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Dark and gritty MC romance.

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RELENT

Relent - Sydney Storm MC Book 1
by Nina Levine

I let Evie Bishop go once. I won't make that mistake again.

I've loved Evie since we were kids, before I found the Storm MC.
Long before I sold my soul to the devil.

I never wanted to bring her into this world, but a man can only go so long without the woman he loves by his side. I need her like I fucking need air and I won't stop until she's mine again.

I knew she'd battle me.
I knew I'd have to fight hard for her.
But I never thought I'd be in this predicament—torn between her and my club.

The thing about me, though, is that I'll do anything for those I love.
Even if it could cost me everything.

DEDICATION

To everyone who struggles with self-doubt.

YOU ARE ENOUGH.

NEVER DOUBT THAT.

PROLOGUE

Evie – 16 years old

“You do know the only reason every guy in school wants you is because they all think you’re just as much of a slut as your mother is, don’t you?”

I finished washing my hands before turning off the tap and lifting my head to look in the mirror at the three bitches standing behind me. They always seemed to wait until I was alone in the school toilets before attacking me with their hateful words.

“You do know the reason every guy in school *doesn’t* want you is because you’re a nasty, spiteful cow, don’t you?” I threw back at Stephanie, the ringleader, before turning to face them.

I watched her eyes widen in surprise. She quickly regrouped and spat some more nastiness at me, “You might be pretty now but looks don’t last, so I recommend if you actually want to lose that virginity you’re hanging onto, to pick one of them and get it done. The rest of your life will be downhill from here and you might not get another chance. I mean, it’s gone to shit now anyway, Evie, so I’m not sure why you would even hope that it’ll get better. Your sister is gone and your mother screwed her way to fucking up your family . . . and if you think Kick will ever see you as more than a friend, you’re dreaming.”

My hand connected with her cheek a second later and the sound of the slap echoed through the tiny room. Anger pumped furiously through my veins at her words. She’d been throwing words like

these at me for months now and, in my grief, I'd been ignoring them. Ignoring *her*. But she'd pushed me now and I'd had enough.

"Don't you *ever* mention Shelly again!" I yelled, as I desperately tried to fight off the guilt and shame that bubbled up whenever my sister and mother were mentioned.

Will it ever end?

Pain pounded in my head as a headache set in. The headaches were never ending these days, and I knew this one, like all the others, wouldn't ease up for at least the rest of today.

Stephanie stared hate at me as she held her face where I'd slapped her. "Just stay away from Todd and I won't ever mention her again. He's mine and I'm not gonna lose him to a whore like you."

I stood stunned as the three of them gave me one last venomous look before leaving me alone. What the hell? I wasn't even interested in her boyfriend. Slumping against the sink behind me, I ran through all my interactions with Todd lately, trying to work out what she was referring to. Lost in my thoughts, I was caught off guard when the door pushed open and Kick barged in to the room, concern etched on his face.

His eyes found mine and he asked, "Are you alright?"

I rubbed my temples as the headache intensified. "Yeah, why? And why are you barging into the girls' toilets?"

He came toward me, the concern on his face shifting to something else. Frustration. I knew that look from him well. "I saw those bitches leaving and Stephanie said something about you being in here and needing me." He paused and came even closer, his eyes now demanding honesty from me. "I know you're not okay, Evie. When are you gonna admit it and ask for help?"

Always my protector. But this time you can't save me.

The pain throbbed harder in my head and I struggled for breath.

I can't do this now.

I wrapped my arms around myself, my fingers clawing at my arms, digging into my skin. Desperately wanting to force the despair and hopelessness out of me.

"Don't you see, Kick? Even if I ask for help, there's nothing you can do. Not this time." He'd always been there for me, helping me pick up the pieces when they smashed around me. I knew he

thought he could fix me, fix this horrible situation, but it was time *he* admitted it – no one could fix this.

He listened to what I said, his body tensing as he processed it all. Anger tore across his face and I gripped the sink as I waited for his explosion. Kick had a temper and it was about to unleash itself. Although he was only seventeen, I'd seen grown men shrink under his temper.

"Fuck!" he roared, turning around and punching the door. I remained silent and simply watched as he punched it again, his back muscles rippling under his tight t-shirt. Stephanie had been right when she'd said I wanted Kick to see me as more than a friend. But even I knew that would never happen. Although he was single now, he usually had a girlfriend or a girl he was sleeping with. He was my best friend and that was all it would ever be. And I'd made peace with that a long time ago. But it didn't stop me admiring everything Kick was.

Good-looking with olive skin, brown hair that begged for fingers to be run through it, green eyes I could get lost in for days, and built with muscles gained from hours of football training.

He turned back to face me and scrubbed his hand over his face. "I'm gonna go and sort that bitch out for you once and for all. I've had enough of watching them tear you down for something that wasn't your fault."

We stared at each other for a couple more moments before he stalked out of the toilets.

Shit.

I had to stop him before he went too far.

I had to make him see.

This *was* my fault.

I deserved everything I got.

CHAPTER ONE

Evie

I'd hit it.

That moment in life when you grow weary of trying.

When you've taken so many steps forward and twice as many back and you throw your hands in the air and say to fuck with it.

I was done.

Done caring.

Done wanting to care.

Done with it all.

Life could try and drag me back into the game all it liked, but I was out.

As I sat in the afternoon traffic with tears streaming down my face, I kept my hands firmly on the steering wheel and let them fall. Jeremy was always telling me to let it all hang out, to not hide myself from the world, so I was only honouring him by not giving a shit how bad I looked. And yet, as we sat bumper to bumper, not moving, I was sure the driver in the next car must have been looking at me, judging me. I glanced in his direction to find him engrossed with his phone. I stared for a couple of minutes but he never gave me the time of day.

Nobody cares, Evie.

Not me, not him, and not the driver that killed Jeremy.

I sagged against the steering wheel as the pain sliced through me. Again.

It had been nearly a week and the pain was as intense as it had been the day he died. But I knew from experience the pain would never go away. Eventually, I'd numb myself to it, but still, I'd carry it with me to my grave. Jeremy and I were entwined so deeply that some days I hadn't known where he ended and I began. We'd been a part of each other's lives since we were ten.

Since Kick brought him home from school and declared him a part of us now.

Shit.

And that was the kicker.

Now I'd lost both of them.



It took me twice as long to get home from work than usual due to the horrendous traffic. As I pulled into my driveway, I saw my best friend, Maree, sitting on my front step. She hadn't left me alone since Jeremy's death, and I was at the point where I needed some space. I loved her dearly but she never knew when to back off.

Sighing, I grabbed my bag from the passenger seat and gave myself a quick onceover in the mirror. Shit, I looked awful. My mascara wasn't waterproof after all, and I had black streaks running down my face. Add to that, my foundation had worn off in the heat of the day and my long, brunette hair had frizzed in the humidity, and I looked like a woman you would possibly cross the road to avoid.

Maree came towards me as I stepped out of the car. "You look like you need a girl's night in," she said, assessing me.

Maree was the kind of woman who never stepped foot outside her house unless she was immaculately presented. Even after a long day at her teaching job, with teenagers harassing her, she still looked good. Makeup still perfect, blonde hair swept up into a ponytail, black dress almost wrinkle free and heels not even affecting her feet. "I hate you, Maree," I muttered, taking it all in.

She raised a perfect eyebrow. "Why?"

"Because you always look good and it's not fair," I answered as I walked past her to the front door of my house.

She followed close behind me. "Evie, have you taken a look in the mirror lately? You could wear a goddamn sack and look hot.

Without even doing your hair or makeup. I have to spend hours in front of the mirror to achieve what you wake up with."

I turned to look at her and frowned. "What I wake up with? Bed head and a puffy face?"

Shaking her head, she said, "No, sex appeal. You can't fake that shit, and you were lucky to be born with it. Even standing here with your messy hair, non-existent makeup, and fucking mascara all over your face, you still look sexy. Any guy would pick you over me any day."

She was wrong, but I didn't have the energy to argue. Besides, I hadn't been laid in six months so I didn't know where all these men were who she thought would be interested in me. "I still hate you," I said, and resumed my journey to the front door. My thoughts had shifted now to how I was going to break it to her that I needed a night off rather than a girl's night in. Maree wasn't one to give up easily when she was on a mission. And her mission at the moment was to get me through my grief. What she didn't seem to understand was that time spent with her wasn't going to take away my sadness.

As I unlocked the door and entered my house, I could hear her rambling on about her day. Her words drifted in and out as I trudged down my long hall to the kitchen at the back of the house. I caught snippets of 'those kids will be the death of me' and 'it's only February and I already need a holiday'. But mostly, I was lost in a fog where her words floated in my mind alongside images of Jeremy. Laughing, being a dickhead, dancing...all the fun we'd had over the years had replayed over and over in my mind this week. Like a movie. A movie I couldn't switch off.

"Evie! Are you listening to me?"

Her shrill tone snapped me back to the moment. "What?"

She dumped her bag on my cluttered kitchen counter, and my attention drifted to the mess. I never let my house go like this, but this week I just couldn't have given a shit about it, and it showed. Dishes were piled next to the sink, unopened mail lay scattered on the counter, and other junk had accumulated that I didn't have the energy to sort out.

"Evie!"

I blinked and gave my attention back to her. Pulling out a seat at the kitchen table, I sighed and collapsed onto it. Looking up at her, I said, "Sorry, I'm not with it this afternoon."

I'm with Jeremy.

I wish I was with Jeremy.

She sat with me, her face full of sympathy and concern. "I know, but you need to get yourself together because the funeral is tomorrow."

All of the grief and anger I had churning in me spewed out and I was helpless to stop it. "I don't have to get myself together, Maree. Fuck that. I'll go to the damn funeral but I'm only doing that for Jeremy, and he wouldn't have given a shit if I was the crazy lady at the funeral who howled her way through it and let her fucking mascara drip all over the seat. In fact, he'd *want* me to be the crazy lady. He was always telling me to let myself go and just feel. Well, fuck it, after all this time, I'm not going to give a fuck about appearances. I'm going to feel it all, and if anyone doesn't like the way I deal, they can go screw themselves."

Her eyes widened, clearly surprised at my outburst, but she gave me a big smile. "Well, okay then! I'm liking this new Evie." She reached into her bag and pulled out a packet of facial cleansing wipes. Maree kept a full kit of makeup on her at all times. Passing a wipe to me, she said, "Here, clean off your mascara, babe."

My face was the least of my worries, but I took it from her and did as she said. "I'll be okay on my own tonight."

She frowned. "I don't want to leave you on your own."

"Maree, I'm going to get through this. It'll take some time, but just because I'm a mess doesn't mean I can't be on my own." I paused and then added softly, "I *need* to be on my own tonight."

Her lips pursed together. I knew this was going to be a battle. Maree was the kind of person who always needed to be surrounded by people whereas I didn't. I craved time to myself and felt like I would go crazy when I didn't get enough of it. "I really don't think that's a good idea, Evie. I don't mind hanging out with you if that's what you're worried about."

My weariness intensified. I just wanted her to go so I could have a shower and then curl up in my bed and wallow in my grief. She wasn't making it easy for me, though, and even the thought of having to argue with her over it heightened my exhaustion. "No, that's not what I'm worried about. You know me, and you know I like time to myself. That's all this is about. I know that you think you know better about what I need, but just because it's what *you* would want

if you were me doesn't mean it's what *I* want. Can you understand that?"

Hurt flickered across her face but she covered it well and nodded. "Okay," she whispered and pushed her chair back to stand. Looking down at me, she said, "But if you need me, all you have to do is call."

As relief filled me that she'd listened, I reached for her hand and squeezed it. "Thank you. You're a good friend."

She slung her bag over her shoulder and gave me one last smile. "I'm always here for you, Evie. I just wish I could take away all the bad shit for you."

I gave her a weak smile and nodded. "I know, babe. I know."

When the front door closed shut a couple of moments later, I took a deep breath and then pushed it back out. My heart sat heavy in my chest. Over the years, so many people had stomped on it, but this felt the worst.

Maybe it had finally taken one too many beatings.

Maybe the patches I'd given it were no longer enough to hold it together.

Maybe it needed more than bandages to put it back together.

And if that was the case, I was screwed.

Love had packed up and walked out of my life a long time ago.

CHAPTER TWO

Kick

“You ready to fuck some assholes up?” King asked me as he passed me a beer.

I took the drink and drank some before asking him, “Who?”

He shifted forward in his seat to speak which was a good thing. Even though it was only eleven in the morning, it was busy in the clubhouse bar and the noise, combined with the deafness in my left ear, made it hard for me to hear what he was saying.

“Someone who fucked with someone I love. And whoever is with him when we get to him.” He took a swig of his beer and sat patiently waiting for my answer.

I didn’t ask him any further questions. I never did. When King had a job for me, I did it without hesitation. Looking at my President now, I thought back to the first day I’d met him. Thirteen years ago. I’d been twenty-two and he’d only been a couple of years older, but, even back then, he’d been a law unto himself. He wasn’t our President at the time, but all the boys knew he’d be the next one.

“You in on this or do you want me to go alone?” I asked.

He grinned his wicked fucking grin that told me he wouldn’t miss this for the world. King was a bloodthirsty motherfucker and liked to be hands-on whenever he could. “I’m in and we do this tonight. Meet me at the clubhouse at midnight.”

I nodded and silently drank more of my beer. Drinking with King was easy. He was a man of few words – one of his best traits as far as

I was concerned. I'd never had a problem or disagreement with him, unlike a lot of the club members. He was a hard man and expected a lot, but if you kept your head down and got the shit done he needed you to, then you were all good. King and I were good.

After a couple of silent moments, he said, "Heard you were heading out to a funeral today. Were you close to him?"

Regret punched me in the gut.

Was I close to him?

I should have been fucking closer and that shit was on me, not Jeremy.

It was *my* fault that, when he'd died, he hadn't known how fucking sorry I was that we'd spent the last five years not having each other's backs. "Yeah, brother. We grew up together and he helped me through a lot of shit. But we kinda lost track of each other for a while there. Only just got back in touch three months ago."

"Fuck," he muttered. The emotion that momentarily crossed his face was more than I'd seen on it in months. That surprised the hell out of me; the only emotions King tended to exhibit were anger or a manic-like excitement. King wasn't full of deep emotions. Well, not that I'd ever seen.

"He died in a car accident. Drunk driver took him out."

"Motherfucker," he snarled as he abruptly stood up. Looking down at me with a feral look, he said, "You find the cunt that did it, bring that name to me, and I will make fucking sure he never does it again."

I stared up at him, unsure where his sudden outburst had come from, and simply nodded.

He leant his hand on the table and dipped his head towards mine. "We clear, Kick? I want that fucking name."

"We're clear."

Straightening, he gave me one last hard nod before stalking out of the room. He ran into our

Vice President, Hyde, on the way, and after they had a quick conversation, Hyde made his way to me. I eyed him, uncertain about his mood today, and waited for him to speak so I could gauge where he was at.

With a jerk of his chin, he said, "King says you're at a funeral for the rest of the day."

"Yeah. Why? Have you got something you need me to take care of?"

"See, that's why I fuckin' like you, Kick. And it's why you're mine and King's go-to-guy when shit needs to be done. Can't fuckin' count on anyone the way we can on you."

"What time do you need me back here?" I asked him.

"Four. That work for you?"

"Yeah, I can do that."

"Good." And with that, he turned and left.

I watched him as he barked something at one of the other guys. *Jekyll and Hyde*. That was our VP. Never could be sure if he would rip your head off or buy you a drink. I'd had a few run-ins with him, but the thing about Hyde was unless you really screwed him over, he didn't tend to hold onto shit. Unlike King who remembered every little fucking thing done to him and always made sure payback was delivered at some point.

As Hyde exited the room, I emptied my glass and stood. It was time to visit old ghosts.

And old flames.



"Evie," I called out as I jogged to catch up to her, the heat of the day causing my shirt to stick to me.

She stopped and turned to face me, her body language clear. She didn't want to talk to me. Sighing, she murmured, "What do you want, Kick?"

Fuck.

Beauty like I'd seen on no other woman lit her face, even today when I knew she would be struggling with what we'd just sat through. The tiredness I saw on her face was a dead giveaway to her grief, as were her unruly hair and lack of makeup. I'd spent most of the funeral watching her, taking in the changes to her body since I'd last seen her just over a year ago. The curves I'd grown up loving had almost disappeared. The black dress she wore today hung limply off her whereas in the past, it would have hugged the shit out of her. Evie had always had hang-ups about her body but I'd always

fucking loved it. The more curves the better as far as I was concerned.

I let my eyes wander over her. Even in her curve-less and exhausted state, she turned me on. I was sure she always would. "Are you okay?" I asked, silently willing her to speak to me rather than pushing me away like I knew she probably wanted to do.

Her mask slipped for a moment and then she quickly put it back in place before saying, "I'll be fine."

I took a step closer to her and as she tried to move away from me, I quickly flicked my hand out and caught her wrist, halting her movement. "Don't do that," I said, annoyed we were back here, back to a place where she tried to hide herself from me.

"Do what?"

"That thing you do where you shut down and sweep your feelings away as if they don't matter." She'd been doing it for as long as I'd known her. Twenty-seven years. "You lost a friend, Evie . . . *we* lost a friend, and I'm sure as fuck not coping with it so I know you've gotta be struggling too."

She pulled free of my hold. "He's gone, and we've gotta keep going. Simple as that."

What the fuck?

"You're fuckin' kidding me, right?" I asked, my voice hard. Forceful. Demanding. Her words made no sense. Jeremy had been like family to us growing up, and there was no way we just moved on from this. No way *she* would just move on from this.

"No, I'm not. Funerals are to say goodbye, and I've just said goodbye." Her brown eyes betrayed her, though. She was struggling with this, too.

"That's bullshit. It's gonna take us a long time to say goodbye. That shit isn't covered in a fuckin' funeral, Evie."

Those brown eyes of hers flared with what I figured was anger. "How would you know how long it'll take me? You haven't seen me in a year, Kick, so you have no idea what's going on with me anymore. Don't come back here today thinking you know me, 'cause you *don't*. The day you walked out on me three years ago was the day I changed." She was angry, and yet her voice held none of the angry passion it had when we were together.

I stepped into her space again and bent my face to hers. "I *do* know you. I know how you like to handle shit you don't want to

deal with. I know you prefer to shut down and not let your feelings out. And I fuckin' know you feel every-fuckin'-thing deep, babe. Losing Jeremy would have cut you deep and you can try and hide it from everyone, but you can't hide shit from me." I moved my face even closer to hers before I whispered, "I see you, Evie. I've *always* seen you, and I know you're struggling. Let me in."

She froze and stared at me in silence for a beat. Then her breathing picked up as the words fell out of her mouth. "Why now, Kick? Why couldn't you have just come back for the funeral and left me alone?"

The desperate plea in her voice did not go unheard. It was the same fucking question I was asking myself even as I was asking her to let me in.

Why the fuck now?

I didn't answer her, and she demanded again, "Why?"

The anger in her tone fired me up. "You weren't the only one disappointed we ended things three years ago. Did you ever stop to think about that?" I threw my words at her, instantly regretting the harshness of them and wishing like fuck I could scrub them away and start again.

"No, because *you* were the one who ended it!"

And there was the passion that had been missing before. I fucking loved her passion so even though she was mad at me now, I was on cloud-fucking-nine.

She still loves me.

I couldn't hide it, I grinned. And that pissed her off even more. Story of my fucking life.

"What the fuck, Kick?" she snapped. We were still in each other's faces and that fact didn't elude me. She hadn't moved away from me.

We can still make this work.

"I didn't end it, baby. You ended it. Did you forget that?" I said softly.

Confusion flashed across her face and she frowned. I knew her so well it was like I could see her brain flicking through the memories. "I remember we fought and you said you didn't want me in your world."

"Yeah, and then you said you were done and we were done. *You* ended it."

"No! You did. You didn't want me!"

Fuck, I'd missed this. Evie arguing with me turned me way the fuck on. Any other woman yelling at me like this would piss me right off, but not Evie. "I didn't want to bring you into my world. You knew that."

"Jesus, I was already *in* your world. I fucking grew up in your world."

I shook my head. "You know that's not the world I'm talking about - "

She cut me off. "I don't even know why we're arguing over this! It's in the past, and it's done." Her wild eyes stared at me and her shoulders tensed up. Hell, her whole body was tense, and that made my day.

Evie wasn't done with this.

If she were, she wouldn't be lashing out like this.

I raised my brows. "You sure about that?"

She hesitated, and although she tried to act like she hadn't, I caught it. "Yes," she said with determination, but I knew it was more to convince herself than me. Half the time, I knew Evie's next thought and move before her. After being the one she'd confided all her fears, worries and happiness in while growing up, I fucking *knew* how her mind worked.

Again, I shook my head. "No, you're not, and I'm going to show you just how fuckin' unsure of it you really are."

Her eyes widened and she finally moved away from me. I'd expected her to put distance between us from the beginning of the conversation. The fact she hadn't was just another sign she wasn't done with this. When she spoke, it was like all the passion of a minute ago had been drained from her. Exhaustion had stepped back in. "Just leave it, Kick. We tried twice and we couldn't make it work. And we've both changed. We're not those kids who loved each other anymore."

She didn't give me time to say anything else before turning and walking away from me. My mouth opened to call out to her again but I quickly snapped it shut. I'd catch up with her later. I had no intention of letting her walk away from me permanently again, and perhaps I needed to take this slowly. Fuck, I wasn't known for slow, but for Evie I would do anything.

And she was wrong.

We'd always be those kids who loved each other.
Underneath all the shit that was me today, *I* still loved her.
It was fucked up, though, that it had taken Jeremy's death for me to admit that.



Darkness blanketed the clubhouse when I arrived back there at midnight to meet up with King. It was one of the club member's birthdays, so most of the boys were out celebrating with him.

King stood leaning against his bike waiting for me, a grin stretched across his face. I pulled up next to him and waited for his instructions.

"Did you and Hyde get that job done this afternoon?" he asked.

"Yeah, the debt was settled. And it was clean." We'd collected off one of our junkie customers who hadn't paid in over a month. Surprisingly, no blood had been shed.

He nodded. "Good. Now, you ready for some fun?" he asked, a dangerous tone to his voice. I knew what 'fun' meant to King.

With a nod of my head, I said, "You lead the way."

No other words were exchanged and his bike roared to life.

Our destination was fairly close, only about a fifteen-minute ride. When we pulled up outside the run down house with two bikes outside, my gut seized with a mixture of anticipation and concern. King was known for pulling some crazy shit in his time, but to fuck with fellow bikers was a little past crazy.

"What's going on, King?" I asked as I walked towards him.

"One of these fuckers stole off my sister. Payback's gonna be a bitch."

I narrowed my eyes. "And?"

"And what?"

"I'm sensing there's some other shit going on here. Don't fuck with me, brother, tell me the full story so I know what the fuck I'm walking into."

He lit a smoke and took a long drag. When his gaze hit mine, the grin from earlier was gone from his eyes and a hard look had replaced it. "You've got a sister, right?" He waited for my nod and once I gave it, he continued. "My sister is a lot younger than me,

twenty-three, and one of these cunts was dating her and thought he'd share her around with his mates at a party when she was drunk. Lucky for her, a friend of mine was there and stepped in. The cunt fucked off and she didn't hear from him again until three days later when he showed up at her house and beat her up and stole the money she'd been saving."

"Fuck," I muttered, understanding his reason for being here now. I'd be here, too, if it was my sister.

"Yeah, fuck. Skylar didn't fucking tell me she was dating him because if she had, I would have put a fucking stop to it. The fucker is a Silver Hell member. I only found all this shit out when my friend called me to ask how she was."

Fuck.

If what I figured was about to go down did actually go down, we were about to declare war with the Silver Hell MC.

King finished his smoke and stubbed it out. Slapping me on the back, he asked, "You with me, brother?"

I never hesitated when it came to my President. "Yeah, I've always got your back."

His eyes lit with that dangerous gleam again. "Let's go party then."

He strode to the front door and banged it hard with the palm of his hand and yelled out, "Open up, motherfucker!"

We waited for less than a minute before the door was yanked open. A pissed-off Silver Hell member glared at us, but only for a second, because King stepped inside the house and sucker punched him. The guy dropped to the ground, knocked out cold, and King stepped over his body to walk down the hallway.

I entered the house and the stench of cigarette smoke, booze and sex hit me. Fuck, I hoped the women had left already. King was unpredictable, yes, but my guess was he wouldn't leave any witnesses alive to tell the tale.

The hallway led into a filthy kitchen full of dirty dishes and rubbish strewn across the counters. It was empty so we continued into the living room. Still empty in there, but a bloodcurdling scream from an adjoining room alerted us where to go next. King picked up the pace and kicked the door in without even attempting to open it. Jacked up on adrenaline and a desire for revenge, nothing would stop him now.

"What the fuck is going on here?" King thundered as he came to a halt the minute he entered the room.

I followed him in and stopped, too, sickened at the sight in front of us. A Silver Hell's biker had a naked girl strapped to the bed, spreadeagled. He sat atop her but I could see her face, and she didn't look to be any older than about sixteen. And it wasn't consent written across her stricken face.

"Fuck," I muttered. I'd seen a lot of shit in my life, but this type took the fucking cake. The fact the guy was still fully clothed gave me hope that he hadn't done too much to her yet. Regardless, this shit was fucked up.

The guy shifted off the bed and came towards us, a menacing glare in his eyes. "What the fuck business is it of yours, and how the fuck did you get in here?" He was tall and built, and his body was tensed, ready for a fight. He'd obviously never met my president; I'd never known King to lose a fight.

"The name Skylar ring a fucking bell, asshole?" King demanded.

A look of recognition crossed the guy's face but he said, "Never heard that name in my life. Now fuck off and leave me the hell alone."

King seethed with anger, the rage clinging to his words as he said, "Your first mistake, Marco, was fucking with my sister. Your second mistake was raping the girl on your bed, and your last fucking mistake will be lying to me."

He stepped towards Marco and punched him hard in the face. The sound of bone cracking vibrated around the room. The guy retaliated, aiming a punch at King's cheek, but King blocked it, shoving the guy backwards and into the wall. As he sagged against it, and slid to the ground, King advanced and stood over him.

"Wanna tell me the truth now?" he asked, his voice deathly calm and controlled.

Marco glared up at him and then spat at his feet. "Your sister was a good fucking root, man. That cunt of hers was sweet and tight -"

King cut him off with a punch to the jaw. His head swung to the side and hit the bedside table before King hauled him up by his shirt, swung him around and shoved him forcefully into the other wall. It was obvious from the look on King's face that he had only one thing on his mind – death.

As King continued to rain pain down onto the guy, I turned my attention to the girl on the bed. Terror flashed in her eyes and as I walked towards her, her whole body flinched as if she was trying desperately to escape me.

I shook my head. "You're safe with me, darlin'," I murmured as I pulled my knife from its sheath. Cutting the ropes tied to her wrists and feet, I freed her. She scrambled into a huddled position with her knees up and arms around them, and stared at me in silence, obviously waiting to see what I would do to her.

Fuck, I hated this shit. Hated the fear she felt because of a man who believed it was his right to take whatever he wanted from a woman.

I sat on the bed beside her and pointed at King who was still beating the shit out of the rapist asshole. "That man's sister was used by the guy who was raping you, and that's why we're here. He won't stop until he kills the guy, at which point we'll take you wherever you want to go. You're safe with us. Okay?"

Her eyes widened and then she nodded. "Thank you," she whispered, her body visibly relaxing a little.

"Good. Now where are your clothes?"

She jerked her chin towards the corner of the room and I located them and brought them to her. "Get dressed, 'cause I don't think we're gonna be here much longer," I said as I took in the bloodied mess King was creating.

I left her to it and walked back to where King was. "You need a hand, boss?" I asked.

He stopped mid-punch and looked up at me. His long dark hair stuck to his sweaty face, his eyes held the crazy that I knew he was made of, and his breaths were coming hard. "Does it look like I need a fucking hand, smartass?" he asked. He'd knocked Marco unconscious and, by the looks of it, Marco's remaining breaths were limited.

I grinned and shrugged. "Just making sure, old man. I mean, you're nearing forty so I figure your body might start letting you down soon."

"Fuck off," he muttered, and went back to what he was doing.

I waited in silence. The only sounds in the room were of fists colliding with bones and the grunts King made as he took his revenge. I'd lost count of the number of times this scenario had played out

over the last thirteen years. King liked to take back-up when he went on one of his missions, but he rarely needed it.

The sound of whimpering caught my attention and I turned to the girl. She stood by the bed staring at King, tears streaming down her face. My natural instinct was to go to her and wrap her in my arms; however, I figured after being attacked by one stranger, she'd hardly want another stranger touching her. Instead, I said to King, "Can we hurry this the fuck up, 'cause we've got a woman we need to get out of here."

King straightened, took a step away from the body lying at his feet, and turned to me. Blood covered his shirt, some of his face and his hands. He looked like he'd stepped out of a horror movie but it wasn't anything I'd never seen before. His gaze flicked to the girl. "You wanna see me end his life so you know for sure he won't ever hurt you again, or would you prefer to leave the room?"

"Fuck, King, like she needs to see anymore shit," I said, before she could answer him. King had some fucked-up ideas sometimes.

He glared at me. "Let the girl decide. Maybe she'll surprise the fuck out of you."

I returned his glare before turning to her. She stood staring at me in panic, shaking her head at the idea. It looked like she wasn't even taking breaths.

I nodded and started walking to her. It was clear she was about to lose her shit and I needed to get her out of here. When I reached her, I pulled her close to me and said, "It's okay, I'll get you out of here before -"

The shot rang out and her scream tore through me as her eyes looked past me to King.

Fuck.

Motherfucker.

I gripped her harder and levelled an angry stare on King. "What the fuck?" I roared, "She didn't want to fucking see that!"

King's eyes had morphed from wild crazy to deranged crazy. When he spoke, his words dripped with lunacy and the hardness that was signature King. "I don't give a fuck what she thought she wanted. She *needed* to see that."

"No, she fuckin' didn't."

We faced off, glaring at each other. King was amped, his body taut and full of rage. I knew that look from past experience. He

hadn't rid himself of the need to exact revenge yet; he still had more in him and he'd have to find a way to work that out of his mind and body before the night was over.

He dismissed me with a wave of his gun. "Get her out of my fucking sight."

She whimpered in my hold, her body wracked with sobs. Without another word to King, I began dragging her out of the room. I moved fast, and when we made it to where the other guy was lying passed out in the hallway, I stepped over his body and roughly pulled the girl outside with me. I knew what King would do with him and she didn't need to see any more death.

I had her on the back of my bike and was just about to leave when another gunshot sounded. A moment later, King stepped outside and stalked to us.

"You take her, and I'll call Bronze," he ordered, still with that deranged glint in his eyes.

The cops.

Of course. Shit was gonna go down between Storm and Silver Hell over this if they ever worked out it was us responsible for the deaths of two members. King had Bronze on our payroll and it was a smart move to give him a heads-up over this.

As I sped off in the direction the girl gave me, unease slid through me. The two clubs had existed for years on a mutual agreement to leave each other the fuck alone. The events of tonight had obliterated that agreement, and while Storm was capable of holding its own, I didn't want to go to battle.

A battle meant death and destruction.

Two things I'd seen enough of to last me a lifetime.

CHAPTER THREE

Evie

I stepped out of the shower, wrapped myself in a towel and walked to the vanity. The woman staring back at me in the mirror seemed more like a stranger than me.

When did I lose myself?

I spread toothpaste onto my toothbrush and tried to avoid my thoughts. They came hard and fast, though, relentlessly chasing me. Trying to force me to face them.

A year ago when you gave up on Kick.

That's when you lost yourself.

Lost your way.

I spat out the toothpaste and rinsed. Slamming the toothbrush down, I muttered, "Shit." I reached for the towel and dried my face. Staring back at myself in the mirror, I traced my finger over the dark bags under my eyes. Leaning closer to the mirror, I stared hard at myself.

Fuck, my grief and exhaustion plastered my face.

Moving my face away from the mirror I reached for my skincare and slathered it on. I still couldn't be bothered with makeup, but at least the skincare might help.

Jeremy's funeral yesterday had taken every last drop of energy from me. And then seeing Kick had sucked anything remaining.

Kick.

Why the hell had he come back? The last year with no contact had been hard. Harder than the years where we'd been apart but still in touch. At the time, I'd thought those years were hard – having him there but not having him as mine. I'd finally gotten my head together over it all only to have him come and screw with my mind and my heart again.

Just when I'd decided not to care about anything anymore, he'd shown up, and I couldn't get him out of my mind. Turns out I still did care about something. Or rather, someone.

A loud knock on my front door distracted me from my thoughts. Shit, at eight o'clock in the damn morning. Really? They could go to hell, I wasn't ready for visitors.

The knocking turned into loud banging and then I was stunned to hear a female voice I knew well yell out, "Evie, are you home?"

My sister. Who I hadn't spoken to in years.

"Yeah, give me a minute," I yelled back and hurried into my bedroom to put some clothes on.

When I opened the door to her a couple of minutes later, I was surprised to find a woman who hardly resembled my sister staring back at me. Julie had been a thin, well-kept blonde the last time I'd seen her, which was about five years ago. Today, she was overweight, brunette, and had aged more than the five years she actually had.

"Hi," I said, hesitantly. We hadn't parted on the best of terms, and Julie was a bitch at the best of times, so I'd learnt to hedge my bets as to her mood over the years.

She glared at me. "I know you're judging me already so just quit it," she snapped as she pushed past me to stalk down my hall.

I shut the door and turned to follow her. "I see you still haven't learnt to use your filters."

When we reached the kitchen she dumped her bag on the table and glared at me with her glare again. "I just say it as I see it. And you can't tell me you weren't standing there staring at my fat, judging me." She placed her hands on her hips and waited for my reply. Almost as if she was ready for a fight.

"I wasn't judging you, Julie, but I won't deny I noticed it and wondered how you'd gone from where you were to this."

She moved her hands off her hips to hang by her sides, her body easing out of its tense state a little. Only a little, but that was a lot for

Julie. "Thank fuck someone can be honest with me."

My tiredness and grief mixed with the absurdity of this whole scenario and caused laughter to bubble up and escape my lips.

She commenced glaring at me again and demanded, "What's so funny?"

I shook my head and threw my hands up in a defensive gesture. "Well, you come to see me, and rather than saying hello and starting a conversation like any normal sister would after all these years, you have a go at me and barge into my house. How screwed up are we? Seriously, it's fucked up, Julie."

She thought about it for a moment and then nodded and gave me a slight smile. "Yeah, I guess it is. But hell, with our family, you can't blame us, right?"

She had a point. "Right." I took a breath and asked, "So why are you here?"

Her whole face softened. I wasn't sure I'd ever seen Julie's face soften like that. "I heard about Jeremy."

My stomach rolled and my breath caught at the mention of his name. I reached out to hold the chair to steady myself.

This is too hard.

I worked to catch my breath again and the nausea passed, but I remained silent. What was there to say, anyway?

"I'm sorry, Evie. I know how much he meant to you."

I met her gaze and found only concern there. She had no ulterior motive for being here which I would have suspected in the past. "Thank you," I said softly and sat at the table.

Julie sat as well and kept talking. "Have you seen Kick?"

"Fuck," I muttered, "do we have to talk about him?"

She shrugged. "Any discussion of you and Jeremy is pointless unless Kick is involved. The three of you were almost joined at the damn hip."

"Jeremy and Kick had a falling-out five years ago, Julie. And Kick and I went our separate ways three years ago, so any inclusion of Kick in this discussion is pointless."

"Shit," she murmured, connecting the dots in her head. "I'd heard you and Kick broke up but I just figured you would have stayed friends like you did the first time you broke up. And I never would have thought Kick and Jeremy would ever stop being friends. What happened?"

I sighed. It seemed I couldn't escape Kick today. "I don't know. Neither of them would tell me."

"And you never pursued that information?"

"I did, but you know those two. Stubborn to the bitter end. Neither would crack, so, in the end, I just let it go."

"That must have been hard. To stay friends with Jeremy while you were with Kick, I mean."

Nodding, I agreed. "Yeah, it was, but I made it work. I did try to make them see sense, but neither would give in." Sadness wrapped me in its arms while I remembered how amazing Jeremy had been throughout that time in my life. He'd never walked away from me, even though it was clear he couldn't be around Kick any longer. And Kick had even managed to not be an asshole about my friendship with Jeremy. It was almost as if the two of them had some agreement about it all but I'd never managed to work it out. I'd just gone with the flow because it had broken my heart that they'd fallen out in the first place. I'd done my best to bring them back together, but that had been a waste of time.

Julie looked at me. *Really* looked at me, as if she was trying to work something out. "Are you going to be okay? I know it's shit right now, but I want to make sure you're coping."

I considered her question, and I also considered her presence here today. "Why today, Julie?"

She knew exactly what I was asking. Sighing, she said, "Let's just say, I've been re-evaluating my life lately. I know we've had our differences in the past, but I'd like to try and put that behind us and spend time together again."

"Why are you suddenly re-evaluating things?" God, I hoped it wasn't sickness or something like that. My body tensed, waiting for her answer.

"I'm a thirty-six-year-old woman with no husband or kids, and I pushed my family away when I was younger and stupid. My best friend recently died from cancer, and I decided life's too short for petty disagreements. So here I am."

The tension relaxed out of my body. "Sorry to hear about your friend, but I'm glad you've decided to make those changes."

"It might take me some time with Mum and Dad, Evie. Don't expect this to just happen overnight. Not after all the shit we've been through."

"I get it." I really did. Our parents were hard work.

"How are they?" she asked tentatively.

I stretched my legs out in front of me and sagged a little in the chair. "They're doing okay at the moment."

"Right, so that means they're still struggling to get their shit together."

She was right. In our family, doing okay didn't mean the same as it would in most families that I knew. "I'll let you decide for yourself once you go and see them."

She stood and picked up her bag. "I've got to get to work. It was good to see you."

I stood as well and moved to hug her. She awkwardly tried to return the hug and that offering spread warmth through me. Julie was not an affectionate person so this hug meant the world to me. When we pulled apart, I smiled at her and said, "Thank you for coming and don't be a stranger. And go and see Mum and Dad."

She nodded and I expected her to say something about them, but she didn't. What she did say took me by surprise. "I don't know what happened between you two, but is there any way for you and Kick to work out your differences? Assuming he's not with someone else now, that is?"

"He's not, but I don't think so. We've been through too much, and if we couldn't make it work the two times we tried, I doubt we could now."

"I don't believe that, Evie. The Kick I remember would do anything for you. *Anything.*"

I wrapped my arms around me. She was wrong, and I needed to protect my heart this time. "I don't think he would. Not anymore," I said softly.

Her face took on that look a person got when they were trying to make you see something their way. "Go through your memories again. Try and remember back to when you were kids. I know he would have done anything for you back then. You two are so connected...between your childhood, our families, Jeremy, the stuff you've both been through...that can't count for nothing, Evie." She paused and stared hard at me before adding on a whisper, "Make it count. You two deserve happiness."

And then she was gone and I was left alone.

Consumed by memories.



Evie

16 years old

"Kick! Stop!" I chased after him but he didn't stop. No surprise there; when Kick decided to do something, nothing got in his way.

I rushed after him as he stalked towards the basketball courts where Stephanie and her posse were. His back muscles were tensed, ready for the showdown. Those bitches had been harassing me for months and he'd been itching to take them on, but I would never let him. There was no way I could hold him back now, but really, they deserved whatever he had in mind.

Unless he physically lashed out at them.

That thought sent cold chills through my veins. I was sure he wouldn't lay a hand on a girl, but what if his anger and need to stand up for me made him do something stupid?

I picked up my pace and yelled out to him again. "Kick, please stop! I can handle those bitches myself."

He kept going without a second glance in my direction. The girls spotted him and all turned to face him. The other kids noticed the standoff and they, too, turned to watch. Everyone began closing in on Kick and the girls, and I hated that I had put him in this situation.

He finally made it to them and stopped. I couldn't see his face but I could imagine his glare. That look from Kick was enough to make most people consider their next step but Stephanie didn't cower. She actually took a step closer to him and sent a glare his way.

"Why the fuck can't you bitches leave Evie alone? You don't even know what shit really went down with her family, so you should shut the fuck up rather than spreading nasty gossip and treating her like a slut," he raged. I could tell from his voice how close to the edge he was.

Not good.

"I know her mother cheated on her father and that's a slut as far as I'm concerned. Like mother, like daughter," Stephanie countered.

Kick's arm moved as if he was about to raise it but he kept himself under control and instead clenched his fist over and over, as if he was fighting the

urge to punch someone. "I'm not gonna fucking argue this shit with you, Stephanie. Leave Evie alone." His voice had dropped to a menacing tone.

Stephanie said something to him but a hand on my shoulder and the brush past me of a male body distracted me from her.

Jeremy.

"Sorry, Evie," he murmured, as he shoved me aside and kept advancing towards Kick.

I missed what Stephanie said but zeroed back in on Kick who had raised his voice. "You don't wanna start something with me. Trust me on that," he threatened just before Jeremy stepped in.

Jeremy placed his hand on Kick's shoulder. Kick's head jerked around to see who it was but before he could say anything, Jeremy spoke calmly to Stephanie. "Why do you always have to be such a bitch, Stephanie? I'm seriously beginning to wonder about your parents and just what they get up to." He paused, and I saw her face flinch. Jeremy gave Kick a grin and then continued, "Yeah, I think we might look into that, Kick, and then report back what we find."

Stephanie's face contorted into anger like I'd never seen before. "Leave me the fuck alone, Jeremy," she spat before saying to her bitches, "Come on, girls, these three aren't worth our breath." Then she turned and stalked away from us and her posse followed.

I stood there, stunned, not sure what had just happened.

Jeremy slapped Kick on the back and then looked at me with a grin. "All sorted, Evie. That bitch won't give you grief anymore."

I frowned. "How do you know that? And what the hell just happened?"

Kick stopped staring after the girls and turned to look at me. "Jeremy did some digging. Discovered that Stephanie's dad is having an affair at the moment."

"Oh my god! What a two-faced cow to give me shit about my mother."

Jeremy came to me and laid his arm across my shoulders, and pulled me close. "Yeah, thought you might like that."

I looked up at him and smiled. "Thank you."

He jerked his chin at Kick. "Don't thank me, thank him. Kick had the brilliant idea to find out what she was hiding and then to use it against her."

My gaze landed on Kick. He stood still, staring at me with a look I wasn't sure I knew. It gave me goosebumps. "Thank you," I whispered, my stomach doing butterflies, "you're always looking out for me and I've never done anything to deserve it." It was true. For as long as I'd known him,

Kick had always stood up for me, and I'd never really given him anything in return or helped him in any way.

He shoved his hands in his pockets and scowled at me. "Don't fucking say shit like that, Evie. You'd do the same thing for me and Jeremy."

Kick didn't usually speak to me like that and it confused me. I stared at him silently, wondering what caused him to do it.

Jeremy punched him in the arm. "Don't be a dick," he muttered.

I watched as the two of them glared at each other for a few moments and then Kick looked at me and said, "Sorry, I'm an asshole. But don't put yourself down, okay? You've been there for me more than you know." His voice cracked a little on his last sentence and he seemed so uncomfortable saying it all. But, at the same time, I could feel the honesty in his words.

I smiled at him and then Jeremy broke the moment with another slap on Kick's back. "Okay, let's round this up, guys," he said as he draped his arm around me again. "I've got fucking math homework and I need Evie to work it out for me."

Kick grinned. "She needs to work my shit out, too."

I rolled my eyes. "Are you two ever going to do your own work?"

They stared at me like I was an idiot, and then both their faces broke out in larger grins. "Fuck no," they said in unison as the three of us began walking home.

I laughed.

No matter what I was going through in my life, these two always made my day better.

I hoped I always had them in my life.



After Julie left, I headed over to my mother's house. I checked in with her almost daily. Whereas my father usually kept me at arm's length, my mother was the exact opposite - needy.

"Mum, you home?" I yelled out as I unlocked the front door and entered her house. Stupid question really, because aside from going to work, my mother hardly left her home.

"In the kitchen," came her reply.

I kicked off my shoes just inside the front door because Mum had a thing against shoes in the house. As I did this, I noticed the black boots sitting near the door and wondered who they belonged to.

And then I heard a male voice.

Kick.

What the hell? He hardly ever visited my mother.

I hurried to the kitchen and as I rounded the corner, I came face to face with him. I had to grab onto the counter to steady myself so I didn't run into him. My gaze hit his neck and took in the tattoos there before it travelled up to his face, taking in his beard and brown hair that always had that just-fucked look.

His hands grabbed my arms to also help steady me, and my tum-my did somersaults at the contact.

It's been too long since he's held me.

"Evie," he murmured, his deep voice awakening the desire I'd always felt for him. The goddamn desire I'd fought hard to rid myself of. But after seeing him at Jeremy's funeral, I knew the desire was as strong as ever.

Fuck.

I tried to move out of his embrace but he wouldn't let me go. I glared at him. "Let me go, Kick."

He held me for another couple of moments before doing as I'd asked. I placed my hands on his chest to try to force him to step aside so I could enter the kitchen, but he didn't move, and all I succeeded in doing was shooting more desire throughout my body at the feel of his body again.

He glanced down at my hands on his chest and then looked at me from under hooded eyes.

Those green eyes.

Damn.

"Feels good, baby," he whispered, his voice thick with unmistakable hunger and those damn eyes penetrating mine, radiating more of that hunger.

My core sang out its need but I acted like I had no clue what he was going on about. I remained silent and tried to push him again. Jesus, his muscles had multiplied since the last time I'd touched him. And they were rock hard. Good lord, I was done for if he pushed this. I could keep my heart closed but my body could never deny him.

He dipped his face towards mine and said, "Your hands on me... feels good. Been too fuckin' long."

God, why do you hate me?

Why do you send temptation my way when you know it will only lead to more heartbreak?

I dropped my hands and tried to harden my gaze. I needed to show him I had no intention of going there with him again. "And it won't happen again," I snapped. "Now let me through."

His brows raised but he stepped aside, and I finally entered the kitchen to find my mother busy at the sink washing up. Tupperware containers surrounded her, confusing the hell out of me.

"What's going on?" I asked.

She kept washing but turned her head to look at me. Smiling, she said, "Kick dropped by to say hello and I'm thankful he did because I got him to change the washer on the tap. It had been leaking for ages, driving me crazy."

"You should have asked me to do it, Mum."

She frowned. "You know how to do that?"

Kick chuckled from behind me and muttered, "Yeah she does, 'cause I taught her."

I paid no attention to him and did my best to ignore the memories flashing in my mind of the hot summer day Kick and I had sex on the kitchen floor of his house after he showed me how to change the washer on the tap in that kitchen. "What's with the Tupperware, Mum?" She must have had every single piece she owned on the kitchen bench.

She stopped washing up, turned her body to face me and gave me her full attention, a look of humour crossing her face. "I had a bloody spider in the kitchen and the Tupperware cupboard was open. This was before Kick arrived. Anyway, the damn spider crawled in that cupboard and you know how much I hate spiders... I started madly pulling Tupperware out and onto the floor until I could see the spider. When I saw it, I shut the cupboard to trap it. I was gonna call you to come get it out, but Kick showed up and found it for me."

I spun around to face him. "Did you kill it?"

His face softened and he murmured, "No, Evie, I didn't kill it. I remember."

"I wanted him to, but he reminded me how much you hate that so he took it outside for me. Goodness gracious, I have no idea why you won't just let us kill them," my mother said.

Undeniable warmth spread through me that he'd done that.

For me.

And that he'd remembered.

I was still facing Kick and he whispered, "I get it, baby."

My breathing picked up at his words. More memories flashed in my mind - Kick and I at about sixteen, telling each other our deepest fears and heartaches. He was the only one who got it, who knew why I was so against killing spiders.

Shelly loved spiders.

I stared up at him, lost in the memories, and then I took a deep breath and turned back to face mum. Brushing off what she'd said, I changed the subject. "I can't stay long, but do you need me to do anything or pick anything up at the store for you?"

"No, I stopped at the supermarket on my way home from work yesterday and picked up some groceries."

I smiled at her. "That's good, Mum."

She returned my smile. "I'm trying, Evie, I promise."

I reached out and squeezed her hand. "I know."

Her face turned sombre. "How are you doing? After the funeral?"

"I can't believe he's gone." My voice choked up as Jeremy's face flashed through my mind. For a moment there I'd had a reprieve from the memories.

I watched as she swallowed hard and realised this would be stirring her memories and regrets up, too. She nodded quickly and then turned back to the sink and busied herself with dishes again. Mum wasn't the kind of woman who ever liked to talk about her daughter's death, in fact I could hardly recall having any real conversations of substance about it with her. I waited to see if she would say anything further but she didn't, and I let her have that. It was probably not the best choice but I'd never pushed her to talk.

Turning, I looked up at Kick. "Thanks for helping Mum."

He nodded, his intense gaze never leaving mine. "Anytime."

When he didn't move to let me out of the kitchen, I widened my eyes and nodded at the entry in a let-me-out-of-here gesture. He took his time but he finally stepped aside, and I brushed past him. Without a backwards glance I left the house and hurried to my car. My mind and body were tangled with desire and confusion, and the sooner I got out of Kick's space, the better.

As I opened my car door, a hand grasped my arm and stopped me. I turned in surprise to find Kick behind me.

Shit.

"What?" I demanded.

"Your mum's doing well."

"You came after me to tell me *that*?"

With a shake of his head, he said, "No."

We stood watching each other, not saying a word. I truly didn't know what he wanted after all this time. "Yeah, she's doing okay at the moment. I got her to see someone and start working through all her shit. Finally. Only took nineteen years, but she's getting to the point where she's leaving the house more and more."

"That's good. I hated watching her shut herself away like that."

"Yeah," I said softly, and then asked, "What do you want, Kick?"

"You."

Unmistakable heat flowed between us at his statement and I sucked in a breath. We'd been here before and Kick did not want me. He only thought he did. "No, you don't. You want what you think we can be, but as soon as you can have that, you'll pull away, so why bother starting something we both know will only end badly?"

"That's the past, Evie. I've changed and realised I want you in my life. Give me a chance, baby."

Everything in me screamed to say yes, but my head knew better. "No."

I didn't wait for him to say anything further before getting in the car and shutting the door. I turned the key in the ignition and attempted to ignore him, but he tapped on the window until I finally put it down.

He leant his head in the car and said, "I was wrong, Evie."

"When?"

"Three years ago when I told you I didn't want you in my world." His eyes held the truth in his statement; I saw regret, but I couldn't let that sway me. Just because he regretted his choice didn't mean he'd end up making a different one this time if I let him back in.

"Well, it's too late now," I dismissed him.

He shook his head. "Life's too short to say shit like that. And it's too fuckin' short not to go after what you want. And I'm telling you now, baby, I want you, and I'm gonna get what I want." And there

was Kick's trademark stubbornness. I could tell from the way his eyes bore into mine that he was trying to force me to go along with what *he* wanted.

I stared at him, unsure of what to say to that. And when he moved his hand to cradle my face and rub my lips with his thumb, I sat there and let him do it. He'd taken me completely by surprise.

He let me go and straightened. Tapping the top of my car, he said, "I'll see you soon." And then I watched him walk back into my mother's house, my eyes hardly able to shift from his ass.

Fuck.

CHAPTER FOUR

Kick

I sat at the bar of the clubhouse and stared at Nitro as he told me about the bike engine he was rebuilding. His words drifted in and out as my concentration bounced between him and thoughts of Evie. It had been a week since I'd seen her at her Mum's. I'd purposely left her alone, because if there was one thing I knew about her, it was how much she hated being pushed into doing something. After all these years, I knew when to push and when to back off.

"Kick, are you fucking listening to me?" Nitro broke through my thoughts.

I took a swig of my beer before answering him. "Sorry, brother."

He finished his beer and motioned to Brittany to bring him another. "All good, man, I know you've been through some shit the last week. But you should drop by my house one day and take a look at the engine. Could do with some help, 'cause I've heard you know your shit around engines."

Nitro and I weren't close but I'd recently realised how much we had in common and maybe helping him with his engine would stop me fucking thinking about Jeremy and Evie so much. "Yeah, I will."

Brittany brought Nitro his drink and leant across the bar, flashing her huge tits at him. I didn't have much respect for her but she was the best bar bitch we had. "You think you could convince King to let me redecorate the bar?" she asked us, eager eyes flicking between the two of us.

Nitro grinned at her. He often used her when he wanted a quick lay and I knew they had an easy friendship. "Darlin', I could try and convince King of anything if you let me fuck you the way I want," he said with a wink. He reached across the bar and traced her cleavage with his finger, which caused her to close her eyes and moan.

"Fuck, you two, get a fuckin' room," I snapped, and gulped the rest of my beer down.

Nitro slipped his hand into her top. Eyeing me he said, "I would if she'd play the way I want to, but she never does."

She slapped his hand away. "I told you I'm not interested in that, Nitro. You'll have to find some other slut to let you do that."

He shrugged. "You'll have to find someone else to convince King then, babe, 'cause no play means no help from me. Besides, I don't think any of us could give a fuck about paint and furniture and shit like that."

Brittany cast an unconvinced gaze around the room. "So you don't care about the ugly cream paint that is peeling in some parts, or the out-dated wood tables and chairs, or the fact the couches in here obviously have seen better days and too much cum? I hate sitting on those couches because I know that nearly all of you boys have each fucked more than a handful of bitches on them and spread your germs everywhere. And what about the plants that are dying in here because whoever picked them chose the wrong plants for inside and no one ever waters them besides me? Oh, and your Storm logo on the wall behind the bar needs to be redone because it's all worn and shit."

I raised my brows at her. "I see you've put a lot of thought into this, but, personally, I couldn't give a shit and I doubt King does, either."

"Give a shit about what?" King's voice sounded behind me.

I jerked my chin at Brittany. "She wants to redecorate. Says it's old and ugly in here. And she hates the cum on the couches."

King laughed. "You want new couches, sweetheart? You and I could christen them."

She rolled her eyes. "Okay, I get it. You don't care what your clubhouse looks like."

King stopped laughing and narrowed his eyes on her. "Tell you what. You figure out a cost for me and I'll think about it, but I want something from you in return."

Fear flickered in her eyes, and she didn't respond. No one ever wanted to owe King anything, especially not a female. I'd heard the stories about what he demanded from women and I didn't blame her for her hesitation.

"Well?" he barked, waiting for her answer.

"I think it'll cost too much," she said, her voice holding no trace of her previous confidence.

He gave her a long, hard look before finally nodding. "Yeah, I thought it might," he said darkly.

I watched her walk away from us and head towards the other end of the bar. It was fairly clear she couldn't get there fast enough.

Nitro stood. "Gotta hit the head. I'll catch you later."

After he'd left, King asked, "You heard anything around the traps about Silver Hell?"

Had I heard whether they knew it was Storm who'd killed two of their guys?

"Haven't heard a thing."

"Yeah, me either. We need to try and find out more. You able to do that?"

I nodded. "I've got some contacts. I'll follow it up for you."

He slapped me on the back. "Good." His gaze shifted from me to track Brittany's moves and he leant on the bar in what seemed like an effort to get a better view. Once he'd had his fill, he looked back at me. "I've got a job for you today. Need you to collect some of our hard-earned cash."

"Who from?"

His gaze had shifted back to Brittany for a moment, but his eyes came straight back to me. "Our coke-loving friend who never fucking wants to pay up. Sort him the fuck out, Kick, 'cause I'm sick of his fucking shit. In fact, if I never have to deal with him again, I would be a very happy man."

King speak –Take him out or ensure he never comes knocking on our door again.

I stood and watched as he continued to track Brittany's moves. That bitch had zero chance of avoiding him now. She'd well and truly caught his attention today. "Consider it done," I said.

He glanced at me. "Good." That was King's signature word to convey his pleasure at his directions being carried out. You never got much more than that from him.

I left him to it, figuring Brittany now had less than fifteen minutes before her shift at the bar ended.

I also figured we'd be getting new paint in here soon.



I cut the engine of my bike and assessed the street. I'd never come to Bruno's house to collect before. Usually, I visited the bar he frequented, but I'd gone there earlier and hadn't found him so figured I'd give his home a shot. Bruno lived on a quiet street which was a good thing for me, and even more so today because there was no one around. Not that I really gave a fuck but it did make things easier when there were less witnesses to take care of.

I left my bike and headed to the back door. I'd almost expected him to have a dog to harass me but he didn't. His yard was a fucking mess of overgrown grass and rubbish that had just been dumped out the back. Filthy, junkie pig.

The back door was unlocked which I'd been counting on. The number of idiots who left their back doors unlocked never failed to amaze me. I entered and the smell of pot hit me instantly. I fucking hoped he wasn't entertaining; I really didn't want to have to deal with more than him today.

I'd entered through the laundry room, which then took me to a hallway and I followed that along until I came to the living room. Bruno sat on the couch staring at the television, sucking hard on his joint like he couldn't get what he needed from it. He was so engrossed in the joint and the television he didn't hear me approach.

I walked behind the couch and smacked him on the back of his head. He jumped a fucking mile and almost propelled himself into the television before turning around to glare at me.

"What the fuck, Kick?" he demanded, still clinging to that fucking joint as if it were worth a lot to him. I guessed it probably was. This dickhead had nothing in his life but drugs, debt and a whole lot of regret.

I advanced on him and he must have read the look on my face clearly because worry crossed his and he began backing up to get away from me. "You think you can escape this?" I asked as I kept walking towards him.

"Escape what?" he said on a beg. If there was one thing Bruno was good at, it was convincing himself his problems weren't as bad as they were.

I moved into his personal space, glaring down at him. "Escape the world of hurt you're about to be in."

Terror filled his eyes. "No! I've got the money!"

"Really? You expect me to believe that, Bruno? You never have the fuckin' money."

His head bobbed up and down rapidly as he nodded at me. "I have it! It's in my house...I'll go and get it for you."

He attempted to move, and I raised my hand to grip his shoulder and halt him. "Not so fast, motherfucker. You don't move unless I say you can move. We got that?"

He gulped and sweat beaded on his forehead. As he moved his arm to wipe the sweat away, he agreed, "Yes."

I let go of his shoulder and asked, "Where is this money? What room?"

"My bedroom."

I pulled my gun out and aimed it at his forehead. His eyes widened and I took in the accelerated rise and fall of his chest. "You lead the way, but the minute you don't do as I say, I'll shoot. And it won't be to kill to start with. We clear?"

He tripped over his words to get them out fast. "Yes, I get it, Kick, but there's no need to - "

I pressed my gun hard against his forehead. "There's always a need, Bruno. With dickheads like you, anyway. Now shut the fuck up and start fuckin' walking."

He did as I said, and I followed closely behind as he led me to his bedroom. The house was a fucking mess with crap strewn all over the floors. His bedroom was no different. As he began rummaging through his drawers, the only sounds that could be heard in the house were the ticking of his bedside clock and his breaths that were coming hard and fast now.

I moved to stand behind him and pressed the gun into his back. "I hope to fuck you're not looking for a gun," I said, not really expecting him to be that smart, but you just never fucking knew.

He shook his head. "No, the money is in here somewhere. I've just got to find which socks I hid it in."

"You hid your money in your fuckin' socks?"

He turned his head to glare at me. "Well, where the hell else would I hide it, smartass?"

"What the fuck did you just say to me?" I bellowed. Assholes like him annoyed the absolute fuck out of me. First, he was too stupid to keep his shit straight, then he had the balls to think he could get out of dealing with the consequences, and to top it off, he wanted to call me fucking names? Fuck that shit.

The look of recognition that crossed his face was priceless. That moment when your target realises just how much shit they're actually in never failed to pump excitement through my veins. "Shit, sorry, dude. I didn't mean it."

I raised my gun and shot at the roof. What I really wanted to do was shoot him, but I needed to get that money first so the roof was the next best thing to hurry him along. Pointing the gun back at him, I roared, "Hurry the fuck up. I don't have all day."

Sweat had started to take over his face and his shirt stuck to the sweat on his body. He began rummaging faster until, eventually, he located the cash. Dragging it out of his sock faster than a virgin ejaculated, he shoved it at me. "Take it!"

"Calm the fuck down," I suggested as I took the wads of twenties and tens from him. "And let's move this to your kitchen table so I can count it." He owed us six grand and I wanted to make sure it was all here before I took care of him.

Once he'd given it all to me, he began walking to the kitchen. I indicated for him to sit at the table and then I sat opposite him and started counting. He surprised the hell out of me by managing to keep his mouth shut while I did this. Bruno usually babbled shit the whole time when I came to collect cash.

I counted slowly. The bastard had come out in me today and I enjoyed feeling his fear while he waited for me to finish.

He was fifty bucks short.

I glared at him before pointing my gun at his foot and shooting.

He screamed out in pain as blood started going everywhere. Wild eyes landed on mine and he yelled out, "Why the fuck did you do that?"

"You're short," I said calmly, leaning back into my chair and extending my leg out to stretch it.

"Well, you should have just said so. I've got more!" His face had contorted in pain and he gripped his leg tightly. Sweat now poured

down his face and his clothes were a wet, sweaty mess.

"I shouldn't have to fuckin' say so, Bruno. You should know by now that when I come to collect my money I want all of it. What I don't want is to be fucked around."

"It's hardly fucking you around, asshole," he muttered. "How was I to know that sock was fifty bucks short?"

I shot his other foot and watched him writhe in pain. "Where the fuck is the rest of your money stashed? And don't screw me around anymore," I demanded.

He struggled to get the words out. Jerking his chin at the kitchen pantry, he stuttered, "In there, top shelf in the brown container at the back."

Pushing my chair back, I raised my brows and said, "Funny how bullets encourage honesty, isn't it?"

"Fuck you," he spat out, clearly not giving a shit if he pissed me off anymore.

I ignored him and reached up into the cupboard in search of the brown container. My eyes widened in surprise when I opened it. I whistled and murmured, "Fuck me, Bruno. You've been holding out on me."

There had to be twenty grand in here.

"Just take fifty and leave me the fuck alone."

My gaze flicked to him. Was he deluded? "You really think I'm gonna walk out of here today without this cash?"

His fight wasn't gone. "I swear to fucking God, Kick, if you take my money I will hunt you down for it."

I chuckled and cocked my head to the side, giving him a questioning look. "You really think you'll be alive to hunt me down?"

Finally, he realised the depth of shit he was in today. He pushed his chair back and attempted to stand. I watched as he collapsed onto the floor, his body twisting in pain as he did so.

I walked to him and looked down over him. "You've been screwing our club around for years now, motherfucker, and my president is finally done with you. And besides, you're a junkie criminal who preys on the fuckin' elderly and disabled so I'd be ridding the world of a scumbag we can do without."

Hi voice pleaded with me. "Take the money, Kick. You'll never hear from me again. And I promise not to rob or hurt those people anymore." His meaningless words fell out of his mouth. I knew they

meant nothing, because Bruno was a creature of habit and he'd never made good on any of his promises before.

"It's too late for more shitty promises." I looked around his kitchen. "I won't miss chasing you for cash. Between the dive of a bar you drink your life away in and this dump, you've really outdone yourself in life."

He spat at my feet before giving me a filthy look. "Fuck you!"

I pointed my gun at his forehead and pulled the trigger.

He fell backwards as blood went everywhere.

I pointed the gun at his chest and fired three more bullets into him. Just to be certain King got his wish to never have to deal with him again.

Then I grabbed the money from the brown container, and the money off the table, stashed it in my jacket and left the way I'd come in.

Bruno's body may not be discovered for days, weeks even, depending on the stench it caused. He had no family or real friends I was aware of, and in the world we lived in, no one gave much of a shit about anyone unless you were part of a club or gang. Bruno belonged to no one and so no one would care.

That was the cold hard truth of our world.



Two hours later, after I'd been home and sorted Bruno's cash out and then delivered King's amount to him, I pulled up at the cemetery. I had no idea why, but I'd felt the pull there. It wasn't where Jeremy was, his family had organised for him to be cremated. As I left my bike and began walking across the grass, it hit me.

Shelly's here.

I'd almost made it to her grave when a little old lady stumbled and fell on the path in front of me. She landed on her knees and struggled to get back up again. I quickly walked to her so I could kneel down and help her up.

"Are you okay?" I asked, assessing her to see if she'd done much damage.

Her eyes came to mine and while I saw a small amount of pain there, she smiled. "I'm a silly old fool," she said softly, "I'm always

falling over these days but I haven't hurt myself. If you could just help me up, I'll keep going."

She raised her arms and I placed my hands under her shoulders and helped her up. A little unsteady on her feet to start with, she regained her balance, but I kept hold of her until I could verify she wouldn't fall again.

"Can you stand on your own now?" I asked, watching her intently to make sure she could.

Nodding, she said, "Yes, I'll be fine. Thank you for your help. It's hard to find good people like you these days."

I ignored her incorrect assumption about me being good and slowly let her go. When I could see she was all right on her own, I asked, "Where's your car?"

She gave me a smile. "I can manage on my own."

I shook my head and reached for her elbow to help guide her. "No, I want to make sure you get there without falling again."

"Thank you. Even my own son doesn't look out for me like this," she murmured as we began walking.

The journey to her car took some time because she couldn't walk very fast, but that was okay with me. I was just glad when we got there and she hadn't fallen. Once I had her settled in the car, I shut her door and stepped back. She smiled and gave me a wave as she drove off. I stood lost in my thoughts while I watched her go, and didn't hear the approaching footsteps on the gravel.

"Kick?"

I spun around.

Evie.

"What are you doing here?" she asked before I said anything.

"I really don't know." In that moment, I felt lost. Suddenly, and out of nowhere, I felt alone in this world, like I had no one in my corner.

Fuck, what the hell is wrong with me?

She frowned. "Are you okay?"

I scrubbed my face and blinked my eyes a couple of times. "Yeah, I don't know what the fuck it is, but I'm okay."

The hardness she tended to look at me with these days eased a little and she said, "It's Jeremy's death, I'd say. I feel the same way."

I didn't say anything, just stood and watched her. Fuck, I could watch her forever and never grow tired. She seemed so vulnerable at

the moment, though, and I wanted to wrap her in my arms, but I knew that would be a bad move so I kept my arms by my side and stayed silent.

Her body relaxed and she raked her fingers through her long hair. "Why did you two have that falling out years ago?"

She caught me off guard. I hadn't been expecting that. My body stiffened and I blew out a long breath. "It's a long story, Evie, and there's no point rehashing it. What's done is done, and Jeremy's gone so I can't fuckin' fix it now."

"I feel like whatever happened between you two had something to do with me, and I hate that. I hate thinking that I came between you guys."

Fuck.

I hated the tinge of sadness I could hear in her voice, and the way her body slumped.

"It wasn't your fault. We were just stubborn assholes and couldn't see past a disagreement. It was a fuckin' waste of a good friendship and if I could go back and change it, I would. Instead, I have to live with it now. Live with the fact I fucked up."

She shifted on her feet and slung her handbag over her shoulder. "Okay, I can respect that, and I'm glad it wasn't because of me." She took a step away from me and added, "I'll catch you, Kick. I'm gonna go visit Shelly now."

I'll catch you, Kick.

Those fucking words warmed my heart.

"See you, baby."

She blessed me with one last smile and then headed towards Shelly's grave.

Fuck, that shit with Jeremy would haunt me for the rest of my life.



Kick

30 years old – 5 years ago

"What the fuck are you doing, asshole?" Jeremy's thunderous voice echoed around the room. He'd just barged into my house and we stood glaring at each other in my living room. I knew why he was here.

Evie.

She and I had just gotten back together, so of course he was in my face.

He loved her as much as I did.

I glared at him. "I'm fucking the woman I love, and, one day, I'm gonna make her my wife. I walked away from her once and I'm not gonna let anything or anyone come between us again. I'm not gonna let you come between us again."

His fist connected with my jaw a moment later, and I stumbled back, caught by surprise. Jeremy and I had never had a physical fight before. I held my jaw as he roared, "How the fuck can you talk about Evie like that?"

"Like what?"

"I asked you what you're doing, and you say you're fucking her? What kind of a pig are you, anyway, Kick? Most men would say they're dating her, not fucking her."

I spat out some blood and reminded him I wasn't like most men. "I'm an asshole, remember? That's how assholes obviously speak."

"You were never an asshole before, Kick. Storm has made you that way and I fail to grasp what Evie sees in you."

"Well, it's a good thing you're not Evie, then. Don't try and come between us, Jeremy. I swear to fuckin' God, if you do . . . if you fuck this up for us, it won't be pretty between you and me."

He fumed. His body tensed as if he was about to punch me again and the vein in his neck pulsed. "Things haven't been pretty between us for a while now and this is the end of it for me, unless you walk away from her."

What the fuck?

"You're fuckin' kidding me! You'd throw our friendship away over this?"

"No, Kick, you pretty much threw our friendship away when you joined Storm. When you sold your soul to the devil and said to hell with everything and everyone. If you drag Evie into that world, I will spend the rest of my days fighting to get her out of it."

*I moved closer to him. Into his face. "I suggest you get the hell out of my house and never come back. I **never** want to see your face again," I snarled, my eyes boring into his, screaming at him how much I meant every fucking word I'd said.*

I was done with him.

He stood rooted to the spot for a moment, his eyes searching mine. I saw it. I saw the moment where he decided he was done, too. Something flashed in his eyes and he took a step away from me. "Done," he snapped. And then he added, "If you love her like you say you do, you won't drag her down with you. You won't give her a life of shit and grime. Think about that."
And then he was gone.

And I'd been thinking about that for five fucking years.

I'd let those thoughts convince me to walk away three years ago, but the pull to her was too strong to resist any longer.

As much as I now believed every word Jeremy had spoken to be true, I *was* a selfish bastard and wanted Evie with me.

I couldn't deny it even if I tried.

CHAPTER FIVE

Evie

Despair swirled around me, and the four walls of the room closed in on me as my father admitted his latest fuck up to me. As I stood in his sorry excuse for a home, I squeezed my eyes shut and wished we could go back nineteen years and change the course of history. Change the fact he lived alone with threadbare carpets, worn couches with holes in them, clothes that hung off him because he didn't care about eating, a career he'd let go of, and a fucking gambling addiction that ruined any chance of changing and improving his life.

"Fuck, Dad... how did this happen? You were doing so much better." My eyes pleaded with him. I needed something, anything to give me hope this could be fixed. My gut knew, though. Knew this was what always happened, this was just the never-ending cycle of addiction that, once it had you in its grips, would never let you go. Not if you really didn't want it to.

He hung his head.

Shame bathed his face.

Defeat clothed his body.

The man who'd raised me had vanished and in his place stood this father who I struggled to understand and love. I would always love him deep down, but it was more a reflex emotion. These days, love didn't come easily...I had to work to love him.

He looked back up at me, his face more ravaged than I'd ever seen. When he finally spoke, he almost gutted me. "Baby, I need

help."

My father had never asked for help.

Never.

Not when my sister had died, not when my mother had cheated on him, not when he'd lost his job and had to take shitty casual jobs to pay his bills, and never for his gambling addiction.

His words pierced my heart and tears pricked my eyes.

Love knocked on my soul and I knew in that moment, I would do anything to help my father.

"How much do you owe?"

His eyes shut and he drew a long breath. Opening them again, he said, "Ten grand."

My heart dropped into my stomach.

Ten grand.

Where the hell were we gonna come up with that kind of money?

My legs nearly buckled under me so I sat on the couch behind me, rested my elbows on my knees and dropped my head into my hands. This shit was fucked and although my brain scrambled to find a way out for him, it was coming up empty.

Silence filled the room until, eventually, I lifted my head to ask him, "How long have you got to pay it?"

"One week," he whispered just loud enough for me to hear.

Holy shit.

My heart almost beat out of my chest and fear sliced through me. There was no way we could come up with that kind of money in a week. But I wasn't the type of woman to stare defeat in the face and throw in the towel without a fight.

I got my shit together and stood. "Leave it with me, Dad. I'll talk to some people."

Hope flitted across his face. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. But this only happens if you're going to admit you have a problem and get some help for it." I stared hard at him, waiting.

He hesitated for a moment and I stilled. Surely he wouldn't deny his problem any longer? But then again, my father was a stubborn and proud man, and he'd lived in denial for a long time now.

Relief filled me when he finally spoke. "Yes, I have a problem. I don't know how or where to get help but I will find it." The brokenness in his voice told me everything I needed to know. He'd hit rock

bottom. And as much as that pained me, it was possibly the best thing for him because now, finally, he would search for a way out.

"Dad, I'm a counsellor. Remember? I'll find you someone who will help you."

His eyebrows drew together in a frown. "I thought you only counselled kids."

"I do, but I know other counsellors."

Nodding, he murmured, "Okay, Evie, you find me someone and I'll work with them." He paused for a moment before adding, "I know I've let you down over the years and that I've never admitted my addiction... but I need things to change. I want my life back." His voice cracked and he stole another piece of my heart. We'd all lost so much back then but my father had lost the most.

"I know, Dad. We all want you to have your life back," I said softly.

His eyes reached deep inside me and he whispered, "Thank you."



I left Dad's house and drove around in circles for a while, thinking. Wondering where the hell I would find ten grand. Eventually, I found myself on my sister's doorstep. She answered the door, looking a little bewildered.

"Evie! Come in," she said, ushering me into her home.

"What's wrong?" I asked, because she really did seem frazzled.

"I'll tell you over a drink," she replied and waved her hand, indicating I should enter.

Julie was two years older than me and lived alone. I hadn't been to her house in years but it didn't appear to have changed much. She still had the cream walls she seemed to love, the country style wood furniture I couldn't stand, but that she adored, and plants scattered everywhere. Her home had that lived-in feel, though, and I loved that.

She took me into her kitchen and offered me coffee. "Have you just finished work now?" she asked, glancing at the clock that read seven thirty.

I shook my head. "No, I finished hours ago but I went to see Dad and have been driving around ever since."

Her eyes widened. "Shit, that doesn't sound good. We definitely need coffee for this . . . or perhaps something stronger?"

"Coffee is good, thanks."

She got her Nespresso going and said, "Spill. Tell me what he's done now."

I sighed and sat on one of her bar stools, slumping onto the counter. "He has gotten himself into debt again and has one week to pay back the money. I told him I would help him find it. The good news is that he's finally realised he needs help."

My words caused her to still and stare at me in shock. "What the hell will happen if you don't?"

My heart rate picked up. I'd been working hard not to think about that. "I honestly don't know but I'm thinking that the kind of person who has ten grand to lend someone to bet with can't be good news. Especially not if you end up owing him with no way of paying it back."

"Oh my God," she muttered as she made the coffee and brought it over to me. Settling herself on a stool, she asked, "Have you got anyone in mind to ask?"

"You're my first port of call. I figured I'd start with family and work out from there." I looked at her hopefully but her face told me everything I needed to know. She didn't have it.

"I'm so sorry, but I'm struggling financially at the moment. That's actually the reason I was looking so strange when you knocked on the door. I've got credit card bills piling up and then today I found out I won't have a job in a month."

I reached out my hand to hold hers. Squeezing it, I said, "I'm so sorry. If I can help you at all, I will."

She sighed. "God, I am such a bitch."

I frowned. "Why?"

"Because you are such a good human being, and I have treated you like shit since Shelly died."

Shit, tears threatened to fall at her words. She was right – she *had* been a bitch, but I figured we'd all coped with Shelly's death in our own way, and hers was to shut her family out.

When I didn't respond, she continued, "And now, a week after I make contact after years of shutting you out, you offer to help me in

my hour of need."

My eyes glistened and I smiled at her. "It's what family is for. Ours might be messed up and all, but maybe we can find a way to put it back together."

"I think it'll take some time, Evie," she warned.

Nodding, I agreed. "Yeah, I know, but if there's one thing Jeremy's death has taught me, it's that we don't have all the time in the world."

"And how does forgiveness factor into all that? 'Cause unless we can all forgive each other, I don't see anything changing."

"Forgiveness isn't for the other person, Julie, it's for us. It lets *us* move forward, out of our hate and anger at the other person. And I don't think it necessarily means you forget. You just choose to move past that bad stuff so you can have more good stuff in your life."

She raised a brow at me. "Sounds like you're speaking from experience, little sister?"

"I guess I am. I wouldn't say I hated Kick after he walked away, but I was so mad at him for giving up on us and it took me a long time to work through those feelings. I realised *he* didn't know how bad I was feeling, so the only person it was affecting and hurting was *me*. That's when I decided to forgive him, just so I could let those feelings go."

"And now?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, now that you've forgiven him, would you take him back if he asked?"

"Like I said, just because I've forgiven doesn't mean I've forgotten. I didn't go through all that to not learn a lesson there. Unless Kick has changed dramatically in some things, I won't take him back."

"The way you're speaking makes me think he's trying to get you back. Is he?"

I took a deep breath. "Yeah, he is."

"I said it to you the other day, I truly think you two were made for each other, Evie. At least give him one more go."

"I don't know if my heart can take another round," I whispered, my heart already hurting at the thought of *not* giving him another go, but at the same time guarding itself from more hurt.

She drank some of her coffee, and nodded. "I get it. Love's a scary thing when you've been stung before. But you've given me another go."

I smiled. "You're different. You're family."

She leant closer to me. "So is Kick, Evie. Haven't you worked that out by now?"

Shit, she had a point.

When I left her home an hour later, my thoughts were completely consumed by Kick. How long would it take for him to wear me down? I'd do my best to stick to my guns but I knew if he kept pushing, I'd eventually cave. He'd left soul prints on me. I could never say no to Kick . . . I could never deny the pull his heart had to mine.



The next day I dropped by my mum's house after work to check on her again. I was surprised to see Kick's brother's work ute out the front. Braden was a builder and I doubted my mother needed a one.

"Mum," I yelled out as I entered her house, "why is Braden here?"

"Evie, we're in the living room. Come and join us," she yelled back, so I headed in that direction.

A minute later, I came face to face with Kick.

Not Braden.

Kick.

Shit.

"Where's Braden?" I blurted out.

"What?" Mum asked, clearly confused.

I jerked my thumb in the direction of the driveway. "Braden's ute is out front. I was wondering where he is."

Kick had been sitting on the couch opposite Mum, but he stood and came towards me. I tried so hard not to let my gaze drop to his body, but it was impossible, and a second later I found myself checking out his fitted tee and the muscles straining under it.

Shit.

Eyes up, Evie. Stop looking.

It was useless.

My eyes kept wandering down his body, soaking in the sexiness that was Kick Hanson.

He chuckled and dipped his head so our faces were centimetres apart. "It's all yours, baby, you just say the word," he said, his deep voice causing an explosion of need in me.

Shit.

I placed my hand on his chest and tried to push him away, but, just like the last time, his body didn't budge. He did move his face away, though, but grinned at me as he did it.

He knows I am close.

So damn close.

I ignored what he'd said. "What are you here for today, Kick?"

He shrugged. "Do I need a reason? I remember when I used to practically live at this house."

"That was a long time ago."

"Yeah, well, maybe I miss those days."

Regret flared deep within me. "I do, too, Kick, but we can't go back. That's not how life works."

His eyes revealed his own regret, and we stood silently watching each other for a couple of moments. Finally, he said, "Yeah." Taking a step away from me, he turned back to face Mum and said, "Thanks for the drink, Loretta. I'll see you soon."

"Thanks for dropping in," Mum replied, "come back whenever you want."

He nodded and then faced me again. Stepping closer, he reached out to cup my cheek and ran his thumb over my lip. "We can't go back, Evie, but we can sure as fuck go forward."

Kick had always been able to turn me on with just a look or his voice or the lightest of touches, and now was no different. His touch, his voice, and his words melded together and caused desire to spread to every nerve ending in my body.

The other thing he'd always been able to do was read me well. Awareness flickered in his eyes and the corners of his mouth twitched in the slightest of smiles. He traced my lips one more time and then he let me go and said, "I'll see you soon, too, baby."

I wrapped my arms around my body as I watched him go.

Hell, Kick Hanson had me.

"Evie," Mum cut into my thoughts, and I spun around to look at her. "What's up?"

"Huh?" God, my brain had turned to mush after Kick got to it.

"Well, you came over, so I figure you wanted something."

I went and sat on the couch with her. "No, I just came to see how you were," I said, glancing at her to see how she was doing. Usually, tiredness marred her face, but lately she'd been doing better. After Shelly's death, Mum had sunk into a deep depression and never really recovered. She'd retreated within and hardly left the house. It was only recently she'd started to really come out of it and seemed much happier these days. But it took a lot of work on her behalf, and I knew that, so I did my best to help her out whenever I could and checked in on her regularly.

"Thank you," she said, giving me a sad smile, "How are you, baby? I worry about you."

Her words caused a flush of happiness through my body. One of the side effects of her depression was an inability to care for her kids the way a mother should. She'd been unable to show us much affection and that had lasted for years. These days she gave us random pieces of affection so when she did, I grabbed it with both hands and held tight.

"I'll be okay. You know what it's like. I've just gotta take it one day at a time."

We sat in silence for a little while and then she astounded me by opening up in a way she never had. "One day at a time is all you have to do. But don't do what I did, Evie. If you're struggling, go and see someone to help you. I closed down on you all, and that was the absolute worst thing I could have done. Most of the time, you will probably just want to be left alone, and while you do need that, you also need to talk about what you're going through. Not all the time, but don't shut down. Promise me you won't do that."

"I promise," I whispered, my voice catching in my throat at her rare openness.

Maybe after all these years, I'd finally get my mum back.



I shut my eyes and let myself slide deeper into the bath water. Darkness surrounded me except for the flickering of some candles I'd set around the bathroom. Lavender for relaxation.

It'd been a long day, and after leaving Mum's house this afternoon I'd come home, hoping to sink into the couch and not leave it all night. Best laid plans never worked out, though. My neighbour had called me in a panic. Her washing machine had flooded her laundry and she needed help with her kids while she dealt with her emergency. Three hours later, I'd traipsed home even more exhausted.

Thoughts of my father and his predicament filled my mind as I lay in the bath. As much as I tried to force them out, at least just for the duration of my bath, I couldn't stop them coming. I'd contacted my bank today and begged for a loan, but seeing as I already had a maxed out credit card and a personal loan on my car, they wouldn't lend me anymore. The two thousand dollars I had saved would hardly help my father so I'd then asked some friends if they could lend me any money but the most they could come up with was another thousand. I had six more days to figure this out and not many people left to ask.

Shit.

I sat up in the bath, water sloshing everywhere because I moved so quickly. Nausea hit my gut and I had to take some deep breaths to get my breathing under control.

What the hell am I going to do?

What the hell is my father going to do?

As I sat there, with my hands gripping the sides of the bath and my concentration focused on regaining my breaths, a loud knock on the front door filled the silence in my house.

Who the hell would be knocking on my door at ten o'clock at night?

I stayed in the bath, waiting to see if they went away, but when they knocked again, I pushed myself up and stepped out of the bath. Wrapping my towel around me without even drying myself off, I stalked to the front of the house.

When I got to the front door, I abruptly stopped.

Was I seriously going to answer the door at this time of night wrapped in a freaking towel?

Before I could even process that question and answer it, the person on the other side called out. "Evie, it's Kick. Open up."

Oh my god, he had to be kidding me.

Without any further thought, I yanked the door open and glared at him.

His gaze travelled down my body and then back up to meet my eyes. Stepping forward, he raised one arm up and leant it against the door jamb. "Sweetheart, you're a sight for sore fuckin' eyes," he said.

I huffed out a breath and shook my head at him. "What are you doing here at this time of night, Kick?"

"What? No hello? No invitation in?" His tone was playful, flirtatious, and I knew we were heading into dangerous territory.

I jerked my chin at the door. "Shut it after you," I said and then began walking down my hall. "I'll meet you in the kitchen in a minute," I yelled out as I made my way into my bedroom to put some clothes on.

His boots sounded behind me. "Don't need to get changed on my account," he said, his sexy voice causing me to shiver as it drifted across my skin.

I ignored him and continued to the bedroom. No way would Kick and I be having a conversation with me wrapped only in a towel.

When I met him in the kitchen a couple of minutes later, he was sitting at the table with his legs stretched out in front of him and his arms crossed over his chest.

I arched a brow as I sat with him. "You look comfortable there."

"You do that to me," he murmured pensively. He appeared to have something on his mind tonight.

"Do what to you?"

He sat forward and rested his elbows on his knees and cradled his chin in one hand. "Being around you calms me, baby." His eyes held mine, and time stood still for a moment.

Memories rushed me.

Kick filled so many memories of mine, and his voice and presence triggered an avalanche I couldn't stop. My body shivered as they hit me, as the emotions engulfed me.

I took a deep breath. "It doesn't calm *me*," I said softly.

He frowned. "In a good way or a bad way?" He seemed genuinely interested in my answer.

"I'm not sure," I said softly and then asked, "What did you want to talk to me about?"

He raised his brow. "You're not even gonna offer me a drink?"

"No drink. Just spill so we can talk, and then you can leave."

He shifted to lean forward in his chair. "When are you gonna get that I'm not going anywhere?"

"When are *you* gonna get that *I'm* not interested?"

He smirked and said, "You talk a good game, baby, but you are *more* than fuckin' interested."

"Just start talking, Kick," I said, impatient for him to get his words out.

He paused for a second and his face grew serious. "Can we put all the bullshit aside and be honest with each other for a minute?" His eyes implored me to say yes.

I hesitated. Honesty could lead me to trouble here. But after everything we'd ever been through together, he deserved that, at least. I nodded. "Okay." My voice was anything but sure.

"I want to give us another go," he said, "and I need to know if I've got a shot at making that happen."

My stomach knotted. A mixture of desire and concern.

Before I could reply, he reminded me, "No bullshit, Evie. I know you're still pissed at me, but do you think you can move past that?"

Sometimes in life you tell yourself you don't want something that you really do. And if you tell yourself that for long enough you actually end up believing it. I'd been telling myself for three long years that I didn't want Kick. And I'd grown to believe it. But sitting here with him now, and stripping back the bullshit, I knew deep in my heart I *did* want him.

Only a couple of minutes had passed while we sat in silence, but it felt like more. Finally, I said, "I want you, Kick, I've always wanted you, but I don't know how we would make it work. And you know me, I'm a 'how' person. If I can't get my head around how something is going to work, I can't do it."

"You think too much, baby," he said, still staring at me, willing me to want the same thing he did.

"Well, you don't think enough," I accused, my voice rising.

"I do when it's needed, but this . . ." he thumped his hand against his chest, and his voice grew more forceful when he continued, "this is in here. It doesn't need thought."

"You know what?" I said as I leant forward, moving my face closer to his, "I can feel it as much as I want in *here*," I thumped *my* chest,

“but that means shit if we go back to what we were and change nothing.”

He didn't say anything, just sat quietly watching me. By the looks of it, he was thinking now. When his phone began ringing a moment later, he answered it with a look of reluctance. I didn't listen to his conversation but rather left him to go and make myself a cup of tea.

When he joined me in the kitchen, I felt his presence behind me before I heard him.

“I've gotta go but I want to continue this conversation. Yeah?”

I faced him and slowly nodded. “Okay.”

“Tomorrow after you finish work?”

I was about to say yes when I remembered I had to keep calling around trying to find money for my dad. “Shit, I can't after work. I've got stuff to do for my dad and then I think Maree is taking me out.”

He frowned. “Is your dad okay?”

I let out a long sigh. “No, he's gotten himself in debt again.”

“Fuck,” he muttered.

“Yeah, that about covers it.”

Some of my hair had fallen across my face, and he reached his hand up to tuck it behind my ear. He let his hand slide down and then he curled it gently around my neck, his thumb rubbing over my throat. My breathing picked up as desire flooded me. I wanted this, but I had to go slow and make sure we figured it all out before we rushed into things.

His head dipped and when his lips brushed mine, need unfurled through my entire body, and I couldn't stop myself even if I'd tried. I stepped forward and pressed my body into his. My hand landed on his chest and then slid up so I could tangle my fingers in his hair and at the same time pull his head closer to mine.

I needed him.

Needed him as close as I could get him.

As our tongues danced and our bodies came together, I knew there'd never be another man I wanted as much as Kick. God knew, I'd tried to find one, but kissing him now, I experienced that knowledge deep in my core and in my soul.

He slowly ended our kiss and rested his forehead against mine. “Fuck, baby, we need to sort this out because I fuckin' need to be in-

side you."

"I know," I whispered, breathless from his kiss.

We stayed like that for another few moments and then he finally pulled away. "Tomorrow. I don't care if it's fuckin' midnight or later, you and I are going to talk," he said with certainty.

After he'd left, I let the excitement and anticipation work its way through me.

I allowed myself to hope that we could find a way to make this work once and for all.

CHAPTER SIX

Kick

Peter Bishop and I had a strange relationship. I felt like my family owed him a lot for what my father had done to him, and I was sure he hated me for everything my father had taken from him. But I was also certain he hated the fact I knew every dark secret he had and that I had bailed him out on more occasions than he cared to admit.

I stood in his living room and watched the broken man in front of me. Fuck, he'd finally hit rock bottom. I'd never known him to admit he had a problem and that's what he'd just done.

"Who do you owe this time?" I asked, hoping like hell it wasn't the same guy he'd owed last time. I had nothing on that asshole so would struggle to dig Peter out if that was the case.

His eyes held fear when he gave me the name. "Jonathon Gambarro."

"Fucking hell!" I yelled, "Why the fuck did you go to him?"

He hung his head for a moment before looking back up at me with regret. "I was running out of options."

I grabbed the back of my neck and muttered, "Jesus, Peter. How long you got to come up with the money?"

"One week."

Fuck.

I dropped my hand and stalked into his kitchen. Reaching into a cupboard, I grabbed a glass and then grabbed the bottle of bourbon I knew he had stashed in another cupboard. It had been a while since

I'd been to Peter's house but he was a man of habit, and, sure enough, the bourbon was still there. I poured myself a drink and downed it in one go.

Peter followed me. "I fucked up, Kick."

I turned my head to look at him, a scowl on my face. "You did more than fuck up this time. Gambarro isn't known for his compassion."

"I don't know what to do. Evie told me she would take care of it, but - "

I cut him off, "Evie's not fuckin' going near this shit fight. I won't have her involved in this. Do not fuckin' tell her who you owe or I swear to fuckin' God I will take you out myself." Anger spread through me at the mere thought he'd even think to involve Evie in this. Did he not have a clue who he was dealing with?

He didn't say a word. A good fucking idea because anything he'd say would be the wrong thing at this point. My fists clenched and I slammed my hand down on the counter in frustration. I stared at him for a long moment, trying desperately to contain my rage, and when I couldn't rein it in any longer, I picked up the glass in front of me and threw it at the wall. "This is the last fuckin' time, Peter!" I yelled at him. "If I drag you out of this, and then find out you've done it again... so help you God because I sure as fuck won't be."

He nodded but remained silent.

He knew he'd pushed me to the limit.

He knew I was done.

The debt to his family was paid.



Four hours later, I sunk down into a couch at the clubhouse bar. Hyde sat in the couch opposite me, his eyes questioning what was wrong. I still wore my anger at Peter plain for everyone to see. "What's up with you?" he asked as he drank some of his beer.

I struggled with sharing my dilemma with him but decided I needed to. Any involvement of mine in this could potentially impact the club. I leant forward and rested my elbows on my knees. "My

ex's father owes ten grand to Jonathon Gambarro and the only hope he has of settling the debt is if I step in and help him."

Hyde's face clouded over with displeasure. "And what exactly would that involve?"

"I'd have to threaten him with something. I'd need the debt wiped with no payment involved, so that's the only way to make that happen."

"Fuck, Kick. This is dangerous territory. You really want to get mixed up with Gambarro? I can assure you once you're on his radar he'll have you in his sights and won't rest 'til he takes care of you in whatever way he deems fit."

I blew out a long breath. "I fuckin' know that, Hyde, but what choice do I have? If I don't step in, her father is dead."

"And if you do step in, you're a target going forward." He leant forward. "And the club's a fucking target."

"Yeah."

He shook his head and stood. "Stay out of it, Kick. The club doesn't need any more trouble. We're still waiting to see if Silver Hell connects us with what you and King did the other night; this is more shit we don't need."

Fuck.



"Please, Kick. I'm desperate," my sister begged me over the phone at three o'clock that afternoon. She needed a babysitter for a couple of hours while she attended her university lecture.

"I can do it, Lina, but fuck, where the hell is Dave?" Her asshole ex-husband always let her down and it pissed me off.

"He's drunk again. He just called me, like five fucking minutes ago, to say he couldn't make it now because he accidentally drank too much at the pub after work." Not only did she sound angry, but I could hear the exhaustion in her voice. Fuck, that asshole would be answering to me.

"I'll be there soon," I promised. Hanging up, I eyed Nitro who I'd been talking to about bike engines again, and said, "Sorry man, I've gotta go help my sister out."

"Sure, brother. We good for Saturday?" he asked, watching as I stood.

We'd planned to work on his engine. "Yeah, I'll probably get to your place by eleven."

He gave me a chin lift and I headed out.

When I arrived at Lina's house twenty minutes later, she seemed even more frazzled. My brows knit together. "What's wrong?"

"Dave just called again and said he'd be here after all." She gave me a pained look. "Kick, I don't want him anywhere near the kids, not when he's drunk."

I placed my hand on her upper arm. "I'll take care of him, okay? I don't want you worrying about it. You just go and do your shit and leave Dave to me."

Tears pricked her eyes and she collapsed into my arms. "I don't know how much longer I can do this," she sobbed.

Fuck, things were worse than I realised. "What the fuck's going on, Lina?"

She clung to me and sobbed for a good few minutes before pulling away and wiping her eyes. Sniffling, she admitted, "He does this often. And sometimes he turns up and gets aggressive with me if I won't let him in the house."

"Fuck, me!" I yelled, the anger punching through my body, "Why the fuck didn't you tell me sooner?"

"I didn't want this to happen!" she yelled back. "I wanted to try and sort it out without involving you because I knew you'd resort to violence to fix it."

I scowled at her. "Sometimes the only thing that works is violence."

She hung her head for a moment and then gave me her eyes again. Sad eyes. "I know you won't get this, but I still love him. After everything he's done, I still love him, and even though I know we aren't good together and can never go back to what we had, I don't want you to hurt him," she said softly, her words pleading with me to understand.

I roughly rubbed the back of my neck. "Shit, Lina. You're right, I don't get it. The guy fucked around on you, he's a shit father, and you want mercy for him? Even after he's gotten aggressive with you?"

Her lips spread into a thin line. "Some people don't know how to do better, Kick. For some, their best is our worst, and it's not always their fault," she said softly, calmly.

My eyes widened. "Don't sprout that psych bullshit at me that you're learning, 'cause I'm not fuckin' interested in excuses. How can you stand here and cry on my shoulder about him one minute and then turn around and defend him the next?"

She sighed. "If I went through life holding onto the shit people have done to me, I'd be an angry and depressed person. I have to let it go . . . for me, not them. And sometimes you can love and hate someone at the same time. I choose to let both in, to not deny my feelings and only concentrate on the bad. And as far as crying on your shoulder, yeah, I've reached a point where I'm feeling overwhelmed. Sometimes you just need a good cry and then you can keep going."

I listened to everything she said, and while I didn't agree with it, I respected her enough to try to follow her wishes. At least until that didn't work and then we'd do things my way. Because I was sure as fuck that her way wouldn't work. "I won't hurt him, but I will make it clear that I'm watching him, and if he doesn't pull his head in, I'll be stepping in for you."

"Thank you," she said as she stood on her toes to kiss my cheek. "You're a good brother, Kick."

"We'll see if you still think that after he fucks up again and I lose my shit at him."

She shook her head. "You have so little faith in people."

"It's what happens when you've been fucked over by people too often, babe."

Her face grew wistful. "We need to find you someone to love. Someone who will love you so much you might start to believe in people again."

I ignored her and jerked my chin towards the front door. "Go. You don't want to be late."

She grinned at me and turned to walk away. "I'm going to start looking," she threw over her shoulder as she left the room.

I shook my head to myself as I went in search of the kids. When my sister got an idea in her head she never let it go. She could try all she liked but I'd never be like her. She was too fucking compassionate and forgave too easily.

There'd only been two people in my life who I'd ever thought I'd be able to forgive if needed.

Turned out me and forgiveness didn't get along well.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Evie

I slammed my front door and trudged down the hall. My efforts this afternoon to get hold of money for my father's debt had been for nothing. No one had been able to offer me a cent and I'd run out of people to ask. Dread snaked through me at the thought of what would happen to Dad if I couldn't find the cash for him.

The silence and heat of the house was suffocating. After spending the drive home completely in my own head, riddled with thoughts about my father, I needed music to drown them out. I dumped my bag on the kitchen counter and switched on the air conditioning and stereo before I headed to the shower. Maree would be here to pick me up in a couple of hours and I needed to clean the grime of the day off. I needed this night out tonight like I hadn't needed one in a long time.



Maree clinked her glass with mine and indicated for me to take a sip. "Here's to hot sex with Kick," she said, laughing.

I rolled my eyes. "I should never have told you," I muttered. But the conversation about Kick had put my worry about Dad out of mind, and that was what I needed tonight.

Her eyes twinkled with mischief. "You should totally have told me. I wanna meet this man who's got you all flustered."

I shifted on my stool. The humidity in the outdoor bar we were at had caused my long hair to stick to my neck. Thank god I'd worn a sleeveless dress tonight. Probably didn't help that the conversation about Kick was getting me all hot and bothered. I eyed Maree and decided to open up to her about Kick and my family. She'd only known me for two years and I hadn't shared much with her so far. I'd had enough alcohol tonight to spill my life story, though. "I've known Kick pretty much my whole life," I began.

Her eyes widened. "Wow."

"His family and mine lived on the same street and our mothers were best friends. Kick was a year older than me and always kept an eye out for me at school, made sure I was okay and wasn't being picked on."

"I'm guessing if someone picked on you, he came down on them."

I smiled. "Yeah, he did. Him and Jeremy. The three of us were inseparable." The memories swirled around me, causing butterflies in my stomach.

"So your families are best friends and you two grew up thinking you'd have a happy ever after together?" she asked, a tinge of hopefulness in her voice. Maree dreamt of happy ever afters.

She was so far from the truth. "No, our - "

A voice from behind cut me off. "No, my father fucked it all up when he fucked Evie's mother." The bitterness in Kick's voice could not be missed and I spun around in shock. I didn't realise he still felt that way about his father.

As I stared at him, Maree said, "Well, that would do it."

He tore his gaze from mine to look at her. "Yeah, it would."

I felt the need to put some perspective on it. "It takes two to tango, Kick. Your father wasn't the only one at fault."

His hard gaze met mine again. "Evie, your mother had just lost a *child*, for fuck's sake, her marriage was crumbling under the strain of that as well as your father's gambling, and she was in pain... My father knew she was vulnerable and he went after her knowing full well she wasn't in her right mind. Don't make excuses for him."

I took a long swig of my drink. These memories sucked, and I wanted the alcohol to blot them out.

Before I could say anything, Maree asked quietly, "Your mother lost a child?"

I nodded, sadness enveloping me. "Yeah, my sister, Shelly..." My voice cracked and I stopped talking. Shit, this never got any easier. Not even after nineteen years.

Because the guilt still tears me apart.

"Our families were on our yearly holiday that we took every summer when Shelly fell out of a tree," Kick explained, watching me carefully, his eyes full of concern.

All three of us sat in silence, lost in thought. Our fun night had quickly turned sombre. I stared at my glass, absently running my finger around the rim while Shelly occupied my mind. When I looked up, I found Kick watching me intently, his shoulders and body tense.

Eventually, he said, "I need a drink. Either of you want another one?"

Thank God.

We nodded, gave him our orders, and then sat watching him walk to the bar. My gaze shifted over his white t-shirt that loosely skimmed his muscles, and then moved down to the black jeans and motorcycle boots. I'd never known another man to wear sexy the way Kick did.

Maree cut into my thoughts. "Babe, he's hot. How the hell did you walk away from him? I don't know if I would ever let him out of my bed if he was mine."

She was the best kind of friend a woman could have. Always able to read my needs, I knew she'd deliberately changed the subject. She'd known I didn't want to talk about my family shit anymore. I smiled at her and then winked. "I can tell you now, if Kick was yours, you definitely wouldn't want to let him out of your bed."

She grinned. "You're a dirty, dirty woman, Evie Bishop. But seriously, what happened between you two?"

I sighed and leant my elbows on the table. "We argued a lot. And on top of that, Kick's got a darker side he won't share with me. Like, he would just shut down and disappear for days at a time. I know he's trying to protect me but he's never understood that there's nothing he could do that would stop me from loving him. He's always been there for me, every single time I needed him, so I would always be there for him."

"So you still love him?"

"I never stopped loving him, but I walked away because there's no future for a couple where one of the partners won't give themselves completely."

Her eyes twinkled again. "So a little sex on the side would be okay then."

I laughed, the alcohol in me softening my resolve a little. "It would be a bad idea."

"What would be a bad idea?" Kick asked as he placed our drinks on the table.

His voice slid right through me. When I met his gaze and found heat there, the alcohol buzzing through me collided with my desire for him and caused the kind of need no woman could deny. Against all my better judgements, I flirted with him. "Sleeping with you," I said.

He didn't skip a beat. "No, that would be the best fuckin' idea you've had in a long time."

I cocked my head to the side. "You don't think it'd be a good idea for us to get to know each other again before we had sex?"

"Baby, you and I know each other better than we know anyone else." He moved so our faces were close and whispered, "Some days I think I know you better than I know myself."

The air whooshed out of me and I reached my hand out to the table. "I need a drink. Quick," I muttered, and once he'd passed it to me, I gulped half of it straight down. Placing it back on the table, I said, "How do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"That thing where you say something sweet that makes me want to forget everything we've been through and let you back in?"

"There's nothing sweet about me, Evie." His eyes flashed hardness for a moment before reverting back to the softer gaze he usually reserved for me.

"Not true. You just gave me sweet."

"No, I just gave you the truth. Don't mistake that for sweet," he said with the hard tone I knew so well. It was the tone he used whenever he was about to shut down on me.

"You two should totally get a room. Or maybe you should schedule a date for Valentine's Day and work your shit out," Maree said.

I answered her without taking my eyes off Kick. "He doesn't do Valentine's Day. Kick's not your hearts and flowers kind of man."

"She's right, but I do make sure my woman is satisfied in other ways on Valentine's Day," he said, eyes still on me, a promise held deep inside them.

As lust roared through me, I gulped the rest of my drink down. When I'd drained the glass, I asked Kick, "Jesus, was that a double? It was strong."

"Yeah."

I raised my brows. "You trying to get me drunk?"

He smirked. "Don't need to. You've already taken care of that."

I decided I needed a moment away from him so I hopped off my stool. "I'm going to the ladies', Maree. You wanna come? Kick can look after our table."

"No, babe, you go. I'm gonna interrogate your man while you're gone."

I laughed. Maree was the queen of interrogation but what she didn't know was that Kick was the king of evasion. "Have fun, you two," I said and left them to it.

I wobbled my way to the ladies' room. Kick was right when he said I was drunk. Time to slow the drinks down or else tonight would go way past messy.

The line at the ladies' was long, and I started chatting with some of the women, so it took me twenty minutes to get back to the table. As I'd suspected, Kick must have evaded most of Maree's questions because she looked frustrated. "How did your interrogation go?" I asked her with a grin.

She poked her tongue at me. "You knew I'd have no luck, didn't you?"

"Totally, but who knew, maybe you would be the one to break him."

She stood and grabbed her bag off the table. "I'm done for the night, guys."

I frowned. "Really? I thought we'd catch a cab together."

"I got a call while you were gone." She grinned mischievously. "I've got a sure thing waiting at his house for me. Sorry, babe, but I can't pass him up, and Kick said he'd take you home."

Of course he did.

Smiling at her, I said, "Okay, go. I wouldn't expect you to give up a sure thing."

She blew me a kiss and turned and left. When I shifted my gaze from her to Kick, I found him watching me intently. "How did you know I'd be here tonight?" I asked.

He slid another drink across the table to me. "How do you know I didn't go to more than one place looking for you?"

God, he was killing me tonight. I drank some of the bourbon he'd gotten me. Shit, another double. When I placed the glass back down, I said, "How many did you go to?"

He didn't hold back. "Six."

Fuck.

I took another drink. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why now, Kick? Why all of a sudden do you want to try this again, and what makes you think it would be any different to the two times we already tried to make it work?"

He raked his fingers through his hair. "It's not all of a sudden for me, Evie. I've never stopped thinking of you, never stopped thinking I fucked it all up by letting you walk away. But I didn't want to fuck your life up any further so I stayed away. I think deep down I always thought we'd find each other again when we were older. Jeremy's death hit me hard and made me realise just how short life can be. I don't want to wait till we're older. I don't want to fuck around anymore."

I emptied my glass, taking a deep breath as the bourbon burnt on the way down. "Just because you don't want to fuck around anymore doesn't mean it would work. Not unless you've changed your idea of what being a couple is," I said softly.

He leant his face close to mine. So close I could almost taste him. "Let me in, baby. Let me show you how I've changed." Kick had never been the best at expressing his emotions but his eyes laid it all out for me.

Vulnerability, want and hope.

I placed my hand on his cheek.

One night wouldn't hurt.

Surely.

"Show me," I whispered.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kick

19 years old

I pushed Evie against the wall and reached my hand under her dress to trace a pattern up her thigh. Her eyes fluttered shut for a moment and she moaned when my fingers found their way into her panties.

"Fuck, baby, you're wet," I growled as I dipped into her.

Her eyes opened and she threaded her arms around my neck, pulling my mouth to hers. Before she kissed me, she said, "I've been wet for you for years, Kick."

Eager lips met mine and when her tongue found mine, I grunted my approval and ground my dick against her while my fingers fucked her pussy.

When she ended the kiss, she said, with a lick of her lips and a fucking sexy smile, "Best birthday present ever."

Fuck, I needed in.

With my dick, not my fingers.

"How do you like to be fucked, baby?"

Hesitation flared in her eyes and she whispered, "I'm still a virgin, Kick."

Fuck me.

My eyes widened. "What the hell? You had a boyfriend all last year."

"I did but that doesn't mean I'm gonna give it up to just anyone."

She's going to give it to me.

I pressed my finger deeper inside her and picked up the pace. At the same time, my lips crashed down onto hers and I devoured her mouth, all

the while pushing my erection against her.

*I fucking need that pussy **now**.*

She groaned and curled a leg around mine, trying to pull me closer. We couldn't get any fucking closer, but I knew what she craved because I craved it, too.

Skin.

I needed her skin against mine.

I pulled away from her and moved my hands to the bottom of her dress. In one swift movement, I had it up and over her head and on the floor. My gaze dropped to her tits, and fuck me if she didn't have the hottest fucking bra on I'd ever seen.

"You like it?" she asked.

I flicked my eyes to hers. "Like it? I fuckin' love it," I rasped as I reached around the back of her to undo it, "but it's gotta come off."

She hit me with that sexy goddamn smile of hers, moved her hands to the top of her panties as if she was about to remove them, and asked, "What about these?"

"Off," I commanded, eyes glued to her pussy, waiting for it to be revealed to me.

She pushed them down and flicked them aside. Without waiting another second, I knelt in front of her, placed my hands on the backs of her legs and ran them up until they cupped her ass. I pressed my mouth to her pussy and licked my tongue the length of her slit.

She tastes so fucking good.

One of her hands landed on my head and I vaguely heard her moan but it was like it was coming from a distance because, at that moment, I was lost to her cunt.

Lost to every-fucking-thing I'd dreamt of for years.

My tongue circled her clit before I pushed it inside her.

So goddamn wet.

I chased her orgasm with my tongue while my fingers dug into her ass. When I moved one of my hands around so I could work her clit, she shuddered and cried out my name.

I fucking loved the sound of my name crying out from her lips.

"Oh god . . . Kick . . . I'm gonna come . . ." Both her hands were in my hair now, pulling and pressing as if she needed me closer and then needed a break.

And then she came, and I experienced a feeling like I'd never experienced in my life.

Utter fucking happiness.

I was straight up and her hands went straight to my clothes, frantically tearing at them until they all lay in a heap on the floor.

Our eyes met, and greed shot through me like never before.

I grabbed her by the back of her neck and pulled her mouth to mine. "I fuckin' need your cunt, baby," I growled before roughly kissing her.

She hungrily kissed me back, and I pulled her with me to the bed.

"Lie down," I ordered, "I'm just gonna get a condom."

When I came back to her, she was spread out like fucking heaven on my bed. Her eyes searched mine and I saw vulnerability there. Positioning myself between her legs, I leant my face down and kissed her before pulling away and whispering, "I'll go slow and try not to hurt you."

Fuck, I'd never fucked a virgin before and I hoped to fucking God I wouldn't lose control and hurt her.

"I trust you, Kick," she said softly, her eyes gazing at me with all the trust in the world.

Once I had the condom on, I moved over her and she wrapped her legs around me. Keeping hold of her eyes while I did it, I slowly entered her.

Oh, fuck.

Feels so fucking good.

"You okay?" I whispered, our faces so close.

She nodded. "Yes."

Her hands slid around my neck and she pulled my face to hers so she could kiss me. Gentle at first, and then she kissed me harder.

I pushed my cock further in, still slowly, in an effort to not hurt her too much. A pained noise escaped her lips, though, and I pulled my mouth from hers to stare down at her with concern.

She gave me a small smile. "I'm okay, please keep going," she insisted.

I stilled. Searching her face, I asked, "Are you sure? I can stop if you want to."

Shaking her head, she pleaded, "No, I want this, Kick. Please don't stop."

Her eyes conveyed the truth in her words so I pushed all the way in.

Fuck me.

Amazing.

"Okay, baby, I'm gonna keep going," I said, giving her notice.

She smiled again and lifted her head to meet me with a kiss. Her arms wrapped around me and she held on tight, ready for this to happen.

I pulled out, and eyes still focused on Evie's, I pushed back in, all the way. But not hard. Not yet. Her eyes widened but she squeezed her legs tighter around me as if she was telling me to keep going. So I did. This time I pulled out and thrust in a little harder.

Fucking hell, Evie's pussy was tight. This could be over fast.

I pulled out again and thrust hard. My release teased the edges of my consciousness and I dropped my head into her neck as I continued to pump into her.

She moved her hips with me, and fuck, I was so fucking close. "I'm gonna come, Evie," I grunted through hard breaths, almost at the point where I wouldn't be able to hold back any longer.

She didn't say anything but just squeezed her legs around me tighter, her pussy squeezing tighter around my dick. I took it as another sign to keep going and a minute later, I came. Harder than I'd ever come before.

Once I'd wrung every drop from my orgasm, I lifted my head to look at her. She smiled up at me, and I apologised, "I'm sorry you didn't come."

"I did earlier so it's okay."

"No, it's not, but I promise the next time you will."

Surprise flared in her eyes. "Next time?"

I frowned. "You thought this was a once off?"

"I thought this was you showing up to help me celebrate my eighteenth and then taking me home for a one night stand."

"Fuck no," I said as I pulled out of her and pushed up off the bed to dispose of the condom. When I came back from the bathroom I brought a cloth with me to clean her up, but she'd pulled the sheet up to cover herself.

I sat on the bed next to her and frowned. "Why did you cover yourself?"

Her face flamed red. "You turned the light on."

"Yeah, cause I want to clean you up so I need to be able to see for that."

"Oh my God, Kick, I can clean myself up!" She seemed embarrassed and I couldn't figure out why.

"Evie, we just fucked . . . I just had my mouth on your pussy, and you're embarrassed for me to clean you up?"

She covered her face with her hand for a moment and then she sat up so our faces were level. "It was dark and you couldn't see my body," she whispered, her eyes reaching out to me, to understand.

And I did fucking understand, and it made me fucking angry.

I moved her hand, the one clutching the sheet to hide her body from me. When the sheet fell, I ran a finger across the top of her breasts. With my gaze fixed to hers, I said, "Don't let those bitches from school make you be-

lieve you're not beautiful. Just because they told you you're ugly or whatever the fuck they told you, it doesn't make it true. And it's not fuckin' true, Evie." I leant my face down to whisper kisses over her breasts. When I'd finished, I said, "You're the most beautiful woman I know."

Tears threatened to fall, but she held them back. Swallowing hard, she said, "Thank you. I'm such an idiot for believing them." Her voice drifted off as she spoke so that the last few words were almost a whisper, and she hung her head.

I placed a finger underneath her chin and tilted her face up with it. "You're not an idiot, you've just had so much shit thrown at you that you've started to believe it."

As I sat and watched her take that in, my chest tightened. Evie had been through so much and yet she was the best person I knew. Even though people had been so mean to her, and nasty, she was still the kindest and most caring person in my life. And I'd been an idiot last year after I finished school. While she finished her final year, I'd joined Storm and focused all my attention there, neglecting our friendship.

I was fixing that mistake now because if I was truly honest with myself, I'd wanted Evie for years.

I wanted her in my life.

And in my bed.



I leant against the doorway of my bedroom and watched Evie sleep.

Peaceful.

Fuck, she was beautiful. I had a permanent fucking hard-on for her and, she had no idea. Not fucking her last night had been one of the toughest things I'd done in ages.

She stirred and a moment later her eyes came to mine. "Morning," she said, and then she winced, placing a hand to her head.

I pushed off from the wall and walked to her side of the bed. Sitting on the edge, I passed her the water on the bedside table and two aspirins.

"Thank you," she murmured, taking the pills from me. Once she'd swallowed them, she gave the glass back to me.

I stood and asked, "Do you have to work today?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, I'll take you home so you can get ready and then I'll take you to work. And then I'll pick you up after work."

"I can drive myself, Kick," she said, her voice off. I thought we'd made progress last night but uncertainty now hit my gut.

"No, you can't. You'll be over the limit."

She stared at me, in obvious pain from her headache, and I was sure she was about to argue with me again when she surprised the shit out of me and said, "Fine, you can drive me."

"Good, that's fuckin' settled. I'll wait for you in the kitchen."

I left her to it, and a moment later I heard her crashing around in my bedroom. Relief hit me, thank fuck she'd agreed to let me drive her because she was definitely in no state to be driving.

When she appeared in the kitchen ten minutes later, I took in her hung-over state and fuck if my dick didn't jerk again at the sight. This woman could make me want to fuck her even if she was dressed in a fucking sack and had a shaved head.

She's it for me.

I grabbed my keys off the table and jerked my chin towards the front door. "You ready to go?"

She nodded and slowly headed outside. I followed close behind, watching her ass sway in that sexy-as-fuck black dress she'd worn to the pub last night. She'd ripped it off as soon as we'd gotten back to my place and done her best to get me to fuck her, but I'd had no intention of sleeping with her. Not in that state. No, the first time we had sex again, we'd both be sober. I needed to know she wanted this as much as I did. And until I got her to that point, I wasn't laying a hand on her. As hard as that would fucking be.



I still hadn't decided what I was gonna do about Peter and Gambarro when I picked Evie up from work that afternoon. Seeing her, though, pushed me towards the decision of getting involved. How the fuck could I let her father die?

I drove her home and insisted on walking her inside so we could finish our conversation from the other night.

"Okay," she agreed, seemingly as keen to talk as I was.

Aside from the other night and this morning, I hadn't been in Evie's house for over a year. She lived about twenty minutes from me, in a small house she'd saved for years to buy. I clearly remembered the day I'd moved her in and we'd christened a few of the rooms. Back then, it had been in need of renovating and I'd helped her. It looked as if she'd done more since I'd been here last.

As we walked down the hall, I murmured, "I like what you've done with the place."

"You like the colours I've added?"

I smiled. "Yeah, baby, I like it." Evie loved colour and she'd painted feature walls throughout. Teal seemed to be her favourite colour these days, judging by the amount of it in her home.

We made it to the kitchen and she dropped her bag on the counter and looked up at me, seeming rather hesitant. "Why didn't you sleep with me last night? I thought you were all up for sex and then you fobbed me off."

That was unexpected, but I was more than happy to discuss it. "I am *all* for sex with you but not like that."

"What does that mean, Kick?" she asked me, clearly frustrated.

"It means you're worth more than a quick fuck to me. If I can't have you... have your heart, then I don't just want your body."

Silence surrounded us as she processed that. I waited patiently. She had to relent soon.

Finally, she said, "I need more. It's not enough for you to just show back up after all this time and say you've changed your mind."

"What do you need? Tell me and I'll give it to you."

"I need *all* of you."

My body stilled. She wanted the parts of me I didn't want to give. She wanted the parts of me that no one in their right mind would want to know.

The parts she would run from if I showed her.

"No, you don't."

She stepped nearer to me. Our bodies were so close I could feel her warm breath on my skin, and fuck, I needed more.

I needed to feel her body on mine, her hair between my fingers, her pussy around my dick.

Her words at the end of the day.

Her love wrapped around me, taking all the shit away.

"I've known you since I was seven, Kick. You used to share yourself with me back then. Your thoughts and feelings. And then, after all the shit went down with our families, you started to pull away and when you joined Storm, it was like you disconnected from me. I tried so hard to get through to you, to let you know I loved you, *all of you*, but you never took that in. I get that there's stuff you can't tell me, and I don't want to know the ins and outs of it all, but give me something. Anything. Show me *you*. Let me love *you*."

Fuck.

I didn't deserve her. She was lightness to my darkness and I had no idea how to combine the two. Or even if I wanted to.

I reached out and ran my finger lightly down her cheek. "I love you, Evie, but I don't know how to do what you've asked. I can try, though," I whispered, total honesty spilling from my lips.

She smiled sadly at me, a look of defeat in her eyes. "I know."

When she moved away from me and just watched me in silence, I feared I'd fucked it all up.

I'm losing her again.

And then I did what I always did when fear and hopelessness threatened to overtake me - I resorted to anger and frustration. "This isn't the fuckin' end of this," I snapped, and stalked out of the room without waiting for her response.

I didn't need to see her rejection again.

I just needed to find a way to get through to her.

CHAPTER NINE

Evie

I hadn't heard from Kick in two days. Not since he told me he didn't know how to be in a relationship with me. My heart hurt and that pissed me off. Why did he have to show up and create these feelings when I was doing okay without him? And why did he struggle so much with letting me in? When we'd been together in the past, it was like Kick lived two lives. One with me, and one with his other family, the club. I could never work out why he kept the two completely separate. What kind of person doesn't want to introduce you to his friends? It made me feel like shit when he refused to let me meet them. I wouldn't put myself through that again.

I'd decided to try and put him out of my mind when I realised that would be impossible. Out of the question, actually, because when I visited my mother two days after he'd walked out of my house on an angry outburst, Kick was at her house again.

As I entered her kitchen, I asked, "Where is he? I saw his bike out front."

She looked up from the vegetables she was cutting up and smiled at me. "He's out the back, cleaning the gutters."

"Why?"

She frowned. "I guess because he's a nice guy and wanted to help me."

"So he just dropped by and decided to do it for you?" I asked, incredulous.

"He told me he'd noticed them the other day, so that's why he came back. Are you annoyed about it?"

I huffed out a breath. "I don't know how I feel, Mum. I'm like a big knot of stress at the moment. One minute I want him and then the next he pisses me off and I just want him to leave." God, I felt like one of those whiny bitches I couldn't fucking stand.

Just make up your mind already.

A huge smile spread across her face. "Baby, you've always loved Kick, and from what you just said, I don't think that love is going anywhere soon. You two have always had that push and pull where you piss each other off, so that's nothing new."

"Maybe I don't want a relationship like that anymore. Maybe I want something easier with no pissing each other off."

She laughed. "Oh, Evie... you'd be bored in a day."

She was right and I fucking knew it.

And that pissed me off even more.

God damn it.

I left her and went in search of Kick. I found him and Braden up on the roof out the back. He didn't realise I was there for a couple of minutes, so I took the opportunity to watch him and just soak him in. He was shirtless and his muscles rippled as he moved. And I had an awesome view of his ass, too, so every time he bent over, he blessed my eyes with that ass.

Oh god.

My mother was so right when she said I'd be bored without the push and pull Kick and I had.

I still love him.

With every fibre of my being.

With every scar he'd left on my heart.

I still want a life with him.

As I was caught up in my thoughts, he must have seen me. "Evie," his voice filtered through and I blinked him into focus.

"Hi," I said, smiling up at him.

"You staying long?" he asked, his frustration with me from the other day gone.

I had a couple of things to do, one of them being to visit my dad to get more information out of him about the guy he owed money to. I'd been desperately trying to find a way to borrow the money but I'd still had no luck yet so I figured maybe we could negotiate with the guy. "I've gotta go and see Dad but I'll be here for a while."

A look of irritation crossed his face, and he said, "I'll be down in a minute."

"Okay." I had no idea what the irritation was about but I figured he would clue me in soon.

"Hey, Evie," Braden called out, waving to me.

I waved back. "Hey, Braden. Long time, no see."

"Yeah. I reckon it's about time you two got your shit sorted," he said with a huge grin.

I waved him away with a flick of my hand. "Yeah, yeah... you wouldn't be the first person to say that."

He laughed a huge belly laugh. "Well get on that, woman."

I shook my head and laughed. "I'll leave you guys to it. I'm going back inside out of the heat."

"Have a coldie waiting for me," Braden said.

I smiled to myself. I'd missed the banter with Kick's brother. Although our parents had killed their relationship, us kids had stayed friends, but when Kick and I had broken up the last time, I'd cut all ties. I'd needed to put distance between us, and being friends with his family would make that hard.

As I turned to walk back inside, I caught a glimpse of Kick standing on the roof staring down at me. He seemed surprised about something, and I couldn't figure out what, so I just gave him a smile and continued on.

My phone rang a second later and I answered it absently. "Hi," I said, having no idea who it was because I hadn't even checked the caller id.

"What's got you all distracted?" Maree asked.

Thank god. I could get her perspective on this before I saw Kick again. "Who do you think?"

"I am guessing it's that hot man of yours." I could practically hear her licking her lips.

"He's not my man. But fuck, I think I want him to be."

"Of course you do, babe. I mean, who wouldn't?"

I laughed. "No, Maree, I mean I really do want him. Not just for his body."

She grew serious. "As in, you still love him?"

I sighed. "I never stopped loving him. I just didn't want to admit it. But I don't know how we can make it work with all the baggage between us."

"If you want him, you have to fight for him. You have to work out what's holding you back and find a way to get rid of it. 'Cause I've gotta say, you're an amazing woman, Evie, but you came alive when you were with Kick the other night. I've never seen you light up like that. On your own, you kick ass, but I can only imagine how awesome you'd be with Kick by your side."

Shit.

I knew what it was.

It's funny how you can be searching for an answer for a long time and then someone says something and it's like the block is moved and you can see clearly.

Fuck.

It wasn't Kick after all.

It was me.

"I know what's holding me back."

"What?"

"Me."

"Huh?"

I sighed. It was so stupid I didn't even want to tell her. "After my mother slept with Kick's father and the shit hit the fan, everyone in the neighbourhood called her a slut and then they called me a slut. They said I was just like her. I was sixteen and had never even had sex, and yet they were spreading all these nasty rumours about me. The girls at school bullied me and I lost pretty much all my self-esteem. I never felt good enough. I never felt like anyone would want or choose to be my friend after that. So, when Kick chose not to introduce me to his friends when we were dating, all the insecurities I thought I'd put behind me flared up, and I felt like I wasn't good enough." I paused and ran my hand through my hair. "Shit, Maree, it was me all along. My stupid negative self talk that I didn't even realise. And I'm supposed to be a fucking counsellor."

"Oh, babe, don't beat yourself up about it. We all have hang-ups and blind spots. At least you've figured it out now," she reassured

me.

"Yeah," I murmured, and then said, "Shit, sorry, I hijacked the conversation. What did you ring for?"

"No worries, babe, I was just calling to see if you wanted to go out for a drink tonight?"

"I might pass. I've gotta sort some stuff out with my dad, and now I think I want to talk to Kick."

"Sounds like that might be a good idea."

"I'll call you and let you know how it goes," I promised, and we hung up.

A noise came from behind me and I spun around to find Kick standing there, his intense gaze on me.

"You still love me?" he asked gruffly. His shoulders were rigid and his breathing shallow while he waited for my answer.

My heart beat faster in my chest and my tummy fluttered. "You heard all that?" I whispered.

He nodded. "Yeah, baby, but answer me. Do you still love me?" The fierceness in his voice turned me on and made me want to crawl into his arms and beg him to be mine forever.

"Yes," I said, finally admitting out loud what I had been denying for so long.

He took that in but didn't say anything else for what felt like ages, and then he shoved his fingers through his hair, messing it up more than it already was. The energy between us vibrated with want and the frustration we'd both been feeling for too long. And then he stepped into my space. One arm slid around my waist and his other reached up to cup my cheek. He brushed his thumb over my lips in the way he'd always liked to do, and he murmured, "I've always loved you and you've *always* been good enough. Fuck, *I'm* the one who's not good enough." He stopped talking for a minute and his eyes left mine to look down at my lips. When he returned his gaze to mine, he said, "I wish you'd told me how it made you feel. I didn't keep you out of that part of my life because you weren't good enough. I did it because I didn't want to drag you into that shit." He bent his face closer to mine so our lips were almost touching, and my core clenched at the closeness. "You're too good for it, baby," he whispered.

I pressed myself into him and wrapped my arms around his body, loving that my hands were on him again, after having denied

myself his touch for so long. A growl rumbled up from his chest and heat flashed in his eyes. And then we both moved at the same time.

Our lips met and it was like everything was right in my world again. This was exactly where I was meant to be in this moment.

With Kick.

The man I'd loved as a boy when he used to let me ride his bike because I didn't have one.

The man I'd loved as a teenager when he took on the mean girls for me, and wiped my tears away when I didn't feel good enough.

The man I'd loved at eighteen when I gave him my virginity and he treasured that for what it was.

The man I still loved for so many reasons, but mostly because he *got* me. He knew all my hopes, fears and flaws, and loved me regardless.

My mouth parted and his tongue slid in.

Possessive.

Demanding.

Loving.

I moaned and his arm around my waist tightened, and he pulled me closer, pushing his erection into me. Lust shot through me and I knew this was it.

This was the moment I was giving myself back to him.

Kick was mine.

I was Kick's.

He ended the kiss and leant his forehead against mine. "Fuck, Evie... you've got no idea what you fuckin' do to me." He lifted his head so he could look me in the eyes. "You give me hope I can be a better man, that I'm not just the sum of all the bad shit I've done in my life."

I frowned. "You're not a bad person, Kick."

He closed his eyes for a moment and when he opened them again, the desolation I saw there pierced my heart. "Yeah, I am, baby," he whispered, cracking my heart a little more.

I opened my mouth to argue with him some more, but his phone rang and interrupted us.

He pulled it out and checked who it was. "Sorry, I've gotta get this," he said with regret, and walked away from me to take the call.

I waited for him to return, doing my best to recover from our kiss and my realisations. He wasn't gone long, but when he came back to

me, the Kick who'd been with me a minute ago was gone, and in his place was the guy who looked at me through hard eyes. This was the Kick I didn't know so well but so desperately wanted to know and understand.

"I've got something I've gotta take care of," he said, his voice as hard as his eyes.

"Will you be back?"

"I don't know, but Braden will finish the gutters."

"I'm not worried about the gutters, Kick. What I want to know is when will I see you again? We were kind of in the middle of something there."

"I'll call you," he said, and I felt like I was being dismissed.

What the hell?

He'd already started to leave before I could get my wits together and challenge him. However, he stopped and turned back to me. "Don't go to see your father. I'm gonna sort that out, okay?"

"What the hell is going on?" I demanded, growing more frustrated.

His hard look intensified and he stalked back to me. "Promise me you won't go to your father, that you won't try to fix his shit for him. I went to see him and I told him I would help him with it."

I stared at him in shock. A minute ago he'd been telling me he loved me and now he was talking to me as if none of that had been said.

"Promise me, Evie," he barked.

I jumped, and was instantly pissed off. "You better go and sort your shit out, Kick, and *then* you'd better come find me and explain to me what the fuck is going on! Because something has happened here that I don't know about, and I'll be damned if I'll put up with this shit."

His eyes bore into mine for another moment and then he nodded. "I'll see you later," he promised, and turned and left.

I stood completely stunned and didn't hear Braden come up behind me. "He needs you, you know."

I jumped again and turned to face him. "Fuck, Braden..." I muttered.

He held his hands up. "Sorry, didn't mean to frighten you."

"What do you mean, he needs me?"

"I don't know exactly what shit Kick's involved in with his club, but he's struggling. Actually, I think he's drowning in it, whatever it is. He doesn't spend much time with us anymore and when we do see him, he's this moody, angry fuck who none of us really want to be around."

"Really? 'Cause he hasn't really been that moody with me."

"See? He needs you because you take it away for him. He's never stopped loving you, Evie. He hasn't even dated anyone since you two broke up."

"I never knew that," I said, surprised again. God, today was a day of discovery.

"Give him a chance. But know that it might take some time for him to change his ways. Yeah?"

It was almost as if he was pleading with me. Braden was a big guy. Way over six feet and built with muscles that looked like they took hours in the gym to achieve. He stood in front of me, his dark, wavy hair sweaty from being outside, his muscles tensed and a demanding look on his face, telling me he how much he wanted me to do what he asked. But it was his eyes that said the most. They gazed at me through pain; Braden was hurting from watching Kick struggle. Nodding, I said, "I don't intend to give up on him, but he's gonna have to step up, too."

He smiled. "I'll give him a kick up the ass for you."

It seemed like Kick might need more than that. I just hoped he had it in him to be the man I needed him to be.

CHAPTER TEN

Kick

I strode into the clubhouse, looking for Hyde. The motherfucker had called and demanded I get down here straight away. Right when I was finally starting to get my shit together with Evie. Pulling me away from my woman had not fucking pleased me, and I was about to give him a piece of my mind.

"Kick!"

I spun around to find Hyde coming up behind me, a hard glare in place. Walking towards him, I asked, "What the fuck is going on, Hyde? What was so fuckin' important that I had to get here right fuckin' now?"

"Did you go and see Jonathon Gambarro?"

"No."

He narrowed his eyes. "You sure about that, Kick?"

"Yes, I'm fuckin' sure about that, motherfucker. Why?"

"Well, it seems someone from Black Deeds got in his face and he's gone fucking psycho on them, so I wanted to make sure you weren't thinking of taking him on. I told you, the last thing we need is a problem with Gambarro."

He wasn't fucking serious? "You dragged me all the way here when I was in the middle of something to tell me *that*?"

I watched his eyes flash with rage. "It'd pay for you to remember who you're talking to," he said, his fury rising fast.

"I never forget who I'm talking to, VP. And you know my loyalty to this club, so don't come in here and insinuate that I am anything but fuckin' loyal." I shook my head in anger. "The shit I've done for you, for King and for Storm, go above and fuckin' beyond. If you ever imply it hasn't or doesn't again, you might just find out what it's like to be on the end of my anger."

"Are you fucking threatening me?"

I moved closer to him so we were almost nose-to-nose, my anger rolling off me. "Yeah, I'm fuckin' threatening you."

Hyde looked like he wanted to punch me, and I had no doubt the thought was running through his head, but I could fucking care less. If he wanted a fight, I'd give him a fight. In the end, though, he turned and stalked out of the room.

Fuck.

I was between a rock and a fucking hard place. And I still had no idea what the fuck I was going to do about it.



Five hours later, after I'd gone for a long ride to blow the shit out of my head, I pulled my bike up in Evie's driveway. Her lights were still on, and I wondered if she'd waited up for me. She'd been pretty fucking clear about me coming over so my guess was she had.

As I walked the short path to her front door, she pulled it open and stood staring at me.

Christ, she never failed to take my breath away. Tonight she was dressed in an old t-shirt of mine that I didn't even realise she still had. Her long, brown hair was flowing wildly around her shoulders and her face was flushed.

"Sorry I'm so late," I apologised.

"Better late than never," she replied quietly.

I waited for her to step aside and let me in but she didn't. "You gonna let me in?"

"Not until you spill."

I exhaled harshly. "Evie..."

She crossed her arms over her chest and a determined look covered her face. "No, Kick. I need you to tell me what happened today. I want to know where you go when The Hard Kick comes out."

"Come again, babe? What's The Hard Kick?" She'd lost me now.

"It's this thing you do every now and then. One minute you're okay and normal, and then something happens and you change. It's like a harder, meaner version of you comes out. And it's not that I don't like it, I just want to understand why. Is it something I do to you?"

There were three steps separating us. I closed the distance and curled my hand around her waist. Leaning in to bring our faces closer, I said, "No, it's not something you do. It's got nothing to do with you at all."

"But - "

I pressed my finger to her lips. "I'm sorry it happens. I've got shit going on with the club at the moment and as much as I try to keep that from interfering with us, I can't always manage to do that."

Her face softened and I sensed her relenting. "I get it. But you do need to explain to me about my father and what you're doing to help him."

"We'll get to that, baby, but fuck, I haven't been able to stop thinking about you all night, so can we deal with that first?"

Heat flashed in her eyes. She didn't say anything, just nodded her agreement.

I moved my free hand down to the bottom of her t-shirt and trailed my fingers up her thigh towards her panties. When her eyes fluttered and she bit her lip, I knew this was what she wanted, too. I pressed my mouth to her ear and murmured, "Let me inside, Evie. I need to fuck you like I've never needed to fuck you." I found the edge of her panties and pushed past them to run my finger along her pussy.

So goddamn wet.

She whimpered, and unable to control myself any longer, I moved quickly and scooped her up. I entered the house, kicked the door shut behind me and strode towards her bedroom.

Her hands came around my neck and she held on tight. "I've been thinking about you, too," she breathed into my ear, causing my already hard dick to nearly lose his shit.

I deposited her on the bed and then reached down to undo my belt and jeans as I kicked my boots off. She moved off the bed and came to me, lifting her t-shirt over her head as she did so. Her hands

went to my tee and she had it off in a matter of seconds. My jeans and boxers followed close behind.

Her eyes travelled every inch of my body before coming back to meet my gaze. "God, Kick, how much do you work out these days?"

I pulled her to me, fucking loving the feel of our skin together again. "It's called working my frustrations out. I haven't had you to work out with for too fuckin' long so I had to find another outlet."

She raised her brows. "You can't tell me you haven't been working out with someone else."

"Every now and then, but babe, none of them come close to you."

"Yeah, yeah..."

She tried to blow me off but I corrected her. "No, Evie. You know I don't say shit for the sake of saying it."

Her body stilled in my arms and I knew I'd gotten through. Her hand came to my face and she caressed my cheek. "I know," she whispered.

My cock throbbed for her, it fucking ached to get inside her, so I hurried this along. "I'm gonna fuck you hard and fast to start with and then long and slow. You good with that?"

A sexy smile spread across her face. "So long as I get your tongue on my pussy later, I'm good with anything."

Christ, I loved her dirty mouth. Had missed that mouth. "I see your mouth is still as filthy as it's always been," I said as I let her go and pushed her back onto the bed.

"Kick, you taught me everything I know, so of course my mouth is filthy as fuck."

"Fuck, Evie," I growled as I positioned myself over her. "I'm gonna fuck your mouth with my cock later and show you just what filthy is."

She reached for my dick and began stroking it. "I don't want you to use a condom. Are you clean?"

"Yeah. You?"

She nodded and then caught my lips in a kiss while she continued to pump my cock. I knew I was dangerously close to coming and that I should slow this down, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. She made me feel so damn good and I hadn't felt good in a long fucking time.

Her touch was magic.

Her words were healing.

And I knew her love was everything I needed in this shitty world.

I pulled out of our kiss and grunted, "Babe, either you need to stop what you're doing or I need to get inside you because I'm just about to blow if you keep it up."

She let me go but said, "You did say this was gonna be hard and fast and I'm good with that."

"I don't want it to be *that* fast. I don't think you realise what you do to me. These days I just need to look at you and I'm almost coming in my pants."

"Baby, you sure know how to sweet-talk a girl," she whispered in my ear.

I groaned. Even the feel of her warm breath on me almost did me in. Fuck, I was so far gone it wasn't fucking funny.

It was time to take control.

I grabbed both her wrists and positioned them above her head. Holding them there with one hand, I held her gaze and said, "Don't move your hands."

"Why?"

"Because if you touch me, I'm gonna come all over you instead of inside of you."

"That wouldn't be so bad," she teased.

"Christ, woman, don't fucking tempt me."

"Okay, I'll just lie here and let you do whatever you want."

"Thank fuck," I muttered and let her hands go, half expecting her to move them, but she didn't.

Now that I had her whole body to devour, I began with her neck and then trailed my tongue down to her breasts. Evie had the best tits I'd ever had the pleasure of touching. Even after all her weight loss, they were a good handful, and I wasn't in the minority in my devotion to them. I'd had the displeasure of watching men ogle them for too many years now. As I sucked and licked them, she arched her back and moaned. I paused for a moment to look up at her face and almost lost control when I saw the bliss written across her face. Her eyes were shut, and her teeth were biting her lip. My woman was sexy as fuck.

Her eyes fluttered open and she found my gaze. Smiling lazily at me, she murmured, "You should keep going, baby. I want you to lick

all the way down to my pussy and then I want you to fuck me with your tongue."

I leant on my elbows, my face resting in between her tits. "That right?"

"Yeah. You think you can manage that?"

I moved quick and a second later, I'd straddled her and had dipped my face to hers. My dick sat at her entrance and I teased her with it, pushing slightly into her and then pulling out. "I can manage any-fuckin'-thing, darlin'. The question is, can you?"

She licked her lips and asked, "Like what, Kick?"

I pushed my dick inside again. Not all the way, just enough to get her going, and then I pulled back out. "Like that," I growled in her ear, "can you manage that?"

She smiled that fucking sexy smile that made my dick even harder than it already was if that was even fucking possible. "I don't think you want to push me, Kick, cause we both know I can take a lot more than you can. I'd only have to reach down, take your cock in my hand and give you a few tugs and you'd be coming before you could say fuck."

Fuck.

I was done.

Between her sexy body, her wet pussy, and her filthy mouth, my senses were in overdrive to the point where I could hardly function.

I thrust inside her, all the fucking way, and then pulled back out and slammed back in again. Stilling with my dick still deep in her, I rasped, "Feel good, baby?"

Her arms reached around me, and she dug her nails into my back. And then she squeezed her cunt around my dick and said, "Feels real good. Keep going."

Fuck me.

I'd missed this woman.

I pulled out and thrust back in.

Over and over.

She clung to me, her nails clawing my back, and her mouth chanting filthy words that turned me way the fuck on.

And as my orgasm built, I knew she was it for me. In that moment, I knew I never wanted to fuck another woman in my life. All I needed to be happy was Evie's beautiful pussy wrapped around my cock, and her heart to belong only to me.

"Fuck, Kick, I'm gonna come!" she screamed, and I thrust harder and faster.

"Wait for me, baby," I grunted as I chased it.

She held on tight and together we came. I pumped my cum into her as her pussy pulsed around my dick and took everything I had to give.

I nestled my face into her neck and rested there while we both recovered from our orgasms. Eventually, I lifted my head and kissed her before saying, "Fuck, that was good."

"Yeah, it was," she agreed. Then she smacked my ass and said, "I'm gonna go clean up and then you can start that all over again."

I grinned and moved off her. "You do that. We've got a lot of time to make up for."

"We do," she agreed, and then left me to go to the bathroom.

I shifted onto my back and placed my arm behind my neck while I waited for her.

Shit, how the hell did I get so lucky?

To have Evie back in my life made me the happiest fucker on the planet.

I wasn't going to fuck this up again.

And it was clear to me now what my next move was.

And where my loyalty now lay.



The next morning, I sat on the edge of Evie's bed and did my boots up, getting ready to tackle the shit I had to take care of during the day.

She rolled over and the bed shifted as she sat up. I turned to look at her and found disappointment in her eyes. "What?" I asked, confused.

"Are you leaving now?"

"Yeah."

She sat up straighter and moved the sheet to cover herself which only confused me more. I moved my hand to the sheet to pull it back down. "Don't," she murmured, holding the sheet tight.

I shifted so I was facing her with one leg up on the bed. "What's going on? Why the fuck are you covering yourself up after last

night?"

"What is this, Kick?"

Now I was really fucking confused. "What do you mean? I thought we knew what this is."

She motioned toward me with her hand and said, "Why are you dressed and leaving so early? It's like you're running out on me."

I flicked my hand out to catch hers. "This," I pointed to myself with my other hand, "is me fighting for you, Evie. Fighting for us. This is me bringing you into my world."

She sucked in a breath but didn't say anything, just waited for me to go on.

I struggled with where to begin. "I've done a lot of shit in my life I'm not proud of." I let go of her hand but she reached for it and grabbed hold of me. My gaze dropped to our hands and then shifted back to her. The fierce look of love on her face gave me what I needed to continue. "I've hurt people, for fuck's sake." She needed to know this, but it fucking sucked to have to lay it all out, because I knew she'd probably want to walk away from me once she knew it all.

"Okay." She said nothing else, just sat quietly waiting for me. Like that wasn't enough for her to make up her mind.

"How can you love a man who does that?" I demanded, needing more of a reaction from her. I couldn't gauge her thoughts from a simple 'okay'.

She shifted closer to me on the bed when she should have been shifting further away. "Kick, you forget I've known you for almost your whole life." She placed her hand on my chest. Over my heart. "I know you *here*. I know the good you carry in you, and I know you feel like you have no good left in you, but I see it. I see *you*. So when you tell me you've hurt people, I know you would have had your reasons. I don't judge you." Her gaze never left mine as she gave me those words and I saw no judgement there, only acceptance.

I stared at her, stunned into silence for a moment. "Storm is involved in a lot of shit and I'm buried deep in that shit, baby. I'm not gonna spell it out for you, but it's not fuckin' legal shit. Can you handle that?"

She blinked a few times, giving away her hesitation, and I waited for the blow to come. "I'm not an idiot. I've always figured the club was into that kind of stuff."

"And you don't care?"

"I wouldn't say that. I'll admit it concerns me, but I put it out of my mind."

I scrubbed my face. "Shit, Evie, if we're together and I bring you into this world, there are gonna be things you won't be able to put out of your mind."

"Like what?"

"Like the shit that's about to go down with your father."

She sucked in a breath. "What's about to go down with my father?"

"He owes all that money to a fuckin' dangerous man who wouldn't hesitate to kill for an unpaid debt. I'm gonna blackmail the guy into letting your dad out of his debt. And that shit will probably blow back onto the club, and fuck knows where that will end up."

Worry took over her face, and I hated that I'd put it there, but she wanted the truth. And then she gave me something - my first glimpse of hope that we might have a future together. "So Storm is into shit and some of it I won't be able to put out of my mind, but I know that you're the kind of man who protects what is his. And if I'm yours, I know deep in my soul that you'll do anything to make sure I'm safe. That's how I know I'll be able to handle this shit."

Her words took my breath away.

She accepted this.

Me.

She accepts me.

I roughly pulled her to me and wrapped her in my arms. "Fuck, you amaze me," I murmured as I held her close, never wanting to let her go.

When I did eventually release her, she smiled and said, "Together, Kick. We'll get through anything if we just stick together. We always have."

I stood. It was time to go and save her father.

Bending, I kissed the top of her head and said, "Happy Valentine's Day, baby."

I ignored the look of surprise on her face at my words.

Yeah, I never used to celebrate Valentine's Day.

I could change, though.

I could change for Evie.



"Mr Gambarro isn't taking visitors today."

Was she shitting me? I eyed the woman who was blocking my access. Uptight, middle-aged bitch who probably just needed a good fuck. "I don't give a flying fuck if he's not taking visitors. You tell him I'm here to settle a debt, and that he's gonna want to see me." I paused and then added, "Tell him it's about Michael."

She scowled. "I'm not interrupting him. You'll need to make an appointment like everyone else."

I slammed my hand down on her desk, causing her to jump in her seat. "Go and fucking tell him I want to see him and that it's about Michael!" I roared.

She glared at me and continued to argue. "I don't know who Michael is - "

Rage blinded me and I struggled with my kneejerk reaction to inflict pain in order to get what I wanted. Instead, I placed both hands on her desk and bent my face close to hers. "Bitch, I'm about two seconds away from doing some major damage here. Go and tell your boss he's got a fuckin' visitor."

Her eyes widened, and then she stood and walked into Gambarro's office. A minute later, they both came out, and Jonathon Gambarro glared at me. I eyed him and took in one of the most feared men in Sydney. He'd had his hand in dirty shit for over twenty years, and at only forty-one I figured he had many more years of it left in him.

"Who the fuck are you?" he barked.

"I'm here to settle Peter Bishop's debt."

He scowled. "Why isn't Peter here to take care of that?"

I walked towards him and threw out the one weapon I had in my arsenal. "I've actually come to talk more about Michael than about Peter."

The asshole knew exactly who I was talking about by the look that flitted across his face.

I'd brought fear to Jonathon Gambarro. A feat not many managed to do. And I hoped like hell it would be enough to save Peter.

He motioned for me to enter his office.

Time to negotiate.

Shutting the door behind him, a more subdued Gambarro took a seat at this desk while I stood on the other side. "What about Michael?" he asked as his gaze swept over me with distaste.

"What do *you* think, asshole?"

"I'm not sure what to think unless you lay it all out for me." His voice remained calm but the sweat beading on his forehead gave him away.

I slowly placed my hands on the edge of his desk and bent slightly towards him. "It seems you've got a thing for young boys, Jonathon, and I happen to know one of them didn't make it out of your home alive. That information remains with me, and me only, as long as you wipe Peter's debt and forget you ever met him. And before your brain starts to tick over and contemplate ways to take me or Peter out for this, you need to know I've made arrangements for this information to be passed onto the cops if either of us end up dead."

He weighed my words, and I watched the hatred form in his eyes. "How the fuck do you know about this?" he sneered.

"Knowing shit that no one else knows is my specialty."

"That shit is likely to get you killed one day. You do realise that, don't you?"

"I'm not concerned about that. I've lasted seventeen years in this shithole city with the knowledge I have. I don't think anything's about to change just because I've got something on you."

His brows shot up. "Well, then you've got no fucking idea how I work."

I bent lower to look him right in the eyes. "No, motherfucker, *you've* got no idea how *I* fuckin' work. You don't want to take me on because I've got reach in this city that you can only fuckin' dream of."

"I don't even fucking know who you are, so excuse me if I don't buy a word of what you're saying."

Time to pull out the big guns. I started rattling off names he *would* know. "Justin Sutherland, Billy Jones, Max James, Eric Bones, Calvin Ryan, Stu Davy... you know any of those names? And I promise you that's just the tip of the iceberg. You wanna fuck with me, you'll be fucking with them, too." I intentionally left out King's name just like I'd intentionally not worn my cut this morning.

He sat back in his chair and I knew I had him.

Silence filled the room as we glared at each other, and while he contemplated his next move.

I should have felt anxiety, worry, concern ... anything.

I felt nothing.

Years of doing this shit for King had numbed me.

My job was to get the shit on people, throw that shit at them and sit back and watch them crap their pants. It was to bend them to our way of thinking, and I was the fuckin' best at it. It was why King kept me so close. He knew I had good contacts, and he knew the cold heart beating in my chest meant nothing was off the table when it came to getting what we wanted.

If Gambarro didn't come to the party now, I had other options to force him. But it seemed the first option I'd gone with would be enough.

He pushed his chair back and stood. When he spoke, his voice was low. Cold and calm. "Consider the debt wiped."

I nodded once but didn't say anything. He had more to get off his chest and I knew it.

"Also consider this a warning. I don't like the way you conduct business and I intend on showing you just how much it displeases me. And I don't care how long it takes me to do that, be it months or years, I *will* see it through. Now get the fuck out of my office," he said in a low, menacing voice.

With my goal achieved and nothing else left to say, I turned and walked out of his office. I knew he'd make good on his threat so my next stop was the clubhouse. It wouldn't take Gambarro long to figure out I was Storm, so I had to let King know what had just gone down.

While I figured Hyde would be pissed, I suspected King would rally the boys. The crazy motherfucker lived for shit like this.



It took me nearly an hour in traffic to get to the clubhouse and, in that time, word had travelled. Gambarro was on the warpath. He hadn't worked out my connection to Storm yet but Hyde had already heard about what had gone down.

Hyde found me before I found King. Anger rolled off him. I'd never seen him this fired up. "What the *fuck* did you do?"

"I sorted some family shit out," I threw back at him. "Just like you would have done if it was your family on the line."

"No, what you did was create club shit and that's something I sure as fuck wouldn't have done. When Gambarro figures out who you are and that you're with Storm, he'll come, gunning for us, and he won't fucking hold back. I can promise you that."

"You don't think I've already thought of that?"

"I seriously don't know what the fuck goes through your mind anymore, Kick. If I didn't know better, I'd say you had a head full of pussy and had lost your fucking mind, but seems as though I know you're a cold-hearted bastard who doesn't ever let pussy control him, I don't know what's gotten into you."

"Hyde," King's voice sounded from behind me and as he got closer, he said, "we're backing Kick on this."

Hyde's anger and frustration grew and he channelled it into a punch to the wall closest to him. "Fuck!" he roared as he stood staring at us, his eyes wild, his face flushed. "Do you know what the fuck that will do to Storm, King?"

King was the master of controlling his emotions when he wanted to and he did that now. The vein pulsing in his neck was the only giveaway he was angry. "Of course I fucking know what this will do to Storm. I also know we have the connections to take him on. And win." He turned to look at me, his eyes flashing from anger to that wicked look he got when something excited him. "And I'm in the mood for some fun. Let's shake this shit up, boys. Let's show Sydney what the fuck Storm is made of."

Hyde shook his head. "Fuck, you're an insane motherfucker sometimes, King."

King grinned. "It keeps life interesting, my friend."

"And what about this other shit with Silver Hell? If they figure out that was you, then we'll have two lots of assholes coming after us," Hyde said.

King shrugged. "Bring it on. Like I said, Storm is connected, and if need be, I'll fucking drag our other chapters in."

Hyde raised his hands. "I've had my say. You're the President, so whatever you say goes, but I'm letting you know I think this is some fucked-up shit."

King took in what he'd said and then grew serious. "Hyde, we're brothers. If one of us needs help, we all pull together. Kick *always* has our backs. It's time we take his."

Hyde stared at both of us for a long moment and then blew out his breath. "Fuck," he muttered. "Yeah." And then he walked away, leaving King and I alone.

"Thanks, brother," I said.

"No thanks needed. Whatever you need from me, you have it. Just ask."

I nodded and watched as he, too, walked away.

Storm had become my family when my own had fallen apart years ago and King had always been there for me. He'd just shown me I was true family to him because King never offered anyone whatever they needed. He never told anyone just to *ask* for what they needed. Usually you had to sell your soul to get that kind of offer from King.

Fuck.

I'd sold my soul a long fucking time ago.

King was only giving me what I was due.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Evie

I shimmied into the new red dress I'd bought today and smoothed it down into place. Stepping in front of the mirror in my bedroom, I assessed myself. Not bad. I'd spent the day pampering myself with a haircut and colour, and then a pedicure and wax. Kick might not be the kind of man to celebrate Valentine's Day, but that didn't stop me from acknowledging it and looking good for him. Tonight, I planned on seducing him into giving me multiple orgasms. Kick was the only guy I'd ever slept with who'd been able to do that for me, and I could hardly wait to get him started. Shit, I'd been thinking about it all day and was more than ready to go, so the first one wouldn't take him long.

Once I was happy with my dress, I headed into the kitchen. It was nearly seven o'clock. Surely he'd be here soon. I'd actually expected to see him much earlier today but he must have had a lot to take care of because I hadn't seen or heard from him since he left my bed this morning.

I kept myself busy for another half hour but when I still hadn't heard from him, I decided to call him instead.

He didn't answer.

Shit, where was he?

I sat at the kitchen table and thought about it for a few minutes, and then I knew. Well, I had an idea of where he might have gone so I grabbed my car keys and went in search of him.

Fifteen minutes later, I walked into the pub that used to be 'ours'. It was the place he took me to celebrate my eighteenth birthday which then led to us getting together, so I'd always thought of it as ours.

He was sitting at a table in the far back corner. Alone, and he wore a look that told me he was contemplating stuff. Something bad must have gone down. It was never a good sign when Kick was contemplative.

I walked to where he sat and he looked up as I approached. His eyes were vacant - it was as if he was looking straight through me. And then he blinked and I must have come into focus for him, because his gaze travelled over my body. When his eyes came back to mine, I saw the want in them that had been missing a minute ago.

"Evie," he murmured, "what are you doing here?"

I sat opposite him, hating that he'd asked me that. "Is it not okay that I came looking for you?"

He reached his hand across the table to take hold of mine. "It's always okay for you to come looking for me."

"So why did you just ask me what I was doing here?"

"Guilt," he said softly and didn't elaborate.

"What's wrong, Kick?"

He stared at me for what felt like ages. He seemed to be weighing something up and I expected something bad to come out of his mouth but he surprised me when he finally spoke. "I fucked up Valentine's Day."

"Why?"

"I should have picked you up earlier and taken you on a date. I'd planned to . . ."

"I think we both know dates on Valentine's Day are not your kind of thing, and I'm okay with that."

"Yeah?"

I smiled. "Yeah. But you're gonna have to make up for that in other ways."

Heat flared in his eyes. "I think I'm good for that, baby. I don't think I could fuck that up even if I tried."

"I think you're right there. You have mad talents in that department."

He laughed, and it was so damn good to see him relax a little. "Good to know my talents are appreciated," he said, letting go of my

hand and sitting back in his chair.

My smile faded. "Now, are you gonna tell me what's really going on, because I am betting it's got absolutely nothing to do with Valentine's Day? Is it something to do with my father? Is that why you're sitting alone in this pub tonight looking like you're assessing your whole damn life?"

"This is our pub, Evie. It's where I come to think."

Warmth spread out from my belly.

He remembers.

"Yeah, I know it's our pub," I said, and then asked, "What are you thinking about?"

"Do you ever look back on your life and wonder if you could have done it better?" His eyes watched me intently, waiting for my answer.

I nodded. "Yeah, I do it a lot." I drove myself crazy with my thoughts sometimes.

He listened to what I said, remaining still. His body was so tightly wound by the looks of it and I wanted to lay my hands on him and try to work some of that tension out. But what Kick needed at this very minute was a listening ear so I gave him that instead.

Eventually, he stretched his arm back to grab hold of the back of his neck, letting out a muttered, "Fuck," while he did it.

I leant my forearms on the table and shifted forward in my seat. "Please tell me what's wrong."

"I sorted your father's debt today . . . but I've caused other problems in order to do that."

My relief was short-lived as what he'd just said filtered through. I frowned. "What kind of problems do you mean?" My heart beat faster in my chest at the thought something bad would come of all this.

He reached for the beer in front of him and took a swig before placing it back on the table and absently running his finger around the rim. Eventually, he gave me his eyes, and said, "It's nothing the club and I can't handle, but . . . fuck, I don't know, have you ever gotten to a point in your life where you feel sick of all the shit you have to deal with? Like, if you'd made different choices in your life, things would be so much different."

"Yes," I whispered, not taking my eyes off him.

"I just want this to be simple, Evie," he said quietly.

"What?" I asked, unsure of what he was referring to.

Anguish burned in his eyes. "Us. I just want us to be easy for once."

My heart squeezed in my chest.

I hated seeing him hurt.

Standing, I held out my hand to him. His brows pulled together, questioning, so I said, "I want it to be easy too, Kick, so I'm going to show you how much I love you, and we're going to make a pact to stick together no matter what. Life might be hard, but you and I can do everything possible to make *us* easy."

He stared at my hand for what felt like ages and then gave me his as he slowly stood. When his gaze met mine, he said, "I fuckin' hope so, baby."



"Stop," Kick growled, his arm wrapping around my waist and pulling me back to him as he came through my front door. He closed the door behind him and whispered in my ear, "That was the longest fuckin' ride."

I let my head fall back on his shoulder, and when his mouth found my neck a moment later, I moaned as his lips set my body on fire. My hand reached up and my fingers slid through his hair. Gripping tight, I admitted, "The last three years have been the longest fucking years, Kick."

He ground his erection against my ass. "Fuck, baby, never going there again," he promised gruffly. His mouth pressed harder into my neck, and his lips and tongue worked their magic on me. His hand skimmed up my body, ghosting over my breasts and my neck to eventually end up in my hair. My core nearly exploded when he roughly grabbed my hair, yanked my head to the side, and rasped, "You ready for your Valentine's present?"

Fuck.

I'd missed this.

Missed Kick's rough side.

Before I managed to form coherent words, his hand that was around my waist, reached down to the bottom of my dress, and pulled it up high enough to give him access to my panties. His hand

slid straight in, his fingers gliding through the wetness I'd had for him all day. He teased me for a few moments, sampling my pussy without giving me what I wanted. What he *knew* I wanted. Every time his finger came near my entrance, I pushed myself into his hand, trying desperately to force him inside, but he quickly moved his finger away and circled back to my clit.

"Kick . . ." I groaned, trying to move my head out of his hold so I could attempt to gain some control back.

"No," he growled, holding my hair tighter, yanking it harder to the side, showing me who held the control here. His finger ran circles over my clit again before slowly moving back down. "Tell me how much you want this, baby," he ordered, his finger hovering over my entrance, teasing the hell out of me again.

"I want it so bad," I mewled, my mind and body completely consumed with the need for his finger to be inside me.

"I'm not convinced."

His gravelly voice drifted into my consciousness, and I decided to show him rather than tell him. I moved one of my hands down to his with the intent of making him do what I wanted, but his hand swiftly left my panties to grab hold of mine. A groan escaped my lips at being thwarted.

"I said tell me, not show me," he warned, trapping my hand in his firm grip.

Lust had taken over my body, pure need flowing through every vein. Kick had always been a master of bringing me to the edge, of driving me to complete desperation.

Desperate for his touch.

Desperate for his words.

Desperate to be joined as one.

"I want you more than anything else in this world, baby," I whispered.

He stilled and I waited.

I knew those words would send him over the edge, and I was right. He let me go so he could roughly push me against the wall. Forcing his body hard against mine, his hands took hold of my face and his mouth pressed down onto mine as he took what he wanted. A searing kiss that was as demanding as it was tender.

My arms wrapped around him and I dug my fingers into his back, knowing that would fire him up as much as my words had.

Kick was right about something he'd said the other day – we knew each other so well. Sex with him was amazing because we knew exactly what turned each other on.

His kiss grew more urgent, his body pressed even harder against me, and I took everything he had to give. Years of denying our desire shaped this kiss and I felt it all.

He devoured me.

He worshipped me.

He loved me.

"Fuck, you're beautiful," he murmured as he ended the kiss and searched my face. His finger lightly traced patterns over my lips. When he forced my lips open, I took what he offered and sucked his finger, tasting myself there, swirling my tongue over his finger because I knew he loved that. I knew he got off on me tasting myself and loving it.

I reached for the button on his jeans and he let me, but he never took his eyes off mine. Once I had his jeans undone, I reached in and took hold of his hard cock, running my thumb over the pre-cum on the tip. His eyes fluttered shut for a moment and he exhaled a hard breath. When he gave me back his gaze, I said, "I'm ready for your Valentine's present now."

"Suck my cock, baby . . . show me how fuckin' much you love me," he commanded, heat-filled eyes telling me how much he wanted that.

My lips pulled up at the ends in a smile. I loved sucking his cock. Without hesitation, I knelt and pulled his jeans and boxers down to free his cock. After he'd kicked his pants aside, I ran my hands up his legs, taking my time so I could appreciate the muscles he'd built since last I'd had this pleasure. His hand landed on my head. The way he held tight combined with the sounds of his heavy breaths told me how much he wanted this. I took hold of his cock and wrapped my lips around the tip and gently sucked it. Only the tip. Two could play at the game of tease.

His hand pressed harder on my head, trying to force me to take his entire length into my mouth. "Fuck, Evie, suck the whole fuckin' thing, baby," he groaned, obviously craving what I wanted to make him work for.

I gripped him harder and stroked the length of him while moving my mouth away. "All in good time," I murmured, enjoying the

game.

Just as I was settling in to play with him a bit more, hands reached under my arms and yanked me up and over his shoulder. He strode down my hall and towards my bedroom while I cried out, "Kick! Put me down!"

His hand met my ass in a slap that jolted pain through me while at the same time causing intense pleasure to shoot through me. "Not fuckin' likely, sweetheart. You wanna play with me? Well, we play my fuckin' way," he said, and I almost came just from his words. At his promise.

Fuck me, I loved it when Kick took charge like this.

A minute later he dumped me on the bed before standing at the end of the bed and demanding, "Where are they?"

I shifted to lean on my elbows and look up at him. Frowning, I asked, "Where's what?"

"The cuffs I bought you."

Oh god, yes.

"In the bottom drawer," I said, pointing my chin at the chest of drawers in the corner.

He stalked over to the drawers, found what he was after and came back to me. "Up and turn around," he barked, indicating for me to stand in front of him facing the other way.

Without hesitation, I did what he said and a moment later, he snapped the handcuffs on my wrists and locked them into place. His hand slid around my waist to spin me around to face him again. The carnal desire written on his face pulsed happiness through me and my body buzzed with expectation.

This is going to blow my fucking mind.

He ran his finger across my lips and said, "I want these lips around my cock and I want you to suck until I come like I haven't come in three fuckin' years." He paused, his gaze locked on my lips as if his mind was far away, and then he murmured, "There are no lips like yours, Evie."

As my body tried to cope with the assault of desire his words caused, his hands moved to my shoulders and pushed me down to my knees. Once he had me where he wanted me, one of his hands held my head in place while the other one guided his cock into my mouth. I took it all the way in and began sucking. My hands locked behind my back itched to be involved, but he'd made sure I had no

control over this so I worked with what I had. My lips and tongue worked him up into a frenzy and I almost gagged as he forced his dick as far down my throat as he could, but Kick and I had this down to a fine art from years of practice and he knew when to back off and I knew when to breathe.

Kick's breathing grew ragged and he began grunting his appreciation of my mouth, and then he stilled and demanded, "You wanna swallow, baby?"

Still with his cock in my mouth, I nodded and he muttered, "Fuck." A moment later he pumped cum down my throat and I happily swallowed it all.

He pulled out and dropped to his knees in front of me. Reaching behind me, he undid the handcuffs and freed my hands before roughly taking my dress and bra off. He then moved his hand down to my panties and ripped them off. I shivered at his rough touch. So hot, and it turned me on even more. His finger found my clit and began massaging it. Then he slid his finger along my slit before finally . . . god, *finally*, pushing his finger all the way in. And then he fucked me hard with his fingers.

My body had been pushed to the edge of desire and I felt like I might collapse as he worked me up to my release. Kick sensed it, though, and put his free arm around my waist to hold me up. His mouth dropped to mine and he kissed me roughly before pulling away and saying, "I've fuckin' missed this pussy."

I shuddered as my orgasm built. Any minute now and Kick would have waves of extreme pleasure coursing through my body. "Don't stop," I managed to get out before the first wave hit.

He kissed me hard again, and said, "No plans to stop, sweetheart. I'm gonna make you come all night long. It's fuckin' Valentine's Day, after all."

My mind flashed with white light as the orgasm ripped through my body. My brain shut down as I let it take over me. I was sure Kick was whispering dirty words in my ear but I couldn't make them out. The only thing I could concentrate on was the fact he really was blowing my mind with his fingers.

I rode the waves and when I finally came to, I let myself fall against Kick who held me tight and then lifted me up and placed me on the bed. He positioned himself on the bed next to me and let his hand trail over my breasts. His eyes dropped to look at them and af-

ter he'd bent to take a nipple in his mouth and lightly bite it, he gave me his gaze, and rasped, "I need to get my cock in between these and fuck them."

Holy shit, he wasn't kidding when he said he had plans for the whole night.

My eyes followed his hands as he lifted his t-shirt over his head to reveal the hard muscles of his chest and abs. Oh god, a girl could get into trouble because of those muscles.

I shifted so I could catch his lips in a kiss and then said, "First you need to take care of my pussy and then you can do whatever the fuck you want."

He grinned at me and said, "I can manage that, but babe, not until you make me a promise."

"What?" I asked, ready to give him anything he wanted as long as he gave me his goddamn cock.

He roughly grabbed my face and pulled me back for another kiss. When he ended it, he bit my lip. Not too hard, just the way he knew I liked it. "Promise me you'll never lose that fuckin' dirty mouth of yours."

I grinned back at him and threw one of my legs over him before swiftly moving so I was straddling him. Arching my back and giving him an eyeful of tit in the process, I promised, "Yeah, baby, I promise."

His eyes had already been coaxed to my breasts and he reached up to grab hold of one.

Hell yes.

No fucking way was I letting go of Kick again.

Ever.



The next day, Kick came with me to see my father. To tell him his debt had been settled.

He answered the door with a look of surprise and we followed him into his kitchen. "You want a drink?" he asked, watching us warily. His gaze followed Kick's arm as it came around my waist and pulled me close.

Kick shook his head to a drink and I said, "No thanks, Dad. We've come to talk about your debt."

He pulled a teaspoon from the drawer and as he shovelled coffee into a mug, he pointed it at us and asked, "You two back together?"

Before coming here, I'd asked Kick to let me do most of the talking, and he kept quiet now and let me answer. "Yeah, we are."

A scowl crossed his face. "You sure that's for the best, Evie?"

His words angered me, and my body tensed, ready for a showdown if necessary. "I don't think it's any of your business. Not after all these years where you couldn't care less about me."

Kick's hold of me tightened and I heard his muttered, "Fuck." He didn't say anything else, though, and that impressed me. The Kick of three years ago would have been straight into an argument and fight if necessary.

Dad continued to make his coffee, remaining silent for a moment. Eventually, he stopped what he was doing, and asked, "Do you know what Kick's involved in these days?"

The look on his face told me he didn't think I did. "If you're referring to Storm, yes I know he's part of the club."

Dad's gaze flicked to Kick and the look he gave him was pure hostility. Then he looked back at me and said, "No, I mean the fact he bails me out of situations that involve thugs and criminals you don't ever want to be tied up with. I don't want you involved in that kind of stuff, Evie."

My blood boiled and I stepped forward. Kick loosened his hold on me but refused to let me go completely. "If you didn't want me involved in that shit, Dad, *you* should have stayed away from them. I do know what he's done for you and I also know that because of you, he could be in trouble now. That shit's on *you*, not *him*," I snapped, my eyes blazing the anger I couldn't control even if I tried.

He was taken aback, obviously not expecting me to fire up like that, but memories of too many years of being let down by this man rushed at me now.

Kick finally waded into the conversation. "Evie and I are together now, Peter, whether anyone else likes it or not. And as far as her knowing what I'm involved in for you, I haven't told her the half of it, but I'm more than happy to if you'd like me to." I couldn't see his face but I could feel the fury in his voice and the hard set of his stance against my back.

Dad stared at him in silence for a few moments before turning his stare to me. "I'm sorry for dragging you into it." The room swirled with his regret. "I'm a weak man and I've let you down."

"Oh my god, Dad, yes, you're a weak man, but if you want to change your life, the only person who can do that is you!" Frustration at his excuses cut through me. He'd been full of excuses as long as I'd been old enough to understand what one was. "Stop making your pathetic excuses and man up. Yes, Mum cheated on you and your life went to shit after that. And yes, you lost a child . . . we all did, but we've all found a way to cope with that and live our lives . . . it's time you did, too. Find the good in your life and put the bad behind you."

Kick, who had little patience, got straight to the point of our visit. "Gambarro's wiped your debt, but so help me if you fuckin' get yourself into anymore debt, Peter...That was the last time I'm stepping in for you." His hand pressed hard against my waist and I knew in my soul that if Dad ever found himself in debt again, Kick would bail him out. Because he loved me, he would do anything for my family, or me, regardless of the words he'd just spoken.

"Thank you," Dad said, struggling to meet Kick's eyes.

"Did you see that counsellor I found for you?" I asked.

He hesitated and I knew if he said yes, he'd be lying. "Not yet," he admitted softly, now avoiding my eyes.

Kick's frustration sounded in the long breath he pushed out. "Jesus," he muttered.

I pushed him. "When will you be seeing him?"

Cagey eyes darted back and forth between Kick and me before finally settling on me. "I'll call him soon."

My handbag had slipped down my arm, and I pushed it back up before saying, "Okay, you do that," I snapped, way past angry at his failure to help himself, "and don't call me until you have seen him. If you can't be bothered to sort yourself out, I can't be bothered to help you anymore."

Before he could say anything, I turned and stalked out of his house. Heartbreak, anger and disappointment sat heavy in my gut, and I swallowed the lump in my throat and fought back the tears threatening to fall. It killed me to give up on him, but I couldn't keep going the way we had been for most of my life. My father needed tough love now. I thought he'd hit rock bottom, but, obviously, he

hadn't. I shuddered to think what that would look like when it finally happened because he'd looked pretty bad the last time I'd seen him.

Kick followed me out and when we reached his bike, he pulled me into his arms and kissed my forehead. "You okay, baby?"

I pulled back a little so I could look in his eyes. Those beautiful eyes that blared his love for me. It had been there all along but I'd been too blind to see it. I smiled. "Yeah, because I have you."

He planted a kiss on my lips and then said, "You've always had me, you just didn't know it."

My tummy fluttered and my heart expanded with happiness.

Even with all the sadness, grief, hurt and anger hanging over me, Kick helped take some of it away.

He gave me hope life could be good again.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Kick

"Anyone else got anything to discuss?" King asked, casting his gaze around the room.

Church had been quick today, but we hadn't discussed the one thing I thought we would have.

And then Hyde stepped in. "Where are we at with Gambarro, Kick?" he asked, his steely eyes boring into mine.

I sat forward. I'd been ready for this. "As far as I know, he still doesn't know who I am. I've asked my contacts if they've heard anything and there's nothing on the radar."

"Gambarro's not a fucking idiot, Kick," Hyde asserted, "he'll figure it out soon enough and we need to have a fucking plan to deal with this shit."

King interrupted. "Our plan is what it's always been."

Hyde gave him an incredulous look. "What? Sit and wait for the shit to land at our feet and then defend ourselves?"

King's hard eyes narrowed at Hyde. "You think it would be better to announce to Gambarro it was us?" he asked scathingly.

Hyde shoved his chair back and stood. Shoving his hand through his dark hair, he bit out, "Fuck, King, I don't know what the fuck we should do, but I hate sitting here waiting. Like a sitting fucking duck." He glared at me. "We shouldn't be in this fucking position."

Devil, who only spoke when he felt it absolutely necessary, said, "Sit the fuck down, Hyde, and get your shit together, man."

I eyed Devil and he gave me a nod. He approved of what I'd done. I'd never hear those words from his lips, but Devil's actions always said everything you needed to know.

Hyde now turned his filthy stare to Devil. "Clearly, I'm the only one here who *does* have his shit together. I can't fucking believe none of you are worried about this."

Nitro sat next to me, his body tense, and his mouth firmly closed. No love was lost between him and Hyde, and I knew if he got into a heated discussion now, the fists would likely come out. Nitro was a smart man and extremely disciplined at keeping his mouth shut where Hyde was concerned, but today he lost the fight to contain himself. Cold eyes pierced Hyde and his voice was deathly calm when he spoke. "Clearly you're the only one who is forgetting Kick's loyalty to Storm. He's done shit for us that no man should ever have to fucking do, and he does it without a fucking word of complaint. I think you need to step the fuck back, pull your fucking head in, and shut the fuck up."

King smashed his fist down on the bench and stood, fury circling him. "Enough!" he roared. Pointing at Hyde, he yelled, "Sit down, Hyde, and don't say another fucking word." He watched as Hyde followed his orders, and then he turned to face everyone. "We're not fucking announcing anything to the world. Everyone is to keep their ear out and if you hear anything, you bring it to me. We clear?"

I looked around the table and found everyone nodding their agreement. Hyde nodded but his body language screamed his resistance.

"Right, that's settled. Anything else?" King asked, a look of impatience plastered across his face. He glanced around the table and when no one spoke, he brought the gavel down to signal we were done.

Hyde stormed out, and I watched King as his gaze followed Hyde. He'd always had a close relationship with his Vice President, but Hyde seemed to be causing him headaches lately. He eventually tore his eyes from Hyde and looked at me. "Don't worry about Hyde. I'll take care of him," he said, mistaking my concern for something it wasn't.

I shook my head. "I'm more concerned for you, Prez," I admitted. A frown creased his forehead. "Why?"

"Your VP doesn't have your back and he's the one who's supposed to have it more than anyone else."

He processed that silently. "Yeah," he muttered, deep in thought. "He'll fucking have it soon enough, brother," he added, before stalking out of the room.

King could be persuasive, but I feared Hyde was in one of his moods at the moment and when Hyde was in a mood, nothing could get through to him.

Fuck.



Kick

17 years old

I placed the joint between my lips and inhaled its magic. The magic that would help numb me and make me forget, for even just a few hours, the shit I had to deal with at home. I sucked it deep into my lungs and held it there for a long while before slowly exhaling and letting my head drop back against the wall. I passed the joint to Jeremy and heard him take a hit.

When he was done, he passed it back to me and stretched out on his back on the floor. It was three o'clock in the morning and his house was silent as his family slept. We'd just gotten back from a lame party. He turned to look at me. "That party was shit."

I nodded. "Yeah, not one chick worth scoring."

He laughed. "That's one way to gauge it."

My brows rose. "How else would you gauge it, dude?"

"The lack of alcohol there, for one."

"Well, there is that, too, but I could have lived with that if there had been at least one hot chick, but there wasn't even that."

He turned silent and I moved my head from the wall to see what he was doing. Jeremy had been off all week and tonight his mood had shifted into something else again and I struggled to pick it. "What's up, man? You've been acting strange all week."

His body tensed but then he sat up and stared at me. The light from outside splashed across the room and I could make out the strain on his face

and the rigid set of his shoulders. "Do you have secrets, Kick?" he asked, his voice heavy with burden.

"Jesus, man, we all have secrets. What the fuck's going on?"

The moment stretched before us, long and deathly silent. Whatever the hell he had on his mind was eating him up. I'd never seen Jeremy so troubled. Usually, he was the kind of guy who was confident and not fearful of anything.

Finally, he spoke. "I'm gay."

I stared at my best friend, taking in the torment he obviously felt over this revelation and hating that he felt that way. Hating that society made him feel that way. "I know," I said softly.

His eyes widened but he didn't say anything.

"I've known you for six years, dude, and for half of that time I've figured you were gay." I shrugged. "So?"

Anger clouded his face. "So? Do you have any idea how fucking big this is?"

"It's not big to me. Like, if you thought it would affect our friendship, it won't."

He sat and stared at me, and I couldn't work out the thoughts running through his mind. When he eventually blew out a long breath, he said, "Fuck, I never knew you knew."

I took another long drag of the joint and then passed it to him. After I blew out the smoke, I asked, "Did you really think I wouldn't support you?"

"I didn't know, but I should have."

"Yeah, man, you should have. I've always had your back and I always fucking will."

"Shit, Kick . . . yeah, I know."

I eyed him, curious about something. "Does Evie know?"

He shook his head. "No, you're the only person I've told."

"You should tell her. She won't care, either."

"Thank you," he said quietly, his hands fidgeting after he passed me back the joint.

"What for?"

"For always being there for me. You've never let me down," he said, his voice uneven and his eyes showing me how much this shit was affecting him.

"Well, for the record, if anyone gives you any fucking grief over this, they'll have me to deal with. So you like to suck cock. Who the fuck gives a

shit?"

He stared at me in shock for a minute and then he grinned and shook his head. "Fuck, Kick . . ."

"It's true, dude, and I'm okay with that, but don't ever fucking ask me to suck your dick, 'cause it's never gonna fucking happen. I'm all for pussy."

"I wish I'd told you sooner."

I nodded. "Yeah, me too, 'cause I've been wondering. You got any fucking idea how hard it is to think about your best friend being gay without thinking about cock? Thank fuck cock will never have to enter my mind again." He laughed and I muttered, "Not funny, man. This is serious shit right here."

"So you don't want to come to a gay club and help me find a man when we turn eighteen?"

I slid back against the wall and closed my eyes. "Fuck, you know I can never say no to you. You and fucking Evie . . . always talking me into doing shit I don't want to do."

My eyes were shut, sleepy, but I heard his laugh.

Thank god we'd finally had that conversation.

I really didn't want to have to think about cock anymore.



That night, I knocked on Evie's front door and reached my arms up to grip onto the doorframe, stretching the tension out of my back. It'd been a long fucking day and she was all I'd been thinking about for hours.

She answered the door and my dick instantly jerked. I stepped forward, my arm circling her waist and sliding down to grip her ass. "That outfit is dangerous, baby," I growled into her ear. She had on the skimpiest denim shorts that were really just a scrap of material rather than a pair of shorts, and a tiny, fitted red singlet that stretched across tits that were straining to escape it.

Moving into my space, she put her arms around me, and said, "I'm hoping so."

I raised my brows and smirked. "Oh, really?"

She smiled. "Really."

"A man might need to be fed if he's expected to exert some energy," I said, still smirking.

"Might he?" She played with me and I fucking liked it.

"Well, you could try not feeding me, but I doubt you'll get much out of me. My woman drained most of my energy last night."

A grin decorated her gorgeous face, and I loved that I'd put it there. "Okay, it's a good thing I cooked extra. I was hoping you'd come over," she said, grabbing my hand and walking towards the kitchen.

I let her lead me, my eyes never leaving her ass. "Sweetheart, I don't want you going out in those shorts. They hardly cover your ass, and I don't need to be dealing with motherfuckers checking you out, 'cause that shit could lead to me ending up in jail."

She turned and rolled her eyes at me. "No one will be checking me out except for you."

I yanked her hand so that she was propelled backwards into my arms. She stumbled but I caught her. When I had her eyes, I said, "Where the fuck do you get the idea that no one would be checking you out, 'cause last I looked, you're a fuckin' beautiful woman?"

Her face softened for a moment and she said, "Thank you," but I wasn't buying her belief in my words.

"You've got no idea, have you?"

"What? That you think I'm beautiful?" She seemed genuinely confused at my question.

"No, that every fuckin' man finds you beautiful."

Her mind hesitated to let her heart believe me; I saw it in her eyes. "Kick . . ." Her voice trailed off and she tried to move out of my hold, but I didn't let her. No fucking way was she getting out of hearing this.

"Sweetheart, I've been watching assholes eye fuck you for years. Those curves of yours were any man's fuckin' dream, and while I'm not a fan of this skin and bones thing you've got going on at the moment, you're still any man's dream."

Her mouth fell open and she stared at me with wide eyes. "You liked my curves?" The uncertainty in her voice fucking killed me.

"Fuck yes."

A smile slowly spread across her face, and I knew she'd heard me, and hoped she would start working on bringing the curves back. When she stood on her toes to give me the kind of kiss a man can

only hope for at the end of a hard day, I knew I was in for a good fucking night.

When she ended the kiss, I slapped her on the ass, and said, "How about some food, woman?"

She grinned at me, grabbed my hand and led me to the kitchen.

A moment later, I stood in front of a banquet of food. "You made all this?" I asked, surveying all the dishes.

She placed plates on the counter for us. "Yeah, I know how much you love my Thai food so I spent the afternoon making it for you."

I crossed my arms and leant my hip against the counter. "And what if I hadn't shown? That's a fuckload of food, baby."

She gave me her sexy grin. "Oh, I was pretty sure you'd show."

I raised a brow, amused and way the fuck turned on at her confidence. "Really?"

A laugh escaped her lips and fuck me, I had to control the urge to close the distance between us and take her right now. She came to me, though, and I knew dinner was gonna go cold. She moved right into my space, laced her hands around my neck and pressed herself against my erection. "Really. You're a man who can't get enough pussy ever, and you seem to like mine, so I figured what I gave you this morning wouldn't be enough and that you'd be back for more."

I placed my hands on her ass and gripped her hard. She had no chance of escaping me now even if she wanted to. Bending my mouth to her ear, I growled, "Baby, I don't just fuckin' *like* your pussy. On a scale of one to ten, it rates off the charts. If you were the only woman alive, I'd kill every motherfucker to make sure you only had eyes for me." I shifted my face so I could look her in the eyes. "And Evie, it's not just your pussy I love." I placed my hand over her heart, and whispered, "I love what's in here."

She stared at me, the playfulness gone from her eyes. Her arm reached up and she gently laid her hand against my cheek. "I love you, Kick Hanson."

Fuck, I was an idiot to walk away from her three years ago. She had everything I'd ever wanted, but I'd let Jeremy convince me I wasn't good enough for her. That my world would only bring her harm. In this moment, I knew deep in my bones that I would *never* let any harm come to her. I'd fight to the bitter end to ensure her safety.

I lifted her and placed her on the counter. Stepping in between her legs, I brought my hand up to her singlet and skimmed my fingers over her breasts. A moment later, I had her singlet and bra off, and a mouthful of tit. My dick was so damn hard for her and I barely stopped myself from ripping the rest of her clothes off and banging her on the kitchen floor.

She arched her back, pushing her tit harder against my mouth, and I groaned. I grabbed her hair and pulled her head back. Lifting my mouth from her breast, I trailed kisses up her neck until I reached her mouth. Lightly biting her lip, I asked, "Are we gonna need the cuffs again or are you gonna play fair?"

Her legs wrapped around me as she promised, "I'll play fair tonight."

I let go of her hair and put my arms around her so I could lift her off the counter and carry her into the bedroom. After I let her down, I asked, "How many orgasms do you want tonight, baby?"

Eagerness flashed in her eyes and her hands went to her pants to undo them. "Just keep going until I pass out," she said as she pushed her shorts down.

I undid my jeans as I watched her remove her panties. Fuck, I was almost fucking panting like a horny teenager. She did that to me. I couldn't even wait. I reached for my dick and gave it a tug while never taking my eyes off her pussy.

She came closer to me and removed all my clothes while I kept stroking myself. Her scent intoxicated me, sending me closer to the edge. Her first orgasm was gonna come soon because I couldn't delay this any longer. I had to get my dick in her.

I scooped her up and a moment later I had her under me on the bed. Reaching down to her pussy, I got her started with my fingers.

Her hands reached for my face and pulled me down for a kiss. "Fuck, Kick, can we just start with your dick and skip the fingers?" she begged after she let my mouth go.

How the fuck did I get so lucky?

I did as she asked and thrust my cock in. "Never say I don't fuckin' do as I'm asked," I grunted as I pulled out and slammed back into her.

Hard, because she fucking loved it hard.

She held on tight as I relentlessly chased our orgasms. Her eyes closed and her mouth parted slightly as she took it all. I didn't move

my gaze from her face; watching her unravel with pleasure had to be one of my favourite things to do.

As my release built, her pussy squeezed around my dick and she cried out my name as she came.

Fuck.

I kept at it until it hit me as well, and I gave one last hard thrust before coming inside her. My eyes closed as the orgasm exploded through me. It was the orgasm of motherfucking orgasms.

Evie did that to me.

I finally reopened my eyes and found her staring at me with a sexy gaze; a well fucking sated gaze. Shifting so I was beside her on the bed with a leg slung over her, I said, "One down and more to go, but I'm gonna need that food you made me first."

She moved onto her side and ran her hand along my leg that was now lying over her legs. Her hand made it to my ass where it lingered for a few moments before she ran it all the way up my side to my face. Smiling at me, she said, "I think that deserves a reward."

"Too fuckin' right that deserves a reward. Fuck, I think it also deserves a blow job later."

She licked her lips. "You have the best ideas, baby," she said as she moved off the bed. "I'm going to clean up and then I'll meet you in the kitchen."

Again I wondered, how the hell did I get so damn lucky?



We ate dinner and had just finished cleaning up when I leant against the counter and watched Evie finish packing up the leftovers to put in the fridge. The meal she'd cooked had been amazing but she'd always been a good cook so that had never been in doubt. She covered the last dish with tin foil and as she walked to the fridge she caught me watching her and flashed me a smile. Tilting her head, she asked, "What's going through your mind? You look deep in thought."

I wrestled with my decision whether to tell her or not. I'd actually been struggling with this decision for a few days and I'd come to the conclusion that for Evie and I to move forward, I had to tell her.

"It was Jeremy," I started and then stopped, trying hard to get the words out right.

She frowned as she put the last dish in the fridge. Shutting the door, she came to me and asked, "What was Jeremy?"

Shit, I had to get this out right because I didn't want her to end up hating him. I raked my fingers through my hair. "The reason I ended things with you. Jeremy convinced me that letting you get close to Storm would put you in danger, so I pulled away."

She stared at me, shock evident on her face. "What? I don't understand . . . why would he do that when he knew all I wanted was to be with you?"

Fuck.

I reached out and grabbed her hand, pulling her close. "Because he loved you as much as I do. Because he was the best friend either of us had, and he didn't want you to get hurt from your involvement with the club. Don't hate him, baby. He only wanted the best for you."

Wide eyes looked up at me, and the pain I saw there gutted me.

Maybe I shouldn't have told her.

When she burst into tears, I wrapped her in my arms and pulled her close.

Her body shook with sobs and I pressed my lips to her forehead, trying to soothe her.

We stayed wrapped together for a long time, allowing the memories to come and the grief to flow through us. I fucking missed him, and I wondered if this shit would ever get easier. Not having him in my life had been hard but at least I'd always known he was close if I needed him. Now, he was fucking unreachable and that left a hole that would never be filled by anyone ever again. Not even Evie.

Eventually she pulled away and looked up at me through tear-soaked lashes. "I don't hate him. I never could . . . I'm glad you told me, because it changes the way I feel about how we ended things."

My brows pulled together. "How?"

She sucked in a breath and gave me a hesitant glance. "I thought you didn't love me enough to fight for me, but now I can see you loved me so much that you walked away with unselfish motives. You're such a good man, Kick, and you don't even realise it."

Her words washed over me like a soothing shot of love. They weren't accurate words but I fucking needed them and let a sliver of them in. I let them wash away some of the grime that covered my heart.

"Fuck, all that wasted time," I muttered.

Her eyes searched mine. "What made you change your mind after all this time?" she asked softly.

Moment of truth. I didn't want to, but I had to speak honestly even if it hurt her. I'd decided that being completely open with her was the only way we'd survive this harsh world together. "You've got no clue how hard it was for me to stay away all these years. When you shut me out completely a year ago, it nearly fuckin' destroyed me, baby. I've done a lot of things I never thought I would since then, not giving one shit about anything, because the only thing worth giving a shit about was lost to me. Some days I wake up disgusted with the person I've allowed myself to become. When Jeremy got in touch with me a couple of months ago, he told me he thought he was wrong. He said he'd watched you lose yourself over the last year and that he knew you and I should be together regardless of the club."

"Why didn't you come to me then?" I hated the sadness in her voice. She was right, though. I should have fixed this back then.

I looked at her with the regret that weighed me down. "I wasn't convinced he was right. The person I'd become wasn't someone I wanted you to know . . . but when he died . . . fuck, that fucked with my mind, Evie. I replayed everything over and over in my mind a million times, and then when I saw you at the funeral, I knew I had no choice." I paused and gave her a small smile. "My mind had no choice because my heart had already made it."

I'd barely gotten the words out when her arms came up around my neck and her mouth took over mine in a kiss I'd have paid all the money I had in the world for. It was a kiss that told me I'd made the right decision to be open with her and that I'd made the absolute right choice to fight for her.

It was a kiss that sealed my future.

Evie would be mine forever.

I'd make damn sure of it.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Evie

I cracked an eye open and squinted to read the bedside clock.

Seven am.

Shit, it was too early to be awake on a Saturday morning. I closed my eyes, intent on getting at least another two hours of sleep. Kick had other ideas. His hand curled around my waist and made its way to my breast.

His warm breath coasted over my neck a moment later when he murmured in my ear, "Morning, sweetheart."

When his hand left my breast and started moving lower, I grabbed it and halted its progress. "No fucking way, Kick," I muttered, "you fucked me raw last night, and I can't even contemplate your hand or your dick anywhere near me today."

He chuckled and rolled onto his back. "Well, fuck me," he said, "you've never said no to me. Ever."

I rolled over to face him and raised my brows. "That's probably because you've never worked me like you did last night." I nodded in the direction of his crotch. "That dick of yours has worn my pussy out and she needs a break today. And my hands and mouth are out of action too, so you're just gonna have to take care of yourself, buddy."

The rumble of laughter from his chest warmed me. "One day, Evie, that's all I'm giving you. Tomorrow your pussy is back in the game. We clear?"

I smacked his hands away, the hands that were doing their best to distract me by playing with my boobs. "You're lucky I love you or else that 'we clear' bullshit you've got going on would put me out of bounds for at least another day."

He gave me another gorgeous, very distracting grin before leaving me to walk into the bathroom. "If you change your mind, I'll be in here taking care of business but you're more than fuckin' welcome to come and give me a hand," he yelled out as he moved out of sight.

I shifted onto my back and relaxed into the bed. Maybe if I closed my eyes, I could catch some more sleep while Kick did his thing in the shower. A couple of minutes later, I sat up. Who the fuck was I kidding? Knowing what he was doing only served to distract me so I got out of bed and headed into the kitchen.

I'd made us both toast and coffee by the time he joined me ten minutes later. I eyed him with a smirk. "You all good, now?"

He shook his head playfully at me and grabbed me around the waist, pulling me to him. "You do realise when I take care of business it's nowhere near as satisfying as when you do it, right? Which means I'm gonna be so frustrated by tomorrow, and *that* means I'm gonna have to bang the absolute fuck out of you to relieve my frustrations."

I laughed, and with all the innocence I could feign, I asked, "Is that one of those 'we clear' statements?"

"Fuckin' hell," he growled, his eyes flashing his need for me, "your smart mouth is going to get you into trouble one day, baby. But fuck, if I don't love it."

I kissed him and then slapped his hands away from my waist. "I made you breakfast so you have to be nice to me."

He stepped away from me and reached for his coffee. Taking a sip, he muttered, "I'm always nice to you. I'm not sure the same can be said about you."

I rolled my eyes and chose to ignore his grumbling. "What are your plans for today?" I asked as I carried our plates to the table.

He followed with the coffees. "I've gotta head over to a friend's place and help him with a bike engine he's rebuilding."

"Is that one of the guys from the club?" I asked, loving the fact he was being so open.

"Yeah, Nitro. I'll probably be there most of the day. What are you up to?"

"I'm catching up with Maree. Shopping and lunch."

He leant forward in his seat and caught my lips in a kiss. "Can I have you tonight?" he asked, his eyes staring intently at me.

"You can have me every night, Kick," I said, holding his gaze, "but remember, no sex. I wasn't kidding when I said I needed a break. It's been months since I've had sex, and you're seriously wearing me out."

"Contrary to what you might think, I don't just want you for sex, sweetheart. I want a date with you tonight."

His words caused butterflies in my stomach. "I'd like that," I said softly, my heart swelling with love.

Heat continued to flash in his eyes. "Good," he said with a nod, "and baby, I never want to hear another word out of that pretty little mouth of yours about the fact you've had sex with anyone but me."

I grinned. "Okay, I can manage that," I agreed, fucking loving his jealousy. It was probably not something I *should* love and definitely something I would never encourage by flirting with another man, but it told me how much he adored me.

And I loved that.



"Oh my god, Maree, you're too much!"

She grinned at me and drank the remainder of her coffee. Shrugging, she said, "How am I supposed to say no when a man tells me he wants to fuck me into next week? Hell, I'm not passing this opportunity up."

She'd just filled me in on her plans for tonight and tomorrow. A guy she'd met at the gym this morning had flirted with her and talked her into a date that would obviously last them until Monday morning. I finished my coffee and agreed. "I don't blame you, I would have said hell yes, too."

"Yeah, except you have no need for first dates or one night stands anymore. Now you've got Kick to service you," she said with a wink.

I groaned. "Oh god, that man . . ."

She quirked a brow. "What's he done now? Please tell me he's got the stamina of an elite athlete."

I laughed. "He really does. My vagina is so damn sore today, like it's never been sore before."

It was her turn to groan now. "Fuck, don't tell me that. You can't tell a woman who isn't getting regular sex that your vagina has been worked into exhaustion. That shit isn't fair."

"Sorry, babe, but you asked," I said as I stood and put my sunglasses on.

She stood as well and said, "Yeah, I guess I did. I'm happy for you, Evie, you deserve happiness." I heard her genuine happiness for me in her words.

I smiled and gave her a hug. "Thank you, I'm happy for me, too."

"Okay, I've gotta go and have a pedicure and wax to get ready for my sex marathon. I'll call you on Monday and let you know if he matches your man's skills."

I laughed and watched her go. She'd done what I'd asked her to do after Jeremy's funeral – she'd given me space to work through my grief without constantly checking in with me. I loved her for it, but it was good to get out and spend time with her again.

As I turned to walk to my car, I caught a glimpse of Kick's sister. I hadn't seen Lina in over a year and I'd missed her. My heart hurt to see how much her two kids had grown. She had two little girls – Becca, the oldest, was four, and Candace, the little one, was two. It looked like they were giving their mother a hard time so I wandered over to her to see if I could give her a hand.

"Oh my goodness, Evie!" she exclaimed when she saw me, pulling me in for a hug.

My smile beamed at her. We'd grown up together and knew so much about each other. In that moment, I wished I'd never cut contact with her. "How are you, Lina?"

She frowned. "I'm actually not feeling very well, hon. I feel like I might vomit," she answered, clutching her stomach.

"Shit, are you okay to drive home or do you want me to drive you?" Looking closely at her, I could see how pale her face was. She really didn't look well at all.

"Really? You wouldn't mind driving us home?"

"Not at all," I said and took charge.

I managed to get everyone in the car and back to her place without her vomiting. Once we were through her front door, I said, "You go to bed. I'll look after the kids."

She gave me a grateful look. "Thank you," she whispered, and did as I'd said.

I turned to Becca. She was a gorgeous little red haired beauty and she gave me a smile that would melt anyone's heart. Shit, I bet she had her Uncle Kick wrapped around her finger. "Are you hungry, sweetheart?" I asked as I lifted Candace up, resting her on my hip.

Becca nodded and said, "Yes. Mummy promised us cake if we were good at the shop." She stared at me expectantly and I figured I needed to either find cake or make it.

I gave her a smile and held out my hand for her. "Okay then, let's go find cake," I said as I led her towards the kitchen. Candace babbled words I could hardly discern but I figured so long as she wasn't crying we were good.

We had the batter made and ready to pour into the cake tin when loud banging came from the front of the house. I turned in that direction and my heart skipped a beat when I heard a thunderous, "Lina, open the fucking door!"

Shit, that sounded like Lina's ex, and he seemed to be in a mood. I gave my attention to Becca and with forced calmness, said, "If you take Candace into her bedroom and play with her for a little while, I'll let you have two pieces of cake when it's ready."

Her eyes widened with glee and she clapped her hands together. "Yes!" she exclaimed, and I felt relief as I watched her lead her sister out of the kitchen.

I pulled my phone out of my handbag and dialled Kick's number, willing him to answer fast.

He took what felt like ages to answer, and in that time the banging on the front door got louder. "Evie. What's up, baby?" he asked.

"Kick, can you come to Lina's house now?" I practically begged him, my voice shaking with fear.

"Fuck, what's wrong? And why are you at Lina's house?"

"Long story, and I'll fill you in later, but her ex is banging on the front door and he doesn't sound happy."

"Fuck," he swore again, "hold tight, I'll be there in about ten minutes. And whatever the fuck you do, don't let the motherfucker in."

"Okay," I promised, relieved he was on his way, but unsure I'd be able to keep Dave out because at the rate he was going, he'd have the door smashed open soon.

I shouldn't have worried, though. Kick arrived quicker than he said he would. Dave had continued to pound on the door but that was as far as he'd gotten. When I'd heard Kick's bike pull up outside, I'd finally expelled the breath I'd been holding, and rushed to Candace's room to make sure the girls were okay.

Relief surged through me at the sight of them playing quietly, unaware of what was happening out the front between their dad and their uncle. It killed me to know they'd grow up with a father like Dave. Unless he got his shit together, he was useless to them. Thank God they had their uncles.

I sat on the floor with them and asked, "Would you like me to read you a story?"

Becca gave me a huge smile and nodded emphatically. "Yes!"

I grabbed a book from the bookshelf behind me and after pulling Candace onto my lap, began reading, trying hard to block out thoughts of what Kick was taking care of. We read for about fifteen minutes until Becca looked up towards the bedroom door and squealed with delight. "Uncle Kick!" she exclaimed, and ran to him.

He caught her and scooped her up into his arms. "Hey darlin', are you being good for Evie?" he asked, his full attention on her as if she was the most important person in the world.

Oh my.

My tummy fluttered. I'd forgotten how good Kick was with kids. There was something extremely sexy to me about a man who had the time of day for the kids in his life.

I stood, taking Candace with me, and my eyes met Kick's a moment later. Surprisingly, he didn't appear as if he'd just been in a fight, which I'd been expecting. I'd imagined blood smeared on his clothes or at least a much more dishevelled appearance, but he looked almost like he had when I'd left him that morning.

His concerned gaze assessed me. "You okay?" he asked softly.

I nodded. "Yes. Thank you so much for coming. Is everything sorted?"

"Yeah, he's gone, and I don't think he'll show up here like that again, but the asshole doesn't seem to learn his lessons very fast, so who knows?"

Becca smacked her uncle on the shoulder. "You said a bad word, Uncle Kick," she chastised him, a stern look written on her face.

I suppressed a laugh, and watched with interest as he handled the situation. "I'm sorry, darlin'. I'll try not to say it again, yeah?"

She pressed her lips together, trying hard to emulate her mother. I'd seen Lina give her that very look. "You're always saying bad words. I'll have to tell Mummy on you."

Laughter bubbled up, and I managed to hold it in, but I had to walk away to stop Becca from seeing my body shake with it. I took Candace into the kitchen, catching snippets of Becca telling Kick off.

When they joined us a couple of minutes later, he gave me a dirty look and said, "Thanks for that."

"For what?" I asked as I checked the cake I'd placed in the oven. The girls had scampered off to the lounge room to the television.

He grabbed me around the waist. "For leaving me alone with a four-year-old I had to defend myself to," he said, pressing a kiss to my lips.

"Well, you shouldn't use that language around her."

He groaned. "Do you know how fuckin' hard it is to stop myself from swearing around them?"

"What does Lina say?" I asked, loving seeing Kick squirm, but mostly just loving the fact he cared about it.

Lina's voice came from behind me. "Lina tells him not to do it, but do you think anyone can tell Kick what to do?"

I laughed and turned out of Kick's embrace to face her. She looked a little better. "How are you feeling?"

"A little better," she said, walking towards us. "What word did you say?" she asked Kick, giving him a dirty look.

He held up his hands in a defensive gesture. "I didn't say fuck, that's for fuckin' sure," he muttered.

She shook her head and smacked his chest. "Well, don't say it now, for goodness' sake!"

"All I said was asshole," he admitted.

Pointing a finger at him, she bossed him, "Don't say it again. I'm gonna start charging you, I think." Giving me her attention, she said, "Thank you for this afternoon. I really appreciate it."

I grimaced. "We had a visitor while you were asleep," I admitted, not wanting to have to tell her.

At her frown, Kick stepped in with an explanation. "Dave came over. He was drunk again and bashing on the front door to be let in, so Evie called me and I came and took care of him."

"Thank you," she said, her voice full of exhaustion. "How did you get him to leave?"

"Let's just say we had words." Kick's face had that closed-off look I knew well; he had no intention of telling her what those words had been.

"Did you guys get in a fight?" Lina asked, knowing her brother well.

"No, but I'm telling you, Lina, that if he keeps turning up like he did today, we *will* be having more than words."

She opened her mouth to say something but a knock at the door interrupted us.

Shit, who was it now?

"Wait here," Kick said as he strode to the front door and opened it. "Fuck," he muttered, and I wondered who the hell it was, "what are you doing here?"

A voice I hadn't heard in years sounded, and my stomach dropped. "Well, that's a lovely way to greet your mother, Kick."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Kick

Fuck, could this day get any worse?

I stepped aside and let my mother enter. Actually, I had no choice, because she barged her way in before I could stop her. I closed the door after her and turned to see Evie's face had paled. She looked like she'd seen a ghost, and I guessed she had.

My mother.

The reason for so much of her heartache growing up.

"Mum," Lina said, sounding anything but pleased to see her, "what are you doing here?"

Mum's back stiffened. "Am I not allowed to visit my daughter and grandchildren?"

Jesus, bring on the fucking guilt trip.

Lina scowled. "You never just drop by out of the blue. Not unless you want something." The unspoken accusation sat between them.

Mum's hand went to her hip and I could just imagine the superior look on her face. "That's not true -" She stopped mid-sentence and her head turned to look at Evie. "What the hell are *you* doing here? I thought my son had seen the error of his ways years ago." Before Evie could respond, Mum looked at me and said, "Please don't tell me she's here because you are?"

I stalked to where she stood, and, fuming, said, "You don't get to come here and say that shit to or about Evie." My body buzzed with

anger at her attitude, and my breaths were coming hard and fast. "Besides, what I do is none of your business anymore."

"Yes, you made that perfectly clear two years ago, Kick, but just because you stop seeing me and try to tell me what is and what isn't my business, doesn't mean I'm not interested to know what's happening in your life." Her eyes were still as vacant as they'd been my entire life. The words were coming out of her mouth but she didn't mean them.

My mother. The shallowest woman I'd ever had the misfortune of knowing.

"You've never been interested in my life," I spat. "The only thing Veronica Hanson is interested in is Veronica Hanson."

Her eyes flared with anger. And a tiny bit of hatred. My mother held a lot of resentment in her soul, and her kids and husband had been wrapped up in that resentment for years. We'd held her back; stifled her life plans. Apparently. "How the hell did you come from me?" she demanded to know.

"That's a really good fuckin' question."

"Kick!" Lina interjected, her eyes glaring at me.

Fuck, the fuckin' swearwords.

I quickly glanced at the kids who were busy watching television. Thank fuck, they didn't need to be involved in this shit. I turned back to my mother. "I don't know how the hell any of your kids turned out okay after being subjected to your nastiness and bitchiness while we were growing up, but you did manage to screw Evie up, so there *is* that."

Evie caught my attention when she took a step in my direction, a distraught look on her face. She found my eyes and whatever she saw there stopped her. "Kick . . ." she began, but I cut her off.

"No, Evie, she needs to hear this. So her husband screwed around on her and then took it one step further and slept with her best friend. It doesn't give her the right to take that shit out on the kids in her life, one of them being you. Just because her husband slept with your mother doesn't give her the fuckin' right to label *you* . . . a fuckin' innocent teenager in all that . . . a slut, and spread nasty rumours about you." My heart pumped furiously in my chest as years of hurt and anger roared to the surface. I jabbed my finger at my mother. "*That shit ain't fuckin' right!*"

Jesus!

I began pacing in the small space I occupied, fully aware I was close to losing my shit completely. Evie and Lina stared at me in horror. None of this had ever been confronted. Our families had splintered apart after Evie's sister died, and we'd shattered completely after Dad slept with Loretta six months later. As far as I was concerned, this conversation was about eighteen years too late.

"You've got no idea what I went through! What your father did to me!" my mother screamed at me, the vacant look in her eyes long gone, replaced with bitterness and pure hatred.

"I don't give a *shit* what my father did to you! You should have been more concerned about your children but instead, *I* spent my whole life chasing your affection . . . chasing your love. *You* were more concerned with trying to make yourself look good so that people would think you were this amazing mother and amazing person when that was so damn far from the truth."

She stared wildly at me, her chest heaving, and her face flushed with anger. "You've grown into an asshole, Kick. That club is obviously no good for you but that's what you get for abandoning your family as soon as you could."

Was she for fucking real?

Funny how someone's memories of how something went down can be so wrong.

I jabbed my finger at her again, the adrenaline coursing through my veins needing an outlet, and a finger jab seemed like a much better option than the punch I wanted to throw. I'd never punch a woman, but the wall was looking more and more attractive. The kids were the only thing holding me back at this point. "I joined Storm because they were more of a family to me than you and Dad ever were," I fumed. "You can't abandon something that isn't there in the first place. Dad was long gone, and you were never there. And I never fuckin' abandoned Lina or Braden."

The rage circling the room threatened to choke me.

I need to get out of here.

Without another glance at my mother, I turned and stalked out of the house. Once I'd made it to the footpath, I placed my hands behind my head to grip the back of my neck. "Fuck!" I roared into the air, pushing a chunk of pent up frustration out.

I paced the footpath for a few minutes until Mum came storming out of the house towards her car. "Don't ever talk to me again, Kick.

I don't want anything to do with you ever again!" she yelled as she threw her bag in the car.

"Consider it done!" I thundered, and turned my back as she backed out of the driveway and sped off. "Fuck!" I yelled again, desperately trying to get the rage out that was trapped in my body.

Evie came running out of the house, towards me. I held my hand up, signalling for her to stop, to not come anywhere near me, because I couldn't be sure of my actions at the moment.

She slowed her advance but didn't stop, her eyes pleading with me to let her close.

To let her in.

"No, Evie, don't come any closer!" I yelled, hating the words as they left my lips but unable to stop them from falling out. I needed to keep her safe and I wasn't safe.

She didn't fucking stop.

She came right up to me and a moment later, her hand landed on my arm. "Kick," she said, her voice calm.

Full of love.

My mind flickered with a chaotic mess of thoughts.

So jumbled.

So confused.

I tried to claw through them but instead I was drowning in them.

I was drowning in my life.

A childhood of abandonment, an adolescence of hurt and grief, a life of regret.

Her arms circled me. "Kick," she soothed me as she pulled me close.

Love.

Evie's love clawed through the thoughts.

It pushed the pain aside as it reached for my heart.

For my soul.

Home.

Family.

Evie is my family.

I took a deep breath and put my arms around her. "Evie," I whispered, "I love you."

Her hand ran up and down my neck, in and out of my hair. "I love you, too, baby," she whispered.

I clung to her for a long time, allowing the anger and hurt to seep out of me. Eventually, I pulled away from Evie and asked, "How did you know?"

She frowned. "How did I know what?"

"That I needed you. That it would be okay to ignore me and come to me even when I told you not to," I said, not letting her eyes go, needing them to stay with me and silently tell me the secrets of her heart that her words couldn't.

And they did. The love shone from them as she said, "I knew, because I know you would never hurt me, Kick. You've *always* made sure I was okay, made sure no one else was hurting me. I know deep in my bones that there will *never* come a day that you hurt me."

I gently placed my hand against her cheek. "You never gave up on me, did you?" I whispered.

She shook her head. "No."

I bent my face and kissed her.

Deep and searching.

I'd had her words and I'd had her eyes. Now I needed her body to tell me how much she loved me. When her hands slid over my back and her lips blessed mine with a kiss that reached right into my soul, I knew she was completely in.

I knew Evie would love me forever.

Just like I'd loved her forever.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Evie

"Shit," I muttered as I turned the mower off and collapsed onto the newly mowed grass. I ran my forearm across my sweaty forehead, trying to stop the drops of sweat falling into my eyes.

Why did I have the bright idea to mow this afternoon?

On one of the hottest days of the year so far.

At least it had taken my mind off the huge blow-up between Kick and his mother a couple of days ago. I'd never seen him lose it like that at his family before, but he'd definitely needed to get it out because I'd noticed a change in him since. He didn't seem as angry or hard as he had been for years.

I couldn't deny I'd loved how he defended me, too. Veronica had been awful to me after my mother slept with her husband, and a lot of my problems in my last two years of school had been as a direct result of her vindictiveness. Kick had clearly recognised that and held onto his anger over it for all these years.

I sighed and lay back on the grass. Closing my eyes, I thought about where he and I were at now. We were together in a way we'd never been together. He'd opened himself up to me completely, and I felt safe in the haven our relationship had become.

A low whistle sounded from behind me, and I opened my eyes and sat up to find Kick walking towards me with a grin on his face. My body thrummed with desire. This man just had to catch my attention and I was gone. When he stepped into my view looking the

way he did this afternoon, I knew it would be hard not to jump him and demand sex. Between the muscles his jeans and white t-shirt barely contained, his confident swagger, and the ruggedly handsome face I'd memorised deep in my heart, I didn't have a hope in hell of not throwing myself at him. Oh, and add to all of that the beard he'd grown, and I was going down.

Happily.

"Why are you mowing?" he asked as he sat next to me, stretching his legs out in front of him and his arms out behind him, leaning back on his hands.

"Because, funnily enough, the grass grew," I answered him with the smart mouth I knew he loved.

"Smartass," he muttered, the grin not leaving his face. "Leave it for me in the future, okay?"

I raised my brows. "Is that an 'okay' type statement or a 'we clear' type statement?" I couldn't resist, and waited to see what he'd do next. My body kinda hoped he'd attack it.

He didn't disappoint, and a moment later, I was lying back on the grass with Kick on top of me. Bending his face close to mine, he growled, "It's a 'we clear' statement, baby, but perhaps you need to be reminded who wears the pants in this relationship."

Oh god, yes, I do.

I bit my lip and stared at him, willing him to keep going.

To show me who wore the pants.

His eyes searched mine, questioning. "Yeah?" he asked.

I decided to push him, just to make sure he pursued this. "I think we know who wears the pants when all is said and done," I said in my sweetest voice. "You might think it's you, but it's not."

Heat flashed in those beautiful green eyes of his and he reared up, ripping his shirt off. Next his hands went to my shorts, which he stripped off, along with my panties. He bent his face back to mine and claimed my lips in a rough kiss before saying, "I'm not seeing any pants on you, baby."

Sitting back up to straddle me, he undid his jeans and pulled his cock out. He wrapped his hand around it and stroked it a couple of times, his gaze never leaving mine, except to take in my tongue licking my lips.

The fact we were in my backyard turned me on so damn much. And I knew it would be turning Kick on, too. He liked to fuck out in

the open, and we'd had sex in a lot of strange places over the years.

"Babe, you with me?" he asked, snapping my attention back to what he was doing.

"Yeah, I'm waiting patiently for you to show me who the man is," I said, goading him.

"Darlin', this is about so much more than showing you who the man is, 'cause I think we can both agree who the fuckin' man is here." His lips brushed over mine again, his teeth lightly biting them. With his gaze firmly fixed to mine, he reached a hand down to my pussy and pushed two fingers in. Rough and hard, causing my body to slide a little. "No, this is about showing you who owns your body." He slid his fingers out and then pushed them both back in, hard again, and I moaned at the pleasure he caused.

He kept this up, working me towards heaven.

Working me towards admitting to him who owned my body. Although, it wasn't really a secret.

He'd almost brought me to orgasm when he pulled his fingers out and moved his hands to my t-shirt. Pushing it up to expose my breasts, he then pulled my bra cups down to let my breasts fall out and into his mouth.

My pussy cried out her need, and I begged, "Kick, what the fuck?"

He had a handful and mouthful of boob and wasn't letting go, but his eyes looked up at mine in a 'what?' glance.

"You had me so close, baby," I complained.

He let my boob fall out of his mouth. "Really?" he asked with a smug look on his face.

Fine. If that was how he wanted to play this, two could play at that game. "It's all good, I can take care of this," I said as I reached down to bring myself to orgasm.

He sat back and watched as I pushed my fingers inside and did what I really wanted him to do. I thought for sure he would take over, but he didn't. Instead, he took hold of his dick and began pumping it while keeping his eyes trained on my pussy.

Fuck.

My plan had backfired, but I had another one up my sleeve.

I quickly sat up and moved so I could push him onto his back and straddle him. Positioning myself over his cock, I pushed down to take him inside.

"Fuck!" he roared as his face clearly showed the pleasure I was giving him.

His hands came to my hips and held me tight as I fucked him.

He'd already worked me up with his fingers so I wasn't far off, and the angle I was fucking him at now always got me there faster. As I felt my orgasm about to explode around me, I fucked him harder and faster, desperate for it.

We came together and both cried out our pleasure. I pressed my hands against his chest as I took every last drop of heaven I could find. When I finally opened my eyes, I found him watching me with lust-filled eyes.

I moved off him so I could lay on the grass next to him, curled into his side, head on his arm that had come around my shoulders. "I guess I wear the pants in this relationship," I murmured against his chest.

His body gently shook as he chuckled. "Was there any fuckin' doubt, sweetheart?"

I smiled and closed my eyes.

I loved my man, but I *really* loved how he let me think I had some control when we both knew neither of us had any control.

Our hearts ruled us.

And we each ruled each other.



The next morning, Kick made me run late for a dentist appointment after fucking me in bed and then again in the shower. I was running around my house like a mad woman trying to get everything together when the dentist's receptionist called to move my appointment to a later time slot. I rescheduled with her and then dropped my phone into my bag, relieved I now had a chance to calm down and get ready without the panic.

Kick grinned and came towards me, his hands reaching for the button on my jeans. I slapped his hand away. "No," I said firmly, giving him the evil eye. "You've had your fill this morning and I'm all out of orgasms."

He smirked. "Baby, you are *never* out of orgasms."

I raised my brows, trying to look stern. "I am today."

Crossing his arms over his chest, he said, "So you've got a dentist appointment and then what?"

"Then I've got work. Why?"

"I'm just trying to figure out how long until I can get my dick out again." When I smirked, he added, "You don't seem to realise just what you do to me, Evie."

I put my hand on my hip, settling in to hear this. "Tell me, Kick, what do I do to you?"

He uncrossed his arms and took the few strides separating us. "You cause an insatiable fuckin' need in me that I've never experienced before. Even if I fucked you all day long, I'd still never get enough."

Oh god.

My core clenched.

Maybe I *did* have more orgasms in me today.

He traced my lips and then cupped my cheek before kissing me. "I'm taking you to your appointment and then to work, and then I'm picking you up from work and taking you back to my house. Today we play my way. With my toys," he growled, and I felt his growl all the way through my body.

Hell yes.

He slapped my ass and said, "Hurry up and finish getting ready. We need to make a quick detour past my place on the way."

I did as I was told, and fifteen minutes later he had me on the back of his bike and we were on our way to his house. As I hugged him, I couldn't stop thinking about how good it was to have him back in my life. Thank goodness for second chances, and even third chances. I knew some people hated the idea of love the second time around because they felt it meant so much wasted time, and while I agreed, I truly believed that sometimes you just weren't ready for each other the first time. Or in mine and Kick's case, the second time.

We dropped by Kick's place and he picked something up before we headed to my dentist. I was surprised when he made another detour on the way. We pulled up outside a rundown house and I wondered who lived here. I hopped off his bike and removed my helmet, waiting for him to tell me what we were doing here. However, he simply took his helmet off, dumped it on his bike, grabbed my hand and led me towards the front door.

After he knocked, I asked, "What are we doing here, Kick?"

He seemed so serious. "You'll see."

A guy dressed in what looked to be thrift shop clothing opened the door and ushered us in. He also seemed very serious, and I felt a little anxious, but at the same time, I knew Kick wouldn't put me in harm's way so this must be a safe place.

"Thanks for coming, man. She wasn't supposed to be here until tomorrow, but her old man beat her up bad enough last night for her to leave earlier, and I just want to get her out of town as soon as possible," the guy said to Kick.

"No worries, Brian, I'm just fuckin' glad she's finally decided enough's enough. And King will be, too."

Brian eyed me over his shoulder and then looked at Kick. "This your woman?"

"Yeah, eyes off," Kick replied firmly, his message loud and clear.

Brian held his hands up. "Hey, no problem, I've got enough to worry about with my old lady. I got no clue how men handle more than one woman at a time."

Kick chuckled, but all traces of humour were gone when we made it into a bedroom at the back of the house. Sitting on a bed was a woman who looked to be just under thirty. I sucked in a breath at the sight of her face. Her old man had done some serious damage; she could hardly see out of one eye and the rest of her face was heavily bruised, as was her neck and upper chest area. I shuddered to think what her clothes hid.

Kick knelt in front of her, his face a mask of anger. "Fuck, Jen . . ." His voice trailed off as he took in her bruises.

She winced as she tried to speak. "I'm here now, yeah?"

He nodded and swore under his breath again. "We're getting you out of Sydney today, and I don't want to ever see you back here again."

She agreed, and Kick stood. He walked out of the room, and after Brian spoke to the woman for a couple of minutes, he followed Kick out.

"You've told King she's here?" Kick asked as he pulled an envelope out of his jacket pocket and handed it to Brian.

"Yeah, he's going to swing by a little later today to see her before she leaves," Brian answered, opening the envelope and flicking through the wads of cash inside.

I was stunned. There had to be thousands in that envelope.

Kick frowned. "It's all there, as promised," he muttered.

Brian shoved the envelope in his pocket. "Thanks, I appreciate it."

"I'll let you know when I have more," Kick promised, and then grabbed my hand and led me out of the house.

I was glad to walk outside. Not only was that house rundown, it felt depressing inside, with old furniture and little decoration. Kick seemed on a mission to get back to his bike, but I tugged on his hand to slow him down. When he looked back at me with a questioning glance, I asked, "What was that about?"

He stopped walking and turned to face me. Jerking his chin towards the house, he said, "That's a safe house for battered women, and we help them escape their motherfucker husbands and boyfriends and get them out of Sydney."

"Who's 'we'?"

"King, Brian and me."

"And where did you get all that money from?" I asked the question I figured he might not answer, but there was no harm in trying.

He sucked in a breath and avoided my eyes for a moment, but he surprised me when he looked back at me and said, "I got it off a druggie scum-of-the-earth asshole, and trust me babe, you don't want to know what happened to him, but let's just say the earth breathed a little easier that day." He finished talking and then waited for my reply, his eyes wary. He had no need to worry, though, because I had no problems with the earth breathing a little easier.

I gave him a smile that I hoped told him how I felt. "So you were just redistributing the wealth, so to speak?"

He stared at me for just a moment longer with that serious gaze, and then broke out in a smile. I watched as his shoulders loosened and his breathing evened out. "Yeah, you could say that. King leaves me in charge of financing the operation so whenever we come across extra cash, I put it aside." He paused for a moment before giving me a regretful look. "I wish I could have given you that money to bail your Dad out, but it was already promised to Brian by then."

"You don't have to explain yourself, Kick. And besides, you found another way to help."

He nodded, but didn't say anything.

"Who was that woman?" I asked quietly. I had the sense she was more than just a stranger who needed help.

"Jen is an ex of King's. They dated a long time ago, and she left him for the asshole who nearly ended up killing her."

I had never met King before, but he sounded like a good guy if he still looked out for an ex, as well as all these other women who needed help. "I'd like to meet King one day," I said softly.

He smiled again. "I can organise that, baby," he said, giving me something I had wanted for a very long time.

He'd given me a piece of himself he'd kept hidden for so long by promising to introduce me to his friend.

"Thank you," I whispered, feeling like we'd just taken another huge step towards our future.



"What are you doing home alone? I thought you and Kick couldn't get enough of each other these days," Maree said into the phone.

I tucked the phone between my ear and my shoulder to free my hands. "We were going to spend the afternoon playing with his toys but he had to do some club work," I said as I grabbed the ice cream out of the fridge.

"Fuck, you're a lucky woman. What kind of toys are we talking here? And shit, it's nine pm babe, why isn't he back yet?"

I laughed, scooping ice cream into my mouth. "I think he meant his remote control car, shit like that," I joked with her.

I could picture her poking her tongue at me. "Very funny, Evie."

"Well, seriously, what kind of toys do you think he meant? Mind you, I think Kick could even make playing with a remote control car sexy."

She sighed. "I think you're probably right."

"We'll have to play another day, though. He rang about half an hour ago and said he'd be busy for a while so he'd see me tomorrow."

"Bugger. You'll have to play with BOB instead."

She spoke the truth. I'd been horny all day imagining amazing sex with Kick, so I'd have to take care of that myself now. "I should video it and send it to him."

She started coughing and spluttering. "God, you just made me almost choke on my drink. I think that'd be an awesome idea. Serves

him right for cancelling on you.”

I put the lid back on the ice cream and placed the tub back in the freezer. Taking hold of my phone again, I began walking to my bedroom. “I was kidding, Maree. Whatever he’s doing obviously needs his attention and if I sent him that, he’d be so distracted.”

“I guess,” she mused, not sounding convinced, “but I’d still send it.”

“That’s cause you’re a bitch and like your men to pay when they don’t make good on promises.”

Laughing, she agreed, “Yeah, I do.”

A noise outside distracted me and caused my heart rate to spike.

Shit, was that someone out there?

“Maree, I think there’s someone outside my house. Can you stay on the phone while I go and check?”

“Fuck . . . yeah, go,” she said, her voice tinged with concern.

“Thanks,” I said as I switched the outside lights on and slid the back door open. I took a tentative step, not seeing or hearing anyone, but that noise had pretty much convinced me someone had been out here.

My back door opened up onto a cemented outside entertainment area that then led to a brick path that took me down the side of my house to the front. I found one of my pot plants had been knocked over, the dirt spilling onto the cement.

Shit.

My breathing picked up and my heart thumped in my chest.

“Can you see anyone?” Maree whispered into the phone.

“No, but someone’s been here because the pot plant is knocked over,” I whispered back, not really sure why the fuck I was whispering when this was my house.

And then I heard my side gate latch, and my heart fell into my stomach.

I wasn’t sure whether to move towards the sound or away from it, but my instincts took over and my legs began walking towards the gate. I switched my phone’s flashlight on and shone it down the side of the house, expecting to come face to face with the intruder any second.

I saw nothing. The gate was shut and the path was clear. I hurried through the gate to the front yard, just in time to hear a squeal

of tires and a car speeding off down the street. The car was so far away I couldn't even work out the make or model.

I switched off the flashlight and put the phone back to my ear to hear Maree screeching at me.

"Shhh," I said, "he's gone, and I'm okay."

"Oh my god, don't ever do that to me again, Evie! I was asking you if you were okay and you weren't answering me! Do you have any idea how many grey hairs you just gave me?"

"Sorry, but I needed the flashlight to see."

"Fuck, so there *was* someone there?"

I tried to calm down from the fright and get my breathing under control. "Yes, there was definitely someone here." I'd made it back inside and locked the door behind me, but I was leaving the outside lights on tonight. It probably wouldn't stop someone intent on getting in, but I felt better having them on.

"Christ, you need to call Kick and get him over to stay with you tonight."

"No, I don't want to bug him. And besides, there have been a few break-ins around here lately so it was probably someone trying to get in, and now I've scared him off. I doubt he'll be back. I'll call the police in the morning," I said, feeling too exhausted to wait for them to come out tonight. And besides, what could they do anyway? It wasn't like the cops had the resources to position someone on our street just waiting for a burglar to come by.

"Do you want me to come and stay?" she asked, being the wonderful friend she was.

"No, I'm okay," I said, "but thanks, babe."

"Mmmm . . . I'm not convinced I shouldn't come over."

"Maree, I have security on the house. I'm locked up tight and no fucker is getting in tonight. I promise, I'm all good."

She was silent for a few moments and then conceded. "Okay, but you call me the minute you are worried. And I'll be calling you in the morning to check on you."

We ended the call, and I crawled into bed.

It was probably a good thing Kick wasn't here. He'd go all crazy protective, and while I loved his bossy way in the bedroom, I didn't need him trying to control my every movement.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Kick

I pocketed the cash we'd just collected for King, and turned to Nitro as we headed towards our bikes. "I like it when jobs are that easy."

He nodded. "Yeah, makes it a lot fucking easier when they just pay up with no encouragement needed."

Just as we reached our bikes, my phone rang. King. "What's up, brother?" I answered it.

"Have you been to Hawk's to collect yet?"

"Nope."

"Good, cancel that job. I'm gonna give him an extra week to pay," he said, stunning me. King rarely gave extensions.

"Yeah, the motherfucker's mother needed cash for an operation so I figure she needs it more than us."

"You believe him?"

"He wasn't the one who told me. Jen told me when I saw her yesterday before she left."

I was so confused, not understanding the connection between Jen and Hawk, but I figured King knew his shit. "Right, so we're done for the day then. I'll bring the cash back now, but do you need me after that?" I hadn't seen Evie since yesterday afternoon and was fucking craving her.

"No, you and Nitro can call it a day."

"Thanks. I'll see you soon with this cash," I promised before ending the call.

Nitro raised his brows. "We done for the day?"

I nodded. "Yeah, man." I reached for my helmet. "Did you finish working on the engine?"

"It's nearly done. Thanks for your help the other day."

"Sure. Just call out if you need a hand again."

My phone buzzed with another call, and my face broke out in a grin when I saw the caller ID.

Evie.

Nitro chuckled. "Looks like some good pussy there, brother."

"Yeah, you could say that," I said as I answered it. "What's up, baby?" I said into the phone.

"Someone's broken into my house . . . can you come over? It's okay if you can't, but -"

I was instantly on alert; Evie sounded panicked. "I'll be there in about ten minutes. Are you okay until then?"

"Yes. Thank you," she said softly, relief clear in her voice.

"Fuck," I muttered as I shoved my phone in my pocket.

"What's up?" Nitro asked.

"My girlfriend's house has been broken into."

"You need help?"

"Nah, should be alright," I said, turning over the engine of my bike.

He nodded, and I gave him a chin lift. "I'll catch you later, man." And then I took off for Evie's place.

Whoever had broken into her house would pay dearly.



I'd expected to find Evie still panicked, but she'd calmed down by the time I got there. I took in the mess as I walked through the house to find her in the kitchen. The place had been trashed and it looked like we had a big clean up ahead of us.

She looked up from the table where she sat. "Thank God you're here," she said as she got up and came to me.

I opened my arms and pulled her close. She gratefully stepped into my embrace and rested her head against my chest. I felt the tightness of her body, and rubbed my hand up and down her back. I held her until she lifted her head and looked up into my eyes.

"Why did they have to wreck the place as well?" she asked, her voice cracking a little.

"Fuck . . ." I swore, "because they're assholes."

"Yeah, they are." She let me go and walked to the sink. "I need a coffee. You want one?"

"No, I'm gonna take a look around." At her nod, I headed into the lounge room and surveyed the damage. It didn't look like anything of real value had been taken. The television and stereo were still here. I walked around the entire house and then back into the kitchen. "Babe, what's actually missing?" I asked, because I couldn't work out what had been taken. All big ticket items seemed to be in place.

She was on the phone, on hold, and she answered, "That's the weird thing. I can't work out what's been stolen."

"Who are you on the phone to?"

"The cops."

I reached for the phone and she let me take it. Ending the call, I said, "I don't think anything's missing, unless they took jewellery or something smaller like that?"

"No, I checked that, and nothing is missing."

"Do you want to claim this on insurance?"

She frowned. "I don't know. Why?"

"If you want to claim it you'll have to involve the cops. If not, you can forget them and just let me and the boys find out who did it, and deal with them for you. Either way I'll be finding out who did it, but I'd prefer not to have the cops involved."

She thought about it for a moment and then said, "I'll just let you handle it."

I gave her a quick kiss and said, "Okay, I'm gonna get started on it now. Will you be alright on your own?"

She gave me a smile and nodded. "Yeah, Maree said she'd come over if I need her, so I'll give her a call. She'll help me clean up, too."

Thank fuck for her friend. I didn't really want to leave her on her own.

As I headed out, I mulled it over. My natural instinct would be to suspect Gambarro because I was a paranoid bastard, but this didn't seem like a job he would pull.

It seemed to me that if he were involved, Evie wouldn't be breathing anymore.

But it wouldn't hurt to check in on him.



"Mr Gambarro is out of the country." His security guy glared down at me, challenging me to argue with him. He was refusing me entry to Gambarro's building and feeding me stories about Gambarro not being here.

"You expect me to buy that?"

"I don't give a fuck if you do or don't; it's the truth. Now fuck off and leave me alone."

I assessed the situation and decided to confirm that information with my other contacts before pursuing this any further, but I did ask, "When will he be back?"

The guy glared at me harder, in a 'you're-fucking-kidding-me' look. "I said, fuck off."

I pulled out my phone and began dialling as I walked away.

Bones answered on almost the first ring. "Kick. What's up, my man?"

I liked Bones, simply because he usually had solid information, and he was always willing to share it with me. He ran strip clubs and girls, and, in general, had his finger in a lot of pies. "Do you know if Gambarro is out of the country?"

"Yeah, he left last week. Pretty sure he'll be back this week, maybe in a couple of days."

"Thanks for that."

"Why do you ask?" Bones was a nosy motherfucker and while he had his uses, I didn't trust him with my secrets.

"Just checking some shit out for a friend. Their place was trashed, and they suspect him, but I don't figure him for that kind of thing."

"Yeah, it doesn't sound like something he would pull. Gambarro would be in your face; you'd know it was him without a shadow of a doubt."

"My thoughts exactly. Thanks, man, I'll keep investigating and figure out who else it could be," I said and then ended the call.

No doubt that information would start spreading and perhaps whoever was responsible would come to light sooner rather than later.



I headed to the clubhouse after that and found King in the bar. *The newly painted bar*. He was on one of the old couches with one of the club whores. Brittany had gotten her way with the new paint but not with the new couches. There'd been no point really; new couches would only get used in the same way the old ones did.

King dragged his attention away from the ass he'd been admiring to look at me. "You come to play, Kick?" he asked with a wicked glint in his eye.

"No, I've got your money for you, plus I need to talk to you about something."

He slapped the whore's ass and moved her so he could stand. "Wait here, I won't be long," he ordered her before leading me to the office.

I shut the office door behind me and handed him the envelope of cash. "My girlfriend's house was broken into today. They trashed it, but I don't think they stole anything."

He punched in the code to the safe and dumped the cash in it. Turning back to me, he asked, "Are you thinking this is retaliation from Gambarro? Or Silver Hell?"

"Fuck, I hadn't thought of Silver Hell, but I *had* considered Gambarro for it. Doesn't seem to fit his usual style, though."

Shaking his head, he said, "No, it doesn't." He sat in the chair behind the desk, a thoughtful look on his face. I waited for him to speak. "What about Silver Hell, though? Did you find out anything else about where they are at with Marco's death?"

"Last I heard they were chasing up a lead that Black Deeds were involved in that. They weren't even looking in our direction so I don't think this is their work, either. It's too subtle."

He shrugged. "Maybe you and I are just too fucking paranoid for our own good, brother. Maybe this is your run-of-the-mill neighbourhood burglary and has nothing to do with us."

"Yeah, could be. I'll keep looking into it."

King's eyes narrowed on me. "This chick means something to you?"

"Evie means everything to me," I stated, aware this would trigger further questions from him.

“As much as the club means to you?”

“My loyalties are even.”

He was silent for a moment, and then he blew out a long breath.

“Well, fuck, I never thought I’d see the day,” he murmured.

“Is that a problem for you?” I really fucking hoped it wouldn’t be because it might force me to admit to myself, and everyone else, that my loyalties actually weren’t even. That my loyalties were fast becoming slanted more in Evie’s direction.

Standing, he said, “No, brother. She means something to you, then she means something to the club. We’re behind you with this. Whatever you need, you’ve got.” His eyes bore into mine and told me he meant every word he said.

I let out the breath I didn’t realise I’d been holding. Nodding, I said, “Thanks.”

Contemplating that conversation as I headed back to Evie’s house, I realised how deep I was in with Evie. Seventeen years of club loyalty meant more to me than anything else in my life. But not more than Evie meant to me.

And fuck, I didn’t know what to make of that.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Evie

Kick arrived back at my house about two hours after he'd left. Maree and I had cleaned up most of the mess the intruders had made, and we were now in the kitchen discussing the break-ins that had been occurring in the neighbourhood lately. Kick entered the kitchen and the energy shifted immediately. He stopped and stared at me, a look of pure need in his eyes. But there was something else there, something I couldn't quite put my finger on straight away.

Maree sensed it, too, and gave me a look that said *'fuck, I am getting out of here so you can get laid'*. She grabbed her bag and said, "I'll call you tomorrow and make sure you're okay."

"Thanks for your help, babe," I said as she left.

Kick didn't take his eyes off me. As soon as the front door closed behind Maree, he came to me. His hand went straight to the button on my shorts and a moment later it was in my panties, searching for my slit. No words were exchanged; our eyes did all the talking. And Kick's eyes were loud. And dark. If I didn't know him as well as I did, I would be scared of his intentions.

His finger roughly entered me, and he hissed. Pushing in deep, he began fucking me with it. My eyes rolled shut, and he growled, "Keep your eyes open, Evie. I want to watch them as you come."

I shuddered at the hardness in his voice and in his eyes. This was the Hard Kick, and I didn't know him so well. I realised I had no

idea where this would go tonight. So I did as he said. Kick was completely in charge of tonight.

While his fingers fucked me, his other hand came to my cheek, and he roughly grasped me, his thumb tracing my lips. Our eyes remained locked and our breathing matched in its shallowness.

Oh god, I was going to come.

I was going to come hard.

"Let it go, baby," he commanded, knowing my body so well. Knowing I was so close. "But keep your eyes open."

The rough authority in his voice did it in the end. I came, forcing my eyes to stay open the entire time. My whole body exploded with pleasure, and my legs threatened to give way under me. Kick's arms came around me, and he lifted me and carried me into my bedroom.

A moment later I was on my feet and he'd quickly stripped me. I stood naked in front of him, his eyes hungrily running over my body. He'd already brought me to orgasm once, but I could feel it building again, simply from the intense hunger radiating from him.

I needed to touch him, but when I took a step in his direction, he barked, "No." His eyes snapped back to mine, and he lifted his tee over his head, and then removed the rest of his clothes. His cock was rock hard, and my pussy screamed for it, but I did as he said and stood still, waiting for his next move.

Desire slid right through me when he reached for the handcuffs sitting on my bedside table. "I want you on your back on the bed, with your arms above your head," he ordered, his voice hard, not containing one scrap of the gentle, fun Kick.

And I fucking loved the shiver it gave me, from the unpredictability of him.

I did as he said and waited.

He remained standing, his eyes on mine. I couldn't be sure, but it seemed he was weighing something up in his mind. It seemed like he was at war with his need.

"Kick -" I began, but he cut me off.

"Don't talk," he bossed me, his breaths starting to come hard and fast. And then he muttered, "Fuck." He shoved his hand through his hair, and turned around and walked out of the room.

What the hell?

I shifted so I could lean on my elbows and see where he went, but he'd moved out of my line of sight. Moving off the bed, I went in

search of him, finding him in the lounge room, his back to me, his shoulders tense.

"What's wrong, Kick?" I asked quietly, almost afraid of the answer. I'd always wanted to know this side of Kick, but his intensity was freaking me out a little.

He turned to me, his eyes flashing anger, and that scared me even more. I hadn't done anything to earn that anger. When he finally spoke, his voice was strangled, broken almost. "I'm mad at you . . . and I don't want to be mad at you . . ."

I frowned, unable to understand the words coming out of his mouth. "I don't understand," I almost whispered.

"Fuck! Neither do I," he said, agitated.

I stayed silent.

Waiting for him to explain further.

Hoping this wasn't the end of us.

His gaze roared with fury and violence.

And I didn't understand.

My heart cracked a little more, the scars of our love aching. It seemed that's all we were destined for. Scars and hurt. And an inability to make this work.

"I love you, Evie," he started and then stopped abruptly, like he was searching for the right words. "But I fuckin' hate the power you have over me." His words bled with the conflict he was obviously experiencing. "Fuck, that didn't come out right," he muttered. His eyes pleaded with me to understand, begged me not to walk away from this, but rather to stay and fight.

And so that's what I did.

I fought for Kick.

I moved to him, and placed my hand on his chest. He flinched, but I ignored it. Kick needed my love. He needed to know this would be okay, and that we would battle our way through any obstacles that came at us. My counsellor instincts kicked in. "What power do I have over you?"

He took a deep breath and I felt his heart beating fast in his chest. "You have the power to fuck my loyalties up." His words were raw and honest, and I loved him even more for that. I loved that he gave me that because it meant we could go forward from a place of truth.

"Your loyalty to your club?"

"Yes." His voice was forceful, demanding, as if he wanted me to fix it for him.

But I couldn't fix this for him. I could only try to help him sort through the mess of emotions and thoughts rushing at him.

"Why does your love for me have to affect that, Kick? Why can't you have loyalty to both of us?"

"Because if shit ever goes down, it could mean that one day I will have to make a choice. You or the club."

Clarity hit me square in the chest. "That's the real reason why you kept walking away from me, isn't it?" I asked quietly.

He stared at me for a long time, processing that. And then his face contorted in torment and he nodded. "I think so," he whispered, "but I never realised that until just now."

I asked the one question that had to be answered in order for us to take another step on this journey together. The answer to this question would determine our future. "Can you get past that anger at me?" I held my breath, waiting for him to reply.

Willing him to say the one word I desperately wanted him to say.

"I'm not angry at you, baby. I'm angry at myself." His gaze softened, and my heart soared at his admission, but it confused me even further.

My eyebrows drew together. "Why?"

The air crackled with his ferocious love. It blazed for me to see and feel. "Because I love you, and I've always fuckin' loved you. I might not like the power you have over me, but I'm fuckin' angry with myself for even thinking I should put you second to the club. You've always come first, and you always will. I just couldn't admit that to myself until today."

We'd had many moments of honesty since we'd found each other again, but I felt this one deep in my heart. This really was a defining moment for us and I needed to find a way to show Kick that I got it, that I understood the depth of his feelings for me.

I moved my hand from his chest to his face, gently placing it on his cheek. Shifting closer to him, I kissed his lips. His arms circled me, pulling me even closer. My arms moved up and around his neck, and my fingers worked their way into his hair. Our kiss deepened, and we expressed our love in the best way we knew how. Our lips, tongues and bodies communicated on a deeper level than our words would ever be able to.

When I ended the kiss, I said, "I want to spend the rest of my life with you, Kick. I want you to love me, and hate me, and fight with me, and make up with me, and do it over and over. I want you forever."

His arms tightened around me. "Thank fuck, 'cause you're stuck with me. You're mine now, baby, and I'm yours, and there's nothing that will stop me from fighting for us."

He spent the rest of the night blessing my body with his love, and I thanked the universe for giving him back to me.

By the time my eyes closed from sheer exhaustion hours later, I knew we'd finally come full circle. The promises we'd made each other as teenagers would be fulfilled.

We'd never give up on each other again.



The next morning, I rushed into the kitchen to grab breakfast before heading out to work. Kick had monopolised my time again this morning, causing me to be late *again*.

He watched me from the table where he drank his coffee, and gave me a cheeky grin. God, I loved that grin, but fuck, I couldn't afford to be distracted by him again. "You okay, baby?" he asked, knowing full well I was stressing about running late.

I held my hand up at him. "Don't talk to me," I muttered as I rummaged through my bag looking for my phone. I ignored his snicker. When I couldn't locate my phone, I looked up at him, and asked, "Have you seen my phone?"

He raised his brows. "Oh, am I allowed to talk to you now?"

I put my hand on my hip and glared at him. "Very funny, smartass."

Chuckling, he stood and came to me. As he moved to pass me, he bent his face and whispered in my ear, "Look on your bedside table, sweetheart, I'm pretty sure that's where you left it." And then he kept moving to the sink to rinse his mug. And I was left with desire running through me.

Shit.

I ignored my body and its needs and hurried into the bedroom to grab my phone. He'd been right, and I shoved it in my bag and

headed back to the kitchen to say goodbye. He was leaning against the kitchen counter waiting for me, arms and legs crossed, eyes full of heat. I gave him a quick kiss and tried to keep walking, but his hand shot out and grabbed me around the waist, and he pulled me back to him.

His mouth brushed my neck with a kiss, and he spoke into my ear. "Have a good day, sweetheart. I think we need to discuss our future a bit more tonight. And then I think we really need to play with my toys."

Oh god.

I turned in his embrace. "When you say we need to discuss our future, you're not thinking of breaking up with me, are you?" I teased, knowing full well he had no plans for that. Not after last night.

"No. I'm thinking of getting us matching rings," he said in the kind of tone that told me he wasn't just thinking this, he was already planning it.

"You have the best thoughts, baby," I said with a smile, and he gave me one back.

And then he smacked me on the ass and said, "Okay, go. But be at my place by five. I've got plans for you."

"Yes, sir," I promised, loving the wild look his eyes got at my promise.

Ten minutes later, I was stuck in rush hour traffic. I should have felt stressed about it, but all I could bring myself to do was think of Kick. We sat bumper to bumper for what felt like ages, until, suddenly, there was a break in traffic and we all began moving at normal speed again.

Thank goodness.

I changed gears rapidly as I began to finally gain speed. My thoughts shifted from Kick to work and back to Kick again. I couldn't concentrate on anything but him for longer than a couple of minutes. This was going to be a long day.

And then it happened.

I never saw the car coming.

And I sure as hell never saw the truck coming.

I heard the screeches of tyres before I saw any of it.

All I saw after that were flashes of metal.

And then I saw darkness.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Kick

Fuck.

I pushed through the hospital doors, heart in my gut, and jogged the rest of the distance to the emergency room. It had been over half an hour since Loretta had phoned me to let me know Evie had been in a car accident.

Thirty fucking minutes too long.

My gut swirled with dread.

How fucking bad was this accident? Loretta hadn't been able to tell me much over the phone, and my mind had conjured up the worst possibilities.

As I entered the emergency room, Loretta rose from her seat and came to me, a look of sheer panic on her face.

Fuck.

Her arms reached out, and I pulled her close to hug her. "Kick . . . it's going to be bad . . . I just know it . . ." Her voice cracked, and she started crying.

I let her get it out and then asked, "Have you spoken to a doctor yet?"

Shaking her head, she said, "They haven't been able to tell me anything. No one's giving me anything!" Her voice gradually rose to almost a wail.

"Shhh," I whispered. Loretta wasn't the most stable woman and I could see she wasn't coping with this at all. "I'm going to go and see

what I can find out. You wait here, okay?"

"Okay," she said, her voice barely audible.

I left her and approached one of the nurses at the counter. She gave me a bored 'what-the-fuck-do-you-want?' look. "I'm wanting information on my girlfriend. She was brought in after a car accident."

"Name?" Still with the bored look.

"Evie Bishop."

She typed Evie's name into her computer and after reading the screen for a moment, said, "Please take a seat. I'll call you as soon as you can go through and see her."

I did as she said and took a seat next to Loretta. Fuck knew how long we'd be waiting.

"Did they tell you anything?" she asked, her voice almost pleading for me to say yes.

I shook my head. "No, I think we're in for a long wait."

Thank fuck she was the kind of woman who didn't engage in unnecessary conversation. I didn't have the patience for that. Pulling my phone out, I said to her, "I'll be back in a minute." I stood and headed outside to ring King to let him know I wouldn't be back to the clubhouse any time soon.

"Kick," he answered, "I was just about to call you. We've heard rumours that your girlfriend's accident wasn't an accident."

"Keep talking," I said, more calmly than I felt. My blood was pumping furiously through my veins now.

"It seems this was a hit organised by Gambarro."

"Motherfucker!" I roared as I turned around and punched the brick wall behind me.

"I've got the boys finding out where Gambarro is. We think he's still out of the country but have to verify that. You stay with your woman, and we'll let you know once we have the info."

"Thanks, brother."

We ended the call and I stalked back inside.

Gambarro would fucking pay for this.



"Evie," I said softly, trying to wake her up. She'd been exhausted and had been drifting in and out of sleep for the last couple of hours while we'd been waiting for the all clear.

Her eyes fluttered open, then shut, and open again. She gave me a small smile before wincing and placing her hand to her side. Before she could speak, I placed my finger to her lips. "Shhh, baby, don't try to speak because it will probably hurt."

She had fractured some ribs in the accident. Besides that, she had whiplash but nothing else. She'd been lucky considering a car had rammed her, causing her to slide into the path of a truck. The good fortune of the day had been the quick thinking of the truck driver who had swerved to miss her, and, in doing so, had only clipped her car.

The doctors had done x-rays and verified it was only her ribs and that in time they would heal by themselves. They'd dosed her up on strong painkillers and had told me I could take her home soon.

Thank fuck.

She ignored my advice not to speak. "When can I go home?" she asked, her face contorting in pain with every word.

Loretta was standing on the other side of her bed and grabbed her hand. "They've said you can go home in the next hour or so. They've just got to get your discharge ready and your pain medication."

"Thanks, Mum." She hissed through the pain.

I frowned at her insistence to talk, and she just pulled a face back at me. My woman was too damn stubborn sometimes.

The doctor came back to us with a smile. Looking at Evie, he announced, "You're good to go. The nurse will have your medication in a minute. If you experience any of those symptoms I mentioned to your family, you need to come straight back to the hospital." He waited for her response, and when she agreed, he nodded and left us alone.

I eyed her mum. "Can you give us a minute, Loretta?"

As she left, I raked my gaze over Evie again. Gambarro would hurt for this.

At her questioning look, I said, "Sweetheart, this wasn't an accident. This was retaliation for me getting your dad's debt wiped. The guy who organised this will pay, I promise you that." Her eyes widened, but before she could say something, I silenced her again.

with a finger to her lips. "I'm gonna take you home, and when I get the call from King, I'll organise for one of the boys to come over and watch out for you while I go and take care of this."

I watched as my words sunk in, not knowing how she would cope with that information, but needing to be upfront with her about it.

No more secrets.

She eventually nodded, and I let out a thankful breath.

Once I took care of this, we could all move forward.



I'd just settled Evie into her bed when I got the call from King. "Gambarro's flying into Sydney tonight. His driver is picking him up and taking him out to his country house. I'll round the boys up, and we'll meet him on the way to his house. Can you meet us at the clubhouse in about an hour?"

"Yeah, but can you send Nitro or Devil to watch over Evie? I don't want to leave her alone and chance one of his guys coming to finish off the job they started this morning."

"Good call, brother. I'll send Nitro," King promised and hung up.

Evie's gaze focused on me, and she gave me a questioning look. "Are you leaving now?"

Fuck, the pain I could hear in her voice made my stomach roll. To think I could have fucking lost her today. "Yeah, baby, I'll head out once Nitro arrives. He'll make sure you're okay."

Her hand reached for mine. "Thank you," she whispered.

"It's the least I can fuckin' do . . . for getting you into this mess."

"No, I got *you* into this mess, remember?" She gave me a small smile.

I nodded, and tried to lighten the mood. "Yeah, that's right, and it also means I won't get to play with you and my toys for awhile now."

She tried not to laugh, but couldn't quite help herself. However, the pain in her ribs stopped her, and her eyes welled up from the pain. "You and your fucking toys," she muttered, and a grin spread across my face.

I leant close to her face, and promised, "As soon as your pain eases, I'll be fucking you for days to make up for this."

"That's going to be a lot of days," she murmured.

"Yeah, I'm betting on it, sweetheart."



The dark road stretched out ahead of us, not a car in sight. The silence of the night blanketed us; the only sound to be heard was the rumble of our bikes. King had rounded ten of us up for this job, but I'd made it clear back at the clubhouse that this was my gig. I would be the one to cause Gambarro's last breath.

His car was visible up ahead, and I gave the signal to hurry this shit along. We all picked up speed and a couple of minutes later we circled his car and forced it to pull over. I had no doubt Gambarro would be well protected, and I hoped like hell all of us left here in one piece tonight, but the other possibility was one all of us entertained when we participated in club business like this.

As the car came to a halt, we all trained our guns on it, waiting. It took a few minutes before one of the back doors opened and a gun was fired at us, narrowly missing King. He got pissed, and being the crazy asshole he was, he ran towards the car after dodging the bullets.

Fuck.

I couldn't let him go down for this, so I followed him. King reached the car first and he yanked the door open. As he did this, I covered him, and shot at the guy who lunged for King from the back seat. His body slumped out of the car and King shoved him out of the way. He pulled Gambarro out and pushed him hard up against the car.

"Well, hello there, motherfucker," he greeted him before turning to gesture at me, "I've got someone here who wants a word with you." He stepped out of the way and allowed me full access to Gambarro.

Adrenaline ran through my body, every nerve ending alive with the anticipation of bloodshed. I'd been surprised as fuck Gambarro didn't have more than one guy besides his driver with him. Devil

had restrained the driver, and I was almost disappointed this had been so easy.

Gambarro's empty eyes flashed at me. "I see you got my message," he snarled.

"I got both your fuckin' messages, asshole," I snapped, my fingers itching to pull the trigger of the gun I had trained on him.

"I only sent one. I trust it got through to you."

I clubbed him with my gun. Not hard enough to knock him the fuck out, but just hard enough to cause him some pain. Pain he fucking deserved.

His head snapped back into place and blood ran down his face. "Have at it, asshole. You kill me, and you and your club won't know what the fuck hit you," he threatened.

"Fuck you!" I roared as I clubbed him again, this time a little harder, causing him to lose his balance and stumble. He didn't fall, though. When he straightened, I took in the blood now covering his face.

Fuck yeah.

"Kick, let's move this along," Hyde suggested. He was right; we needed to get this done and then get the hell out of here.

I lifted my gun and aimed it at his forehead. "The world will be a better place without you in it. I fuckin' hope you rot in hell."

My gun sounded, and Gambarro dropped. He hadn't even flinched at my words. So cold and dead on the inside, I bet he'd probably spent his life wondering each day if it would be his last. A lot of people would rejoice at the news of his death.

I stepped away from his body and turned to King. "Are we cleaning this up?"

He shook his head. "No."

His meaning was clear - this was a message, and we would let it speak for itself.

"Alright, boys, let's get the fuck out of here!" King yelled out, rounding everyone up. He jerked his chin at Devil. "Let the driver go. It's not his fault his boss was a prick." King never failed to surprise me; this kind of decision was rare.

With a deep sense of satisfaction, I headed home.

Killing someone like Gambarro rated highly on my 'I've-had-a-good-day-at-work' scale. I would never be convinced that ridding the earth of scum like him was a bad thing.

Especially not when my family was threatened.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Evie

Holy mother of God!

The pain shot through me as I tried to suck in a breath and shift in the bed. My eyes flew open and I stifled the cry trying to push through my lips.

"Baby, are you okay?" Kick's voice cut through my haze of pain.

I turned my head and found him standing next to the bed, his body bent at the waist, face hovering over mine. His distress at my agony warmed me, that he cared so much, but at the same time I hated to see him so worried. I tried to ease his mind. "I'm okay, but I need some painkillers, please."

He nodded and said, "Good. I'll be back in a minute."

I watched as he strode out of the room.

My man loved me.

Everything he did for me showed me just how deep that love was.

And I couldn't wait for him to get those matching rings.

When he came back, he had water and pills. Kneeling on the floor next to the bed, he asked, "Can you sit up?"

I shook my head, fearful of the pain that shifting would cause. I'd had hardly any sleep and I'd finally found a position that caused the least amount of pain; I didn't want to chance bringing more pain on.

"Okay, don't move," he said, as he passed me the painkillers. "I'll hold the water for you."

I took the pills and he brought the glass of water to my lips and helped me swallow them. After he'd placed the glass on the bedside table, I gave him a small smile. "Thank you," I whispered.

He leant over and placed a kiss on my forehead. "I'm sorry." His words were simple, but I heard every last drop of pain and sorrow in them.

I gulped back the tears that threatened. Rapidly shaking my head, I said, "No, this isn't your fault, Kick. Don't you dare take that blame."

Kneeling again, his gaze grew serious, and my gut tightened, sensing where this conversation was headed. "You never need to worry about Gambarro again." His words were hard, and I knew from his tone and the way his entire body had tensed that he was worried about my reaction. He needed me to accept his actions.

"Good," I said, and watched as the worry eased out of his body. "And, baby, I will always feel that way about anything like this. I trust everything you do because I know it comes from a place of love and a need to protect those you love. Never doubt my love for you and belief in you."

He stared at me, and I saw the war waging in his soul. Kick was essentially a good person, but sometimes in life, things touched you and stained you in a way you could never recover from. They caused an irreversible shift in the way you saw the world around you, and in the way you dealt with the things that happened to you from that point on.

Sometimes, the path your journey veered on to led you to do things you'd never have considered previously.

And sometimes, in the hell you'd been delivered into, the end justified the means.

So I watched as he waged war, and I reached my hand up to lay gently against his cheek. "This is it, Kick. Can you feel it?"

He frowned. "Feel what?" he whispered, clearly confused at my obscure words.

"The moment where you know once and for all that there is nothing you could do that I wouldn't accept," I explained and waited for it to sink in.

"Fuck," he murmured, "I don't fuckin' deserve you."

"Yeah, you do," I said as I curled my hand around his neck and pulled his face to mine. He willingly gave me his lips and I kissed

him with all the love and passion I felt for him. When we ended the kiss, I said, "Now, I do believe you have some rings to buy."

He grinned and raised a brow. "Oh, you think so, do you?"

It was my turn to raise a brow. "Questioning the woman who will be your wife one day soon is not a smart move."

Chuckling, he agreed. "You have me there, sweetheart. I learnt a long time ago that questioning the woman I love isn't a smart move."

"When was that?"

"I was seventeen at the time. It was the day I asked you to the senior dance, and you said no because I'd questioned a decision of yours to stand up for Joe Jensen the day before. You practically held me to ransom over that fuckin' dance, and in the end I had to back-track on everything I'd said about that dickhead and pretend I fuckin' liked him to get you to agree to go with me."

I couldn't hide my surprise. "I thought you only asked me to that dance because you had no one else to go with."

His eyes turned soft. "No, baby, I asked you because I really wanted to take *you*. I wouldn't have become friends with fuckin' Joe Jensen if I didn't have to."

My ribs might have been in pure agony and my body and mind might have been exhausted, but this new knowledge buzzed through me, causing extreme happiness to settle in me.

Kick Hanson had loved me since he was seventeen, and he still loved me eighteen years later.



I slept for most of the day. Kick looked after me, staying close by all day. At four that afternoon, Mum and Julie came to visit. I'd been awake for about half an hour then so it turned out to be perfect timing.

"God, Evie, don't give us a scare like that again!" Julie said, her face a mask of worry. She'd brought flowers with her and arranged them in a vase I'd sent Kick to find. Placing the vase on the bedside table next to me, she bent and gave me an awkward kiss on my forehead. She still wasn't big on public displays of affection, and I fig-

ured a kiss was hard for her, but I appreciated the gesture, particularly seeing as though she couldn't hug me.

I smiled up at her. "I'll try not to," I promised, my glance shifting to catch Kick leaning against the door, arms folded over his chest and a contemplative look on his face. We held each other's gazes for a moment and then I gave mine back to Julie.

"Good," she said.

"The police said there were a few witnesses to the accident but none of them can remember the number plates of the car who caused it. One witness even said the car didn't have any. I don't think they're confident they can solve this," Mum told me, seemingly upset with this information.

"Well, I guess whoever it was will get theirs in the end; karma and all," I said, keen to change the topic of conversation. "Have either of you heard from Dad lately?" I hadn't heard from him or seen him since the day he told me he didn't want Kick in my life.

Mum smiled, and that stunned me. She and Dad hadn't been close since he left after she cheated on him. "He and I have been in contact after he called and asked me to lunch the other week. Evie, he told me what you and Kick did for him and how awful he was to you about Kick. He regrets it, and he also regrets not following up on the counselling."

I wanted to believe everything she had said but after years of being let down by him, I struggled to buy it. "And?" I asked, my voice hard and guarding. I had to guard my heart from more disappointment.

Julie stepped in. "He's doing good with the counsellor . . . I've seen him a few times, and I'm proud of what he's doing."

My eyes widened.

Shit, if Julie was impressed, it meant Dad really *was* making progress.

"Okay, good," I said softly.

Mum looked hopeful as she asked the next question. "He wants to see you. Would you be up for that? He's worried about you."

Kick pushed off from the door he was leaning against and came towards me, concern etched on his face. "Is that a good idea?" he asked me.

I loved his concern, but I thought it might actually be good to see Dad. "It's alright, Kick, I want to see him. Maybe this will be the

fresh start we all need.”

As the afternoon progressed and we all loosened up with one another, I thought back to that conversation and hoped it really would be a fresh start for all of us.

An opportunity to put the pain of the last eighteen years behind us once and for all.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Kick

A few days later, King called Church. He'd put it off, giving me time to be with Evie, but he was right – we needed to take stock of where the club was at. I left Evie with her Mum and headed into the clubhouse.

Hyde greeted me with a slap on the back. "How's everything going, man?" he asked, his beef with me completely gone. *Jekyll and Hyde*.

"All good, but not holding out hope that Gambarro was bluffing the other night," I expressed my concern that Gambarro had indeed made plans for his crew to avenge his death if it ever were to happen.

His face darkened. "Yeah, I wouldn't put it past the motherfucker to have organised something."

We took our seats around the table and King began. "Has anyone heard anything from the Gambarro camp?" he asked, looking around the table. The resounding 'no' gave me only a tiny sliver of hope, and it appeared King thought the same way I did. "Well, keep your ears to ground and let me know the minute you hear something. We need to be prepared for this."

Everyone agreed to that, and then I raised my concern from the other night. "Gambarro said he'd only sent one message to us – the car accident. But my girlfriend's house was broken into the other

night and trashed. Nothing was stolen. Now call me a paranoid bastard, but this feels odd. Have any of you had shit happen recently?"

I looked around the table and from the expressions on everyone's faces, I knew deep in my gut something was definitely odd with this. Nitro was the first to speak. "My sister's place was ransacked three nights ago."

Devil's vein in his neck twitched as he said, "Fuck, my brother was broken into a couple of nights ago."

Hyde was murderous. "Fuck!" he roared, standing. He looked like he was about to explode from his anger. "My sister owns a convenience store and it was held up two nights ago." His gaze zeroed in on King. "This is Silver Hell, isn't it? Those motherfuckers!"

If I thought Hyde was murderous, King was positively insane. He slammed his fist down on the table and looked around the table. "Those motherfucking cunts!" Giving his attention to Devil, he said, "I want you to look into this, you and Kick, and report back ASAP, yeah?"

Devil's eyes met mine, and we nodded. "Yeah, boss, will do," he agreed.

"Any other business to discuss?" King demanded, his wild eyes searching the room. When no one spoke up, the gavel came down and Church was done.

Fuck.

Shit just got real.



I gazed at Evie sitting in the bed. She'd progressed from lying down all the time to sitting for a while each day. I knew from experience how painful broken ribs were, and I also knew how long they took to recover from.

"What are you thinking?" she asked, keeping her eyes on mine.

I smirked and pushed off from the wall to walk to the bed. Sitting next to her, I said, "I was thinking that my dick could shrivel up from lack of use over the next month or so."

"Really? Such deep thoughts you have, Kick," she said with a wink.

"That was your opportunity to tell me we could work without your pussy on this."

"Well, we could . . . you've always got two hands to take care of business," she responded, with a teasing gleam in her eye.

"Sweetheart, I'd much rather your hands sign up for this job."

She laughed and fuck if that didn't turn me the fuck on. Jesus, Evie only had to look at me these days and I was almost blowing a load. Her laugh didn't last long, though, because it caused her pain and she winced. But then she grew serious and asked, "Do you ever think we'll get to play with your toys?"

I shifted off the bed and threw my hands in the air. "Fuck, baby, you can't do that to a man when he's got no fuckin' hope of getting a hard-on taken care of."

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean to bring your toys up." She really did look apologetic, but that was no good to me once my dick was already hard.

I placed my finger to my lips. "Shhh, don't mention the toys again. At least not until you can fix *this* shit," I said, pointing to my hard cock.

Nodding, she opened her mouth to say something, but we were interrupted by a knock at the front door. I left her and went to answer the door. My brother and sister stood on the other side, surprising the hell out of me. Lina pushed past me before I could stop her, and asked, "Is Evie in her bedroom?"

I'd forgotten she knew this house; Evie and Lina had been close until the last time I broke up with Evie. "Yeah, just go on through," I muttered, knowing full well my sister wouldn't listen to me if I told her to wait.

Braden grinned at me as he took a step inside. "How are you, little brother?"

"Fuck, man, I'm tired. It's been a long week. And you?" I closed the door behind him.

"I'm good. Heard you had a blow up at Mum."

I raked my fingers through my hair. "Yeah, that woman . . ." my voice drifted off as thoughts of her cut through me. I wasn't sure I'd ever work my anger at her out of my system.

"I get it. I told her not to come around my place anymore, too," he admitted.

"Good. She doesn't deserve a place in our lives."

We'd made it to Evie's bedroom and she caught the last piece of our conversation. She looked up at me and asked, "Who doesn't deserve a place in your life?"

"Mum."

Lina piped up. "Oh, speaking of people who don't deserve a place in our lives . . . Dave has been given a transfer for work. He'll be leaving in a week."

I was concerned for her, and what this would mean but at the same time, I was over the fucking moon he wouldn't be around to harass her anymore. "Are you okay with that?" I asked, watching her closely for her real feelings on the matter.

Her face lit up with a smile. "Yes, because it gives us both space to move on, and it also gets him away from me and the kids when he's been drinking, which seems to be more often than not these days."

Evie reached for Lina's hand and gave it a squeeze. "That's great, Lina," she said with a smile.

"Yeah, thank fuck," I said, meaning every word of it.

For the first time in a long time, it felt like our families were healing and growing, and good shit was happening.

It had been a long time coming.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Evie

Excitement bubbled through me at the fact I was finally getting to meet Kick's friends. As we walked into the clubhouse, I let my gaze roam over it, taking it all in. I'd imagined something similar, but not exactly the same. The non-descript brick building didn't scream biker to me, however the high fence surrounding the large building, and the obvious presence of security and a guy manning the front gate, did tell me something. The club took their security and protection seriously.

Once inside, I noted the dated paint on the walls, the worn carpet and the tired furniture. This clubhouse had seen better days, but I doubted the guys even saw it. The front door led down a long hall that was lined with framed photos of members. A quick glance told me some had passed, but mostly it appeared these photos were of current members. Once we were about halfway down the hallway, Kick turned left and walked through a wide doorway that led us into the bar area. And shit if I didn't get a surprise in there. This room had been freshened up, and it seemed to me it had been done by a woman. It had a lick of new cream paint, the carpet had been pulled up, and the cement floor had been polished. The lighting in this room was also different, brighter. Not to mention the furniture. New wood tables and chairs were scattered throughout, and today they were all occupied as bikers laughed and drank. My eyes narrowed on the couches. They were the only things in the room that

did not look new, and by the quick glance I took, they didn't look like anything I would ever sit on.

Kick's arm came around my shoulder and he pulled me close. "You okay? Are your ribs giving you grief?"

Always looking out for me.

It had been a few weeks since the car accident and while I was still in a great deal of pain, I'd assured Kick I was up for today. A barbeque with the boys . . . no way was I turning that invitation down.

"This must be Evie!" a voice boomed from behind me.

Turning, I found a tall, built guy coming towards us. His dark hair hung down to his shoulders, and although it was messy looking, and he had a scar running down the left side of his face, and even though the glint in his eyes seemed crazy, I had to admit, this man was hot. Scary hot. Scary as in crazy, fucked-up, but hot nevertheless.

"Evie, King," Kick introduced us, and I gave King a huge smile. I didn't care if he came across as scary, he was the man who helped save battered women from their abusive husbands, and he was the man who helped Kick take care of the asshole who tried to kill me.

"Hi," I greeted him.

His eyes sparkled with mischief. "Fuck me, how the fuck did Kick score a woman as beautiful as you?"

"Fuck off," Kick said, and I practically felt the possessive vibes circle me.

Shit, my man's caveman side had kicked in.

And I kind of liked it.

King laughed, and Jesus, if that man was hot before, he was fucking sexy when he laughed and his eyes lit up.

Another guy entered the room and zeroed in on us. Shit, another good-looking dude. This one had short dark hair and a beard. His arms were covered in tattoos and his brown eyes held a sadness to them. He smiled at me, but it was like his mouth was pretending because the smile sure as hell didn't hit his eyes.

Kick introduced him, "Nitro, this is Evie."

"Hi darlin'," he said, his voice deep and husky.

Good Lord, he would make some woman very happy one day. Kick had sent him over to look out for me once but he'd stayed out-

side so I hadn't gotten to lay eyes on him, and what a damn shame that was.

"Hi," I said, watching as his gaze on me changed from looking at me to pretty much looking through me. His eyes turned vacant, and I wondered where he went. My arms wanted to circle him in a hug and make it all better for him, whatever *it* was.

He excused himself to go and get a drink, but almost as soon as he'd left us, another two guys wandered in and came straight to us.

Huh . . . turned out Kick's friends were mostly all hot. Out of these two, I found one of them extremely attractive with his almost bald head, tattooed muscles and piercing blue eyes. It turned out his name was Devil, and I instantly liked him the minute Kick introduced us. The other guy scared the hell out of me. Sure, he was good looking, but I couldn't get past the hard, cold eyes that tracked my every movement, or the indifference I heard in his voice. It was like there was no feeling there, and as far as I was concerned, people who felt nothing were the scariest of them all.

"Hyde," he introduced himself.

"Evie," I replied, giving him a small smile. Even if he scared the shit out of me, I could still be polite to him. He surprised me with a smile back.

"Do you want a drink?" Kick asked.

I shook my head. "No, I don't want to chance it interfering with my painkillers."

"Shit, I forgot about that. Good call, babe," he said.

"You want a beer, Kick?" Devil asked.

"Yeah, thanks, brother," Kick replied, and Devil left to take care of it for him.

Hyde walked away, too, which left only me, King and Kick. King lowered his voice a little when he spoke. "The info you gave me on that drunk driver last week? I took care of him for you."

Kick stared at him and then nodded. I had no clue what they were referring to, but kept silent. If Kick wanted to fill me in, he would. And it turned out he did. He looked at me with a new sadness in his gaze that hadn't been there before. "The guy that killed Jeremy," he said softly, and I felt the pain in his words.

"Oh," I said, not sure what else to say, guessing that when King said he took care of him, he meant he *took care of him*.

King's face clouded over with anger. His gaze shifted between Kick and me when he said, "Assholes like that don't deserve to fucking live, sweetheart."

I sucked in a breath. He was right. "No, I don't suppose they do," I murmured, holding his gaze.

He stared at me for a couple more moments, the angry mask still in place, and then he broke out in a grin and turned to Kick. "I like her," he declared, and then he left us to go and talk to the woman behind the bar.

I soaked in the atmosphere, looking around the bar at everyone having a good time. Without knowing these people, I could still sense the family vibe. Kick had spoken to me about his reasons for joining Storm, and the main reason was the family he found within the club. And I could grasp that now.

Devil came back to us, handing Kick his drink. Eyeing me, he said, "I hear you've agreed to marry this fucker."

I laughed and nodded. "Yes, not that he actually proposed to me."

"Bullshit," Kick said, "I proposed."

My eyes widened, and I placed a hand on my hip. "Oh, really? Was I asleep or knocked out from painkillers when you did it? Because I don't remember it," I challenged him.

Chuckling, he leant close to me, and let his lips brush mine before saying, "I suggested we should get matching rings. Do you seriously not remember that?"

I rolled my eyes. "Oh my god, Kick, that is *not* a proposal."

Devil interjected. "What would a proposal look like, sweetheart? Like, say, if Kick were to propose right now, what should he do?" There was a glint in his eyes that I couldn't pinpoint, but I decided to play along anyway.

"For a start, there'd be a really big, fucking ring. And then he'd get down on one knee and tell me how much he loves me and that he can't live without me. *And* he'd assure me that I was the only one for him and that we'd be together forever." I stopped and took a breath. They were both staring intently at me, and it unnerved me.

Devil raised his brows. "Anything else?"

I looked at Kick and shook my head. "No," I said softly. He was watching me with a strange look, almost as if he was soaking in everything I'd said and filing it away for later use.

And then Kick made my heart expand and find more space inside it to fill with love for him. With his eyes firmly on me, he reached his hand out to Devil who placed a box on his palm.

A ring box.

He took it and got down on one knee. Devil put his fingers in his mouth and whistled loudly to get everyone's attention. Kick looked up at me through eyes that were full of love. Taking my hand, he said, "Evie Bishop, I've loved you since I was a kid. I've never stopped loving you. And I never fuckin' will. I can't live without you, and I'm not just saying that. When I don't have you, I wander aimlessly; I have no purpose. But with you by my side, I belong, and I know what I'm doing. And as far as there being any other woman for me . . . no woman even comes close, never has, and never fuckin' will. I could be in a room of women and all I'd see would be you, and all I'd want would be you." He paused and pulled the ring from the box. It was a really fucking huge diamond ring. "Sweetheart, will you let me get us some matching rings? And then spend the rest of your life with me?"

Tears threatened to fall down my cheeks. I smiled through them, though, and nodded. "Yes," I whispered, and as he slid the ring on my finger, the room erupted with whistles and cheers, and lewd comments being yelled out at us. I was too damn happy to pay any attention to any of it. Instead, I threw my arms around Kick when he stood. I ignored the pain shooting out from my ribs. This wasn't an occasion to let a little bit of pain interfere with. "I love you, Kick Hanson," I said as his arms came around me.

He kissed me, and when he ended it, he said, "I love you, too, baby. And I've always known we'd be together forever. It just took us a little time to figure our shit out." He grinned and added, "You made me work for it, but I knew you still loved me, and that I'd eventually get you to relent."

"You're a sneaky bastard," I chastised him.

Grinning harder, he admitted, "Only where you're concerned. Anything for you, Evie Bishop."

I let the tears fall then.

Tears of happiness.

It had been a long, hard journey for us, but we'd eventually made it to where we were meant to be.

And I was so damn glad he'd made me relent.

EPILOGUE

Kick

I listened to the words coming out of Devil's mouth, and let him get them all out before I said anything. "It's been three months of bloodshed and loss, at *their* fuckin' insistence, and now they want to call a truce?" I flicked my gaze to King. "What the fuck do you think, Prez? 'Cause, for the record, I'm against it. I say we bury those fuckers. And if you ask Nitro, he would say that, too."

King contemplated this new information regarding Silver Hell. I'd expected him to agree with me, but he threw me off when he didn't come straight out with it. Fuck, he'd experienced loss at their hands, too. Why the hell wasn't he saying *'fuck yes, bury them'*? Instead, he said, "Kick, it's your wedding day. Can we just get you the fuck through this and then make a decision?"

Devil seemed as stunned as I was. "I'm with Kick, I say bury them," he said.

A vein in King's neck ticked and he lost his loosely contained shit. "I say we don't fucking decide today!" he roared. "I just want one fucking day without those motherfuckers ruining it. Do you think we can have that?"

Jesus.

I shoved my fingers through my hair and then stretched my back and arms. Nodding at King, I agreed, "Yeah."

King huffed out a harsh breath and desperately tried to shake some of the tension out of his tightly wound body. "Good. Now let's

get this wedding underway." He slapped me on the back as he pushed past me to head out of the clubhouse bar to the marquee we'd set up on the land we owned out the back of the clubhouse.

We watched him leave, and then Devil asked, "You ready for this, brother?"

I grinned. "More than fuckin' ready."

"You're a lucky asshole, to find a woman as good as Evie."

Fuck yeah.

"Kick!" We turned to see Lina rushing into the bar, looking stressed.

"What?" I asked, my own stress levels rising. Fuck, with all the shit we'd been through over the last three months, every little fucking thing stressed me.

"Evie's here. You need to get outside so you're waiting there when she walks in."

"For fuck's sake, Lina, don't do that. You had me worried something had happened to her or to someone else," I complained.

She pursed her lips. "Just get your ass out there."

I did as she said and walked out to the marquee to wait for Evie. I hadn't seen her since yesterday morning and, fuck, I ached to see her. How the hell I'd gone three years without her, I had no clue, because these days, being away from her a mere twenty-four hours was hell.

I'd asked Braden to be my best man, and he leant next to me now and said, "Never thought I'd see the day."

"What?" I asked, not taking my eyes off where Evie would enter from.

"The day my brother got married."

Something in his voice caused me to turn and face him. He was emotional about this. "Yeah, me either," I admitted, "but thank fuck she came back to me."

"Who would have thought, all those years ago when you two were kids, that you'd end up married one day?"

I wasn't the kind of person to look back too often in life. My motto was to keep going forwards, but Braden was a sentimental bastard. Instead of replying to him, I simply nodded in agreement.

"You know," he mused, "it's sad, but I think in a way Shelly's death brought you two together."

My eyebrows drew together. "How the fuck do you figure that?" Jesus, what a morbid fucking thought.

"No, think about it. After her death and all the shit our families went through with our parents cheating, and then all the shit Evie went through, she needed you, and, in a weird way, you needed her. It brought you closer."

"I still don't follow," I muttered.

"You do realise Evie blamed herself for Shelly's death, right?"

Fuck.

"No, I didn't know that," I said softly.

"Jesus, Kick, you really were ignorant, weren't you? When Shelly fell out of the tree, Evie was supposed to be watching her, but she was too busy flirting with you. She blames herself because of that, I'm sure of it. And on top of the blame she dumped on herself, she ended up doubting herself after being bullied. *You* helped her and gave her the confidence in herself she needed. In return, she ended up loving you unconditionally, and gave you the sense of family you didn't get from ours."

I stared at him. "Well fuck, Braden, what are you? Some kind of psych?" I was fucking impressed with his analysis, though.

He grinned. "Fuck off." He tapped his head and said, "I'm just the brains of the family, asshole."

A hush came over the marquee, and I turned to see Evie entering. Fuck, my wife-to-be was beautiful. She had on a fitted white long dress that made her tits pop just enough for me but not so much that every fucking asshole here would be ogling them. And she had her hair up, which I loved because it gave me full access to her neck.

As she walked towards me, our eyes did not leave each other. I was so captivated by her gaze, I couldn't even drag mine down her body to check out her killer curves. Over the past few months, Evie had stopped worrying so much about her weight and dieting and all that bullshit. And I was fucking rejoicing because her curves had returned.

She's made me a happy man in more ways than one.

When she came closer, her father, who had walked her down the aisle, gave me her hand, and I did my best not to snatch it. Fuck, I had it bad today.

Once I held her hand in mine, I pulled her to me and whispered, "Fuck, baby, you look beautiful."

She blessed me with a smile that could take a man's breath away.
"Thank you."

She really had nothing to be thanking me for because *I* was the one who should be thanking *her*.

Evie had brought peace to my life.



Evie

After he'd unlocked the front door of our home, Kick scooped me up into his arms. "Welcome home, Mrs Hanson," he said with a huge grin on his face.

Mrs Hanson.

I grinned back at him, my tummy still full of the butterflies that had inhabited it all day. My wedding day truly had been the best day of my life. "I love you, Mr Hanson," I said softly.

Kick entered the house, closed the door behind him with his boot, and walked intently down the hall. My body buzzed with desire. It had been a long day and I was exhausted, but never too exhausted to play with Kick.

As he walked down the hall, my gaze landed on the frames we'd hung. Photos of us and of our family lined the walls. I remembered the day we'd hung them. Kick had announced his desire to fill the walls with photos of our children. He wanted three and couldn't wait to get started. I'd gone off birth control immediately and he'd spent every morning and night since working on making it happen.

I had good news for him tonight, but first, I would let him play because I feared once he was told, he would turn all overprotective, and pull back on the rough play.

When we reached our bedroom at the end of the hall, he entered it and dumped me on the bed. I bounced a little and then rested on my elbows, watching him, waiting for his next move.

His intense gaze roamed over my body as he removed his cut and placed it on the armchair in the corner of the room. I loved that armchair. It was where he often sat and watched me while I slept.

Waking up to find Kick's hungry eyes on me was the best way to wake up.

He slowly removed the rest of his clothes, and my desire built as he drew it out.

I was impatient for my man.

When he crawled onto the bed, over me, I thought I would burst from the desire. "Kick -"

"Shhh," he whispered, placing his finger over my lips to silence me. He pushed me onto my back and then bent to take one of my nipples into his mouth.

Yes.

I gripped the sheet and dug my toes into the bed. I'd been without Kick's mouth for over twenty-four hours. This was like coming home.

He let my nipple go and raised his head to look at me, his need raw on his face. "You got any idea just how ready I am to fuck you?" he growled as he pressed his erection into me.

Fuck.

I reached my hands to grab the back of his head and pulled his face to mine. Our lips collided a second later in a rough kiss; the kiss we'd both been aching for all day. While he kissed me, he began tearing at my clothes. My wedding dress was practically sewn onto me, though, and he quickly grew impatient and frustrated with its removal.

Pulling his lips from mine, he complained, "Fuck, Evie, are you trying to block my access tonight?" His gaze moved over my dress and I could see his mind trying to figure out the best way to get it off.

I pushed him off me and moved off the bed. Turning around to show him the back of the dress, I said, "You've got some buttons to undo, and don't even think of ripping it off. This dress cost me a fortune." The buttons ran the length of the dress and Maree had warned me Kick would get frustrated with it, but I'd loved it too much to worry about that. Plus, I figured by the time he got me out of it, he'd be so worked up that I'd be guaranteed some rough sex.

He came to me and began working on the buttons. When he was about half way down my back, he said, "Jesus fuck, woman, I was a fan of this dress until now."

I grinned to myself. Smiling sweetly at him, I said, "Sorry, baby, I thought you'd like it more."

He practically growled and his touch grew rougher as his fingers worked harder and faster to get the buttons undone. A couple of minutes later, he had the dress and my underwear off and he spun me around to face him. I sucked in a breath at his face. I'd never seen him so desperate to have me. And I felt that desperation deep inside.

I reached out to take hold of his cock, but he grabbed it before I got there. "I think I'm gonna have to cuff you tonight, sweetheart," he said, his breathing growing ragged. He let my hand go. "Wait there," he commanded and walked to the drawer where he kept his toys.

After rummaging through the drawer for what felt like ages, he shoved it closed, and muttered, "Fuck." Looking over at me, he asked, "Do you remember where the fuck I put the cuffs?"

Shaking my head, I said, "No."

Without saying anything else, he stalked out of the room. I did as he said and stayed where I was, hoping he would hurry back.

A minute later, he stalked back into the bedroom, no cuffs in sight. I sensed his frustration and when he grabbed something from the drawer and slammed it shut, I heard that frustration. Kick was not a patient man.

He came to me, holding the roll of bondage tape he didn't use that often. Cuffs were his preference, or rope. But tape was quick to use and I figured that was why he'd gone with it tonight. His eyes met mine, and he said, "On the bed, baby, back against the headboard, arms up."

Our bed had a padded headboard, which he'd insisted on for my comfort. Attached to the wall just above the headboard was a wrought iron bar and that was one of Kick's favourite things in our entire house. It was what he often used to restrain me. The bar was also one of my favourite things because when he used it, I was guaranteed the best orgasms.

I sat on the bed, watching with anticipation as he came to me. He grabbed one of my hands and taped it to the bar, and then repeated this with my other hand. My core clenched; he was rougher than I'd hoped for, and I loved it.

He dumped the tape on the floor and then took hold of my jaw with one hand while the other one trailed down my neck to my

breasts. His eyes followed his hand and lingered on my chest for a while before coming back to meet my gaze. "Fucking hell, Evie, even after all these years, I want you so damn much." He brought his lips to mine and kissed me while still holding my jaw firmly. I could feel his need in his kiss, and my heart beat faster in my chest at the thought of what was to come.

After he ended the kiss, he let me go and spread my legs wide, bringing my knees up so my feet were resting on the bed. His eyes focused on my pussy, and I watched as he fought to control himself. Kick was good at making himself wait, but that didn't mean his restraint was easy to achieve. He had to work hard at it.

Shifting onto his stomach, he positioned his mouth so he could lick the length of my pussy. I shut my eyes and let the pleasure consume me. His hands gripped my legs, and his lips and tongue brought me to orgasm faster than they ever had. I screamed out his name and fought against the tape that was restraining me.

I need to touch him.

"Don't fight it, baby," he whispered as he moved and brought his face to mine.

I opened my eyes and stared into his. Oh god, I loved this man. "Undo me, Kick, I want to touch you . . ."

I hadn't expected him to listen to me, but he moved off the bed, grabbed his knife from the drawer and came back to free me. However, he didn't have plans for me to touch him. He grabbed hold of me and pulled me to him. Then he moved a pillow down the bed and flipped me so my belly was lying over the pillow with my ass slightly raised. He took hold of both my hands and stretched my arms out on the bed above me while he lay over the top of me. Pressing my hands into the bed, he grunted as he slammed his cock into me.

Hard.

Rough.

Yes.

He pulled out and thrust back in. "Fuck," he growled against my ear sending even more pleasure through me. I loved hearing his need escape from his lips.

The room was silent around us except for the feral sounds of Kick fucking me. Bodies slamming together, breaths coming hard and

fast, grunts as we both reached for our release, and, finally, the roar as we orgasmed.

Kick collapsed on top of me and I didn't even care that his weight was almost crushing me. I was lost in the pleasure he'd just given me. Eventually, he did move off me to lie next to me. He pulled me against his body, positioning me so my head was resting on his chest.

We were silent for a few minutes until he said, "Promise me we'll still be fucking like that when we're sixty."

I laughed and lifted my head to look up at him. "If I know you as well as I think I know you, we'll still be fucking like that when we're ninety."

Grinning at me, he nodded. "I reckon you might be right there, sweetheart."

I moved so I was sitting next to him. My fingers traced a lazy pattern on his chest and my eyes met his. Smiling, I whispered, "I can only see one thing slowing us down."

He frowned. "What?"

"The kids we're going to have."

He sat up, the look on his face changing. Staring at me with a look of amazement, he asked, "Are you about to tell me what I think you're about to tell me?"

I nodded, a wash of emotion taking over me. "Yes. You're going to be a daddy."

His eyes widened and a huge grin filled his face. And then he practically crushed me to the bed and kissed me. He kissed me for an eternity, and when he'd finished, he looked down at me through eyes that couldn't hide his love even if he tried, and said, "I love you, Evie Hanson."

I looped my arms around his neck, and said, "Not as much as I love you, Kick Hanson."

He chuckled. "You might think you wear the pants in this relationship, sweetheart, but I'm telling you now, if we have a daughter, I'm the boss of her. And that's a 'we clear' statement."

I laughed. "Oh God, I hope we have a girl. Kick Hanson scaring off boys . . . I want to watch that."

He groaned, a look of pure pain flashing across his face. "Fuck, that's gonna be worse than dealing with men watching you."

As I watched my man declare his love for me in more ways than one, I realised how happy I was.

Finally.

We'd been through so much and we'd fought so hard for this over the years. And we'd finally done it. We'd created our own family, and this family would always love and protect its own.

Always.

NITRO'S TORMENT

The Sydney Storm MC are back and war is coming.

Nitro's Torment takes the Storm MC to a new level. Dark, gritty and fast-paced, this book is an adrenaline ride right to the very last page.

Tatum Lee is a pain in my ass.

She's stubborn, full of attitude, and she doesn't like to do what she's told.

And yet, at a time when I should be focusing on the war my club is at, she consumes my mind because she's also fearless and fierce, and I've never met a woman like her.

The thing about war, though, is the minute you let your focus drop, your enemy rises up and attacks. And sometimes they bring you to your knees in ways you never imagined.

The other thing about war? You learn just what you're capable of doing to protect those you love.

DEDICATION

To those of us still searching for home

*to love
gentle self-care
opening ourselves up
trusting
so much trusting
believing in someone
that they will hold our heart in their hands
and cherish it
cherish us*

*to finding our home
that place where our souls can breathe
where our hearts can smile*

*to finding the person who can give us that
love & home*

NITRO

“The Hammer’s Coming Down” by Nickelback

Scanning the busy casino floor, my gaze locked onto the guy I’d come here for. *You’re mine, fucker.* I stalked in his direction, pushing people out of the way. Being Saturday night, a crowd was in residence. That would only help my mission. Less chance of anyone involving themselves in what was going down.

About ten steps from my goal, a leggy blonde ran into me. I stopped and attempted to move swiftly around her. However, she had other ideas.

Turning to face me, the glare on her face said it all, but she insisted on wasting my time with her words. With an arch of her brows, she said, “Do you give a shit that I just twisted my ankle in these heels because you weren’t watching where you were walking?”

My eyes held hers. “You wanna back that up and get your facts straight?”

“My facts *are* straight, asshole. You’re the one who was barrelling through here, not me.”

My gaze flicked quickly to the guy I was after. Still at the table, thank fuck. Eyeing her again, I barked, “I don’t give a fuck who was doing what. You need to move out of my way.” If the casino wasn’t so damn packed, I wouldn’t even bother to argue with her, I’d just continue on my way. As it was, I couldn’t move either side of her.

“Does that usually work for you?”

I raked my fingers through my hair, keeping an eye on my target. “Yeah, it does.” I drew my attention back to her and lowered my face. “Now, get the fuck out of my way before I physically move you myself.”

Her nostrils flared. "Men like you don't scare me. Just so you know." With that, she stepped aside and I strode away from her without a second glance.

A few minutes later, I stared into the eyes of the man I believed was able to give me the information my club had been after for weeks. "You need to stand and leave with me now."

Hatred bled from him as he glared at me. "I don't need to fucking do anything."

"You do. Because if you don't, that tight cunt waiting for you at home won't be breathing when you get there."

He scowled. "You're full of shit."

I clenched my jaw and shoved my face closer to his. "You wanna fucking test that theory? I can phone my boys waiting outside your place if you want. Have them send over a photo."

He shoved his chair back. "This isn't going down how you think it is, Nitro."

I pushed him. "Start fucking walking and shut your mouth. The only way this is going down is how I say."

Neither of us would be leaving until I knew who was responsible for all the pain dealt to some of our club's family members over the last few months.



"Today's not your day, motherfucker." I grunted the words out as I reached for his throat. Gripping him hard, I squeezed until he could no longer suck air down into his lungs. "You wanna fuck with my family, you're gonna deal with me. And I don't give second chances."

Clawing at my fingers, he attempted to struggle out of my hold, but it was a fruitless battle. Pathetic sounds came from his throat, the kind of noises that only fuelled my bloodlust. Those sounds rolled through the back alley we were in, lingering in the same way the putrid smells out there did. Thunder cracked overhead and lightning cut through the black sky. It was only a matter of time before rain fell, but I didn't care if we spent the rest of the night getting drenched; I would get what I came for.

I ripped my hand from his throat to fist my fingers in his hair. Yanking his head back, I roared, "Give me the fucking name!"

His lips curled up in a snarl. "Go to hell. I don't rat on my club."

Anger blurred my vision as I spun him around and shoved him headfirst into the brick wall in front of us. His scream of agony as he smashed into the bricks and crumpled to the ground rushed through my veins like a hit of cocaine. This was the kind of high I craved and I clenched my fists, ready to keep going. My boots thudded on the bitumen as I moved to stand over him. Blood covered his face, pouring from the deep gash I'd inflicted on his forehead.

Wrenching him up by his shirt, I backed him against the wall, slamming his body hard. "By the time I'm finished with you, you'll rat on anyone I fucking want you to."

Drawing long, ragged breaths, he shook his head and opened his mouth to speak, but I cut him off with a punch to his cheek. Blood flew through the air as his head snapped to the side from the impact.

I knew his type, so I knew he honestly thought he wouldn't rat on his club. But it was only a matter of time before he would be in a world of pain and begging me to stop. After that, it wouldn't take long to drag the information I needed from him.

Pulling my knife from its sheath attached to my belt, I dragged the tip of it across the base of his throat, pressing hard enough to draw a few drops of blood. The determination in his eyes wavered. "It's been a long day, asshole, and I don't feel like shooting the shit with you for hours. Let's hurry this the fuck along."

"I'm not a fucking snitch," he snarled.

"Tonight you are. Or else you're dead."

His lips pressed together, a signal that he needed further encouragement. I ran the knife down his chest to his crotch. "But first we'll start with your dick. Ever seen one cut off?"

He flinched and I knew I had him. Even if I had to cut into his skin some more, he'd sing before he'd lose his dick or his life.

When he didn't respond, I took hold of his shirt and ripped it open. Buttons rained down onto the ground before his shirt joined them.

My eyes met his. "Changed my mind. First we'll start with this." I squeezed one of his nipples, and swiftly sliced it off.

"Motherfucker!" His scream of pain echoed around us as his body jerked.

I blocked his attempt to fight back by smashing him against the brick wall again. "Yeah, I am. You ready to lose the other one?" As the words left my mouth, I grabbed his other nipple, ready to make good on my threat. Patience was not one of my virtues.

He gritted his teeth through heavy breaths. "Fuck you!"

Blood streamed down his chest and stomach when I slashed his other nipple off. I hardly processed his string of expletives; I was completely focused on my next move.

Gripping the waistband of his jeans, I tore the button off and zip down. I then yanked them and his briefs down. He stood in front of me, naked with his pants around his ankles, anger and fear rolling off him in equal parts.

And then he really started fighting for his life.

Bring it the fuck on.

His punch clocked my cheek as I straightened from lowering his pants. I'd expected it and retaliated by dropping my head and ramming it into his chest while wrapping my arms around his torso. Using all my strength, I swung him around and barrelled him to the ground. He landed so hard I was concerned I'd knocked him out, which was not my intention. But, his body writhed under mine telling me he was still in this fight.

Legs and arms kicked and clawed at me in his attempt to escape. I had to have fifty pounds on him, though, so he was no match.

Pressing my lower body down on his, restraining his legs, I took hold of his wrists and pinned him to the ground, pushing my chest up off his. "You wanna fight? I can guarantee that you won't win."

"I'll fucking die before I'll tell you anything," he spat.

I stared down at him, wondering just how long I'd have to draw this shit out. As much as I could inflict pain all night long, I was aware the cops had increased their nightly sweeps of the city in the last week, so I needed to move this along.

I moved his hands above his head so I could pin both of them to the ground with one of mine rather than both, and then reached into my pocket for my phone.

Pulling Devil's number up, I dialled him. "Get me that photo of his bitch. And draw some fucking blood for it."

"On it." The line went dead and he left to take care of my request.

I met the asshole's eyes again. "You might be willing to die, but let's see if you're ready to let us chop your old lady up."

His hard eyes held mine, probably calculating his options. They then narrowed and he said, "You're full of shit. You do that or kill me, my club only escalates this further, and *your* club is down so many members you wouldn't be able to win that battle."

His club, the Silver Hell MC, had spent the last three months exacting revenge on ours for King, our president, killing one of their members. King had killed him because he'd hurt King's sister. But their revenge had involved far more than simply going after King or our members. They'd also gone after our families, hurting them any way they could. The truce they'd called for last week wasn't one we were interested in.

I hissed. "What you're failing to realise here is that King declared war today. You thought we'd accept your truce? No fucking way. You've no idea who he's called in, but I'll tell you now that our numbers have been more than replenished. And one other thing... you should have known that no one fucks with King and gets away with it."

I let go of his hands and slid myself down his body so I could grab his dick. I then scored my blade along the length of it. Not deep, just enough for blood to pool.

"Fuck!" he roared, trying unsuccessfully to fight me. "King doesn't give a shit about you. He's built that club full of members who do his dirty work, and it's all for his own gain. When are you going to wake up and see that?"

I cut into his dick again. His body jerked underneath me while he continued to battle me for control. "When are *you* going to wake the fuck up and see that King gets his hands dirtier than any of us could ever dream of? And what he's built is an army of soldiers, willing to fight to the fucking end."

My phone buzzed with a text and I smiled when I saw the photo Devil had sent.

Blood and tits all wrapped up in extreme terror. This guy didn't need to know we'd never make good on our threat to harm his woman. He also didn't need to know the amount of blood in the photo was exaggerated by Devil smearing a small cut worth of blood over her skin.

The end justifies the means.

I leaned forward, pushed my hand against his chest to keep him down and shoved the phone in his face. "You ready to lose that?"

His chest heaved with heavy breath after heavy breath. Finally, he broke. "Room 1242." Regret and fury spewed out of his mouth along with his tip-off.

"What the fuck is that?"

"That's the room he's staying in tonight."

"Where?"

"Here."

Fuck, so close.

I stared at him and saw the moment he realised where this was heading. Sitting calmly atop of him, I moved my knife from his dick, ready to rid his club of another member.

He thrashed under me, trying like hell to buck me off.

It was that fight I loved the most.

That last ditch attempt to cling to life while I took his last breath.

TATUM

“When I Go” by Keaton Simons

Numbers.

My days drifted past in a sea of numbers.

14004.

My bank balance.

6.

The number of meals I should eat a day.

3.

The number of people in my life who looked out for me.

5.

The number of flights I took to visit my mother while she was dying last year.

4.

The number of men I'd slept with over the past twelve months.

90000.

The amount of cash it took to crash my life to the ground.

8.

The number of years I lived a lie.

My days drifted past in a sea of numbers while I numbed my pain by disconnecting from life as much as I could.

As the guy I'd been watching in the casino all night slipped me his room key and said, “Room 1242,” I knew I'd be using that key.

I might have given up on a lot, but I never gave up on revenge.

Especially when it involved the opportunity to seek vengeance against the man I thought murdered my brother.



His greedy eyes trailed a path over my body after he let me into his room. I felt nothing but disgust and had to work hard not to vomit.

You can do this.

For Chris.

I flinched when his palm roughly connected with my breast.

"You came here to fuck me, right?" He watched me, waiting for my answer, his hand squeezing my nipple through my clothes.

Swallowing down my nerves, I nodded.

Fuck, Tatum, get your shit together. It's not like you don't deal with these kinds of men every damn day.

He kept his hand on my breast while his other one gripped my hip and pulled me hard against his body.

Against his erection.

He ground his dick against me as his gaze dropped to my neck.

"Those are some tattoos you're rocking. Who's your guy?"

No way was I giving him my girl's name.

"Dane Shepherd," I lied.

His brows pulled together. "Haven't heard of him."

I reached my hand around his neck. "Are we gonna fuck or are we gonna stand here and talk shit all night?"

Heat flashed in his eyes and his fingers dug into my waist.

"You've got a fucking mouth on you, bitch. How about you get on your knees and show me what it's capable of."

No way was my mouth going anywhere his nasty dick. "I've got a better idea. How about I give you a show you'll never forget? And *then* I'll suck your dick."

"I don't need a show. I just need you to blow me and then get your tits out before I fuck you."

I tilted my head and hit him with a sexy smile. "Everyone needs a Billy-Jones-worthy show."

He whistled low and his expression quickly turned from disinterested to intrigued. "You're one of Billy's girls?"

I nodded. "I do things for Billy that none of his other girls do." Not a lie. Just a little creative storytelling.

He took a step back, dropping his eyes to my body. "Okay, but you better make this worth my while. I've got shit to do after I get my dick wet."

It was time to give the performance of my life.

It was time to dance with the devil himself.

I placed my palm against his chest and nudged him backwards. "Sit on the edge of the bed."

His brow raised at my order, but he did as I said. Once he settled there, I raised my arms over my head and linked my fingers before slowly gyrating my hips. I'd worn a tight black strapless dress that hit me midthigh with the express purpose of distracting him. It appeared to be working. His eyes were all over me; he didn't seem to know where to look first.

"Fuck, I need to see those tits," he muttered as he unzipped his pants to free his cock. Pumping himself, he groaned. "Show me."

I shook my head and continued working my hips while I rotated on the spot so he could catch a glimpse of my ass as well. "All in good time. We don't give up the goods that fast. If you know *Billy's*, you know that."

"Bitch, I give no fucks what you usually do, I want those tits out and in my fucking mouth right now."

I stared at him, weighing up my options. I knew he was a man without a conscience, who would kill you just as soon as he'd show you an ounce of compassion, so I had to tread carefully. But I'd watched him for long enough to also know he had a thing for blondes and tits. I just had to play my cards right.

"I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

That was clearly not something he'd expected. The flash of confusion in his eyes passed quickly though. "What the fuck?"

I cupped my breasts. "I have a thing for chests, so these bad boys come out when your shirt comes off."

His shirt hit the floor a moment later and he stared at me expectantly.

My gaze fixed on the tattoo on his chest. The proof I needed to know he was the man I believed him to be.

"Tits. Out," he roared, startling me.

I shrunk a little at his angry tone, but recovered fast. Pulling my dress down, I exposed my naked breasts.

He sucked in a breath. "Fucking perfect."

I ran my hands over my breasts as I continued to dance for him. Every second sickened me. When I finished with him, I would spend hours washing his grime off me.

The end justifies the means, Tatum.

It did.

Every single minute of every single day of the last nine months had been spent working towards that end. I wouldn't back the fuck down after all that. And I certainly wouldn't lose my chance to settle the score.

He slapped my hands out of the way and yanked me to him. His movements caught me off guard, and before I knew it, he had his hands on my ass and his mouth all over my breasts.

Fuck.

I froze.

Our eyes locked and he must have seen something there that made him question this. Gripping my hair, he pulled my head back. "I wanna know who the fuck you are. But first, I want my dick in that ass of yours."

Ice slid through my veins at the cold emptiness laced through his words. My mind raced with possible scenarios of how I would get myself out of the shit I was in. Before I managed to settle on a plan, he stood, picked me up and threw me on the bed face first.

I scrambled to flip myself onto my back, but he was faster than I gave him credit for. His strong arm scooped me around the waist while he reached under my dress to rip my panties off.

The sound of them tearing filled my ears, right before the sound of his groan. "Fuck, this ass is something else." He rubbed my ass cheeks before slipping his hand between my legs to reach for my pussy. "I'm fucking you everywhere tonight so get ready, because this isn't gonna be pretty for you. You're dry as a fucking desert."

I squeezed my eyes shut while he shoved his finger in my pussy. My body shook with dread, but no fucking way was I going down without a fight. I'd anticipated this could get messy, and I'd come prepared.

Waiting for that moment where his attention would be on himself for at least a split second, I focused on getting my breathing under control.

You can do this.

You can't let him get away with the shit he's done.

He finished fingering me, and his hold around my waist loosened. I knew that was my moment, so as fast as I could, I thrust my body forward, away from him. As soon as I was out of his hold, I flipped over and reached for the knife I'd secured around my ankle

in my boots. Gripping it hard, I lunged at him, aiming the knife at his chest.

I almost succeeded.

Again, he was too fast, his reflexes finely honed for battle. He grasped my wrist and twisted my arm. "Fucking bitch," he snarled as he forced the knife from my hand. "You'll pay for this."

My heart crashed into my chest. "I've already paid for it, asshole. There's nothing more you can do to me that will make it any worse."

His fist smashed into my cheek, delivering pain that slowed me down. I ended up almost falling off the bed. My head and upper body dangled off the side while the rest of my body lay sprawled sideways across the mattress. I tried like hell to force myself onto the floor; however, he had other ideas.

The bed dipped as he planted himself either side of me. A second later, he grabbed a handful of my hair and wrenched my head back, twisting it to the side so he could see my cheek. His heavy body covered mine, almost suffocating me, and he punched me hard in the face again. So hard I saw black.

I gasped for air as the pain consumed me.

I'm going to die.

I'm going to die at the hands of a filthy biker.

It was a good day to die.

As much as I'd gone there to kill him, I'd always known there was a good chance he'd kill me instead.

I was okay with that.

Because the truth was, I'd died nine months ago.

The day he'd taken the one person I cared about the most in the world was the day I gave up wanting to live.

And now he would take my life, too.

NITRO

“Hell’s Bells” by AC/DC

The smell of sex hit my nostrils.

And blood.

I smelt it, too.

Then a voice came screeching at me. “Huge fucking mistake!”
And a fist flew at my face.

I presumed he referred to the fact I’d barged into his hotel room and interrupted the filthy shit going on. I hadn’t had a good chance to see what he was doing, but I’d taken in a blonde lying facedown across the bed. She didn’t look conscious so I figured he’d been fucking her without her knowledge.

Not something I ever fucking condoned.

He’d pay for that, too.

Adrenaline spiked through me as every muscle prepared for battle. I grabbed his fist, clamping my fingers tightly around his wrist. With great force, I pulled him towards me with one hand while I pointed my gun in the direction of his dick.

It was a beautiful and almost-too-easy meeting of karma and victory when I pulled the trigger and shot his dick to shit.

Truth be told, the blonde had helped me. She’d provided the distraction I needed to take him by surprise. I’d moved fast once I got through the door, because I’d expected him to react swiftly. He hadn’t, and so there we were—him on his knees clutching where his cock used to hang, and me staring down at him.

“Doesn’t look like a mistake to me,” I muttered. Crouching, I held the gun to his head. “What I’m trying to figure out now is whether to make this quick so I can get out of here, or whether to de-

liver a slow death that would give me the kind of satisfaction I'm craving right about now."

His empty eyes stared at me. He made no move to fight me. Simply knelt there in his agony, drawing ragged breaths and grunting through the pain.

When he said nothing, I continued, "I think I'll do it fast. But only because I'm more than ready to feed the news of your death to Dragon." *Silver Hell's president.*

His lips curled. "Kill me, motherfucker. Dragon's got more men ready to take my place."

"Not once we're done with him tonight. When we refuse a truce, we don't just sit back and wait for your next move." Dragon would wish he'd never started this with us by morning.

My phone rang. I stood to answer the call and the asshole decided to give his life one last shot by punching my crotch.

"What?" I barked into the phone as I fired the gun, ignoring the pain radiating from my balls.

"You done?" King demanded. "We need you back here."

I looked down at the lifeless body on the floor. "It's done. I'm on my way now."

He terminated the call without another word and I shoved the phone in my back pocket. Glancing at the blonde on the bed, I wavered between the decision to check her pulse or get the fuck out of there. In the end, it was the moan she expelled that drove me towards her.

Making my way to the side of the bed where her head hung, I swung her body so she lay the length of the bed with her head on the pillow. She was regaining consciousness, and as I moved her, she cried out in agony. The noise splintered through the room, shards of her torment fracturing the stillness around us.

He'd done a fucking number on her. Blood messed up her face and stuck in her long hair. It was the swelling, though, that gave me pause. She'd be black and blue from this beating.

As my gaze moved from her face down her body, I realised this was the blonde I'd had an altercation with earlier. Her face was unrecognisable, but the tattoos covering her neck clearly identified her. I'd recognise them anywhere. They painted her neck, flowed down to her breasts and extended out to her shoulders to meet the tattoos

on both arms. They were the kind of tattoos I'd like to study. Whoever did them was clearly talented and believed in quality.

She swallowed and tried to move. The pain appeared excruciating, because her face contorted and she cried out again. She squinted at me through her swollen eyes. "Fuck," she rasped. Her breathing picked up and she swallowed madly, probably trying to lubricate her dry throat.

When her body jerked on the bed, I figured she was attempting to leave, but there was no way she'd be walking out of there anytime soon.

"Where's—" she started, but I cut her off.

"He's dead."

My phone rang again.

Renee.

I answered it. "I'm in the middle of something. Can this wait?"

The blonde cried out again as she sat up.

"Who's that?" Renee asked.

I watched the blonde wiggle her way to the edge of the bed, wincing with each movement. "No one. I'll call you back in a minute."

"She sounds like she's in pain."

Renee had a fucking sixth sense. "She is."

"You don't sound like you care."

"That's because I don't."

Silence for a beat. "I hate that, Nitro. You should care. And you should help her."

I raked my fingers through my hair. "I'm hanging up now, Renee."

"Call me back."

Shoving my phone back in my pocket, I eyed the blonde. Her tits spilled out of the dress that sat scrunched around her middle. She wore no panties either; her bare pussy was on full display. Blood had dried on her neck and chest. That was in addition to the blood on her face and in her hair.

I'd bet my last dollar she had broken ribs. I'd also bet he'd raped her. I'd noticed cum on her ass and on the back of her dress when I moved her body. She was a fucking mess and I doubted she'd be able to leave without assistance, which presented me with a dilem-

ma. If I left her there, the hotel staff would find her with a dead body. No way was I leaving a witness at the scene of my crime.

I had two options: kill her or take her with me.

By far, the easiest option was to kill her. It was the choice I was leaning towards. The last thing the club needed was to deal with this.

As I made the choice I had to make, she craned her neck so she could look at the dead body of the man who'd assaulted her. She then looked back at me and said, "Thank you." Her voice was scratchy and she had trouble getting the words out, but her gratitude rang out clear as day.

I stilled.

People didn't thank me for shit.

Well, except for Renee.

"Who was he to you?" I asked.

She exhaled a long breath. "He murdered my brother."

My fingers squeezed the gun in my hand.

Itching to shoot.

Her eyes dropped to the gun. "Are you gonna hurry this up?"

You should care.

You should help her.

Fucking Renee.

My chest tightened.

"Fuck," I muttered as I holstered my gun. "Can you stand?"

"Why?"

"Because you're coming with me."

She stared at me, wasting my time. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Yeah, you are. Now stand the fuck up." When she didn't do as I said, I barked, "Stand up or else I'm gonna pull you up and that shit's gonna hurt way worse than if you do it yourself."

Eyes that bled hate stared up at me. "Fuck you." She may have been sitting on that bed in a world of pain, but her body straightened with determination. "Just kill me."

I stepped forward and placed my hands under her arms. Keeping hold of her resentful gaze, I pulled her up. She managed to stand and I was surprised when not one sound of agony came from her.

"It's not your night to die. Fix your dress," I ordered.

She glared at me, but did what I said. I had a feeling that if she wasn't battered, she'd be fighting me every step of the way. Either that, or taking the gun off me and blowing her own brains out.

After she repositioned the dress, I shrugged my leather jacket off and said, "Put your arms out. You'll need to wear this out of here to cover as much of you as we can. I don't need security looking at us any more than they already will."

Once we had the jacket on, I guided her into the bathroom and cleaned her face and hair up as best I could. I also cleaned the cum off her dress. She gritted her teeth through the pain, again not uttering a sound through the process.

"Right, I'm going to put my arm around you and you're not going to pull out of my hold. Keep your head down and don't make eye contact with anyone. Your face is a fucking mess; I don't need anyone getting a look at that."

She didn't respond, just continued watching me like she wanted to jam a sharp object in my chest.

I gripped her bicep, squeezing just hard enough to draw a cry of pain. "You make a fucking scene and that beating he gave you will seem like a walk in the park. You got that?"

Drawing herself close to me, she spewed her anger in a violent surge of words. "What I've got is that you're no better than he was. How men like you sleep at night eludes me. Forcing women to do shit they don't want to is one of the lowest acts a man can do."

My whole body tensed and my nostrils flared as I took a deep breath. "Don't fucking say that shit to me again. You know jack about me."

With that, I yanked her out of the bathroom, and flung the hotel door open. Shoving her into the hallway, I draped my arm around her shoulders and led her to the elevator.

Every sense alert, I was ready to take on anyone who got in our way. I'd shoot my way out of this fucking casino if I had to.

TATUM

“Ghost” by Massive

There were moments in your life that brought you to your knees. Moments that punched the absolute fuck out of you.

I was having one of those moments.

I thought life had already handed me my heart on a platter. Bleeding and bruised. Turned out life wasn't done with me yet. Bleeding and bruised wasn't enough.

“Stop dragging your feet,” the big guy muttered as he dragged me through the foyer of the casino. His arm tightened around my shoulders as he picked up his pace. The front door was in view and I practically smelt his desire to make it through that door.

I could hardly match his pace a moment ago; I wasn't sure how he expected me to match his new speed. My whole body ached, and I was convinced my ribs were broken. The pain was excruciating and breathing only made it worse. On top of the pain in my body, my head throbbed, slowing me down further. I didn't want to walk and I sure as hell didn't want to think, but this asshole was giving me no choice. If I wanted to make it through the night, I'd have to do both.

I attempted to walk faster, but my efforts only caused me to stumble. As I went down, his strong arms clutched me, holding me up.

The new surge of pain through my body killed like a motherfucker and I couldn't hold my agony in. I cried out, stifling it as much as I could, but the sound was enough to draw the attention of casino security.

Suspicious eyes narrowed on me before swiftly looking at the big guy. Clearly the security guard didn't like what he saw. He stopped

us as we tried to exit the building.

"Ma'am, are you okay?"

The arm around me gripped my shoulder harder and I contained my wince. Nodding, I said, "Yes."

The guard stared at my face before glancing at my body. "No, I don't think you are. Is this man hurting you?"

My life flashed before my eyes for the second time that day. Was I really ready to die? Because that would surely happen if I didn't do as the big guy had ordered. I knew that for a fact. He'd go down in a blaze of glory before he'd concede defeat, and I'd get caught in the crossfire.

So, I pushed every thought out of my mind and focused completely on convincing the guard he was wrong. Pulling my shoulders back, I turned my body towards the big guy's and wrapped my arms around his waist. Looking at the guard, I said, "He's my boyfriend; there's no way he'd ever hurt me. The bruises you see on me are from another asshole who assaulted me earlier tonight if you must know. Now, if you'd please let us past, I'd like to go home and forget this day ever happened." The body my arms were wrapped around stiffened.

The guard stared at me. Shocked. "Umm...." He cleared his throat, not seeming to know what to say.

The big guy took his opportunity. "Thanks for your concern, man, but I've got this. I just wanna get her home, okay?" He may have tacked a question on the end of that statement, but his tone made his stance clear—he wasn't actually asking for permission.

The guard nodded as he took a step back. "Sure."

"Thank you," I murmured as I was whisked past him, although I wasn't sure what I was thanking him for. For all I knew, I may have just made one of the worst decisions of my life.



The ride on his bike was unbearable. Trying to cling to someone on the back of a moving bike while every muscle and bone ached was like playing Russian roulette. There were moments my mind drifted to thoughts of letting go. I imagined flying off the bike, falling to my death.

Finally.

No more pain.

No more heartache.

And then I imagined not dying. It'd be just my luck to survive that and end up in a wheelchair. My fighting instincts kicked in at that thought. I'd rather take my chances with the biker and try to find my way out of this mess than give up without a fight.

We rode for what felt like forever. I breathed a sigh of relief when he slowed the bike and pulled into a back street. However, when I realised he'd taken me to his clubhouse, apprehension knotted in my stomach.

Time to suit up, Tatum.

The property appeared to be under heavy guard. A high fence surrounded it, with a gate manned by two men. They stopped us and after a few words with the biker, let us through. After that, two more men stopped us halfway down the long driveway before allowing us to pass. I wondered if this was normal procedure and figured it well could be. From everything I knew of the Sydney underbelly, you couldn't trust many in this city.

He parked the bike, killed the engine and ordered me off. "Keep your mouth shut in here unless you're spoken to."

The lighting that illuminated the outside of the clubhouse cast a bright glow on him, revealing his hard, cold eyes to me. I'd avoided taking a good look at him in the hotel room after the assault, but in that light, I saw him vividly. His height and muscular build was almost intimidating as he towered over me. I was only five three, where he had to be over six feet by a few inches. It took a lot to intimidate me, though, and while he came close, perhaps the fact he didn't kill me made the difference. He'd hesitated for some reason, which told me he had some humanity left inside.

I nodded at what he said. While I wanted to tell him where to go, I had to be smarter. I had to shut up, stay calm and dig deep to silence my natural inclination to resist. Not to mention, I needed to suppress the agony screaming through my body until I was alone and could deal with it.

He walked me inside and I gave all my attention to cataloguing the building, taking note of doors, windows and possible escape routes. I'd expected more bikers to be inside, but I only saw five.

That seemed strange for a Friday night. One would have thought the clubhouse bar would be hopping over the weekend.

The biker's warm breath on my cheek startled me as he dragged me down a hallway. "If you think there's a way out of here, think again, Vegas."

I ignored him, unwilling to accept defeat. I also ignored the name he gave me. It was better he called me that than ask me what my name was.

We reached the room at the end of the hallway and he shoved me through the doorway after waiting a moment for someone inside to grant access.

Darkness filled the room, the only light coming from a lamp in the corner. Squinting my eyes, I made out a large wooden desk with a computer and paperwork on it, a filing cabinet, a worn couch along one wall and a few seats scattered around the desk.

I almost jumped out of my skin when a deep voice barked, "Who the fuck is she, Nitro?"

Nitro.

"She's a witness." He let me go and I placed my hand over my arm where he'd held me. As if I could soothe the pain.

A man emerged from the shadows and my breathing faltered as he came into sight. It could have been the jagged scar that ran down one side of his face, or his massive build, or the way his body language told me to be wary that did it, but it wasn't.

It was his eyes.

While Nitro's eyes were cold and hard, this man's glittered with crazy. I'd lived with crazy most of my life. And I knew to watch it with vigilance and always expect the unexpected.

He moved so he occupied the space directly in front of me. Staring down at me, he said, "She's a complication we don't need. Why is she here?" His nostrils flared before he turned to face Nitro. "Why the fuck is she still breathing?"

Every muscle in Nitro's body appeared taut as he watched the other man. "She wanted him dead as much as we did, King."

"No one wanted him dead as much as we did."

"Trust me, she did."

They stared at each other, both seemingly unwilling to bend. "You need to deal with her before I do," King said. When he said *deal with her*, I was under no illusion as to what he meant. I filed through

my options, and was about to interrupt their conversation when Nitro spoke again.

"He raped her."

King's body tensed and his gaze flicked to me so he could scrutinize my appearance. As his eyes held mine, he said, "She's a liability." Then, looking back at Nitro, he said, "One you need to take care of."

I swallowed hard. King's order sent a chill through me. I knew men like him and when they decided something, they didn't back down. If I had any chance of surviving, I needed to find a way to get through to him. "I'm not a liability," I said, holding my head high and my body tall.

King's eyes snapped back to mine. "I don't give a fuck what you think. To my club, you are a fucking liability."

Taking a moment to get my breathing under control, I reminded myself it was the Storm MC I was dealing with. Nitro hadn't been wearing his colours so I hadn't known earlier, but the clubhouse announced this fact. These bikers weren't known for their compassion or their leniency, but maybe I had a shot in hell. I would have died at that asshole's hands earlier, but Nitro saved me. Then he gave me a second chance when he brought me here rather than shooting me. Maybe luck would come in threes.

Suit up, Tatum.

Suit the fuck up.

I stepped forward.

Closer to him.

"I work for Billy Jones. He would not want me dead."

King stilled. "You're one of his girls?"

"Yes." *Kind of.*

His eyes narrowed at me. "How long have you worked for him?"

"Six years."

That number was a winner for me. Everyone in Sydney knew that if a girl worked for Billy for longer than a year she was gold. He went through his girls like he went through his women. *Fast.*

"Fuck," Nitro muttered.

It was also common knowledge that Billy would kill for his golden girls.

King glared at me like he wanted to wrap his hands around my throat and squeeze the life out of me. "What's your name?"

My name was the last thing I wanted to give him, but I'd have to if I had any hope of escaping them. "Tatum Lee."

He turned away from me. "I don't have time to deal with this at the moment, Nitro. Get her out of here and watch her until I can verify this."

With that, King stalked out of the office, leaving Nitro and me alone. Raking his fingers through his hair, he said, "I see you changed your mind about living."

"I decided I didn't want to die at the hands of a filthy biker."

He scowled. "But you'd be happy to go back to Billy fucking Jones?"

I returned his scowl. "He treats me better than you have."

Tension punched through the air between us and if I thought I'd seen Nitro angry before, something I said made his mood far worse. Dipping his face to mine, he snarled, "Get your ass out that door and to my bike. And don't say another fucking word about Billy Jones to me."

"It would be my absolute pleasure to not say another fucking word to you, full stop," I snapped, before spinning on my heel and marching out of the clubhouse.

I decided then that I could deal with a lot of things, but bikers weren't one of them.

NITRO

“Pretty Vegas” by INXS

Tatum Lee was a pain in my ass.

We’d arrived at my house an hour earlier and after she had a shower, I’d given her a shirt to wear and set her up in my bedroom because it was the only room with a bed. If she’d been anyone but a woman who meant something to Billy Jones, I’d have tied her to a fucking chair and left her alone. As much as I loathed Billy, he was one of Storm’s loyal allies and since we’d declared war on Silver Hell, we needed to keep every ally on side. Pissing him off was not a good move.

“You’re not sleeping next to me in this bed,” she said as I entered the room and lifted my shirt over my head.

“I’m not sleeping, Vegas. And I’m doing that in the bed next to you.”

Raising her handcuffed hands in the air and jerking her chin at her feet that I’d tied together, she said, “You’ve detained me. I can’t go anywhere. I hardly think you need to be so damn close to me.”

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I reached to remove my boots. “You and I would get along a hell of a lot better if you stopped thinking.”

She muttered something under her breath that I didn’t catch. Not that I cared to hear it. The less talking we did, the better.

Once my boots were off, I settled on the bed, my back to the bed-head, legs crossed at the ankles. Eyeing her, I ran my gaze over her body. Ignoring the bruises and swelling, I remembered how she’d looked when we first met on the casino floor. Besides the fact she had curves in all the right places, muscles that only accentuated

those curves, long blonde hair that was exactly my type, and a beautiful face a man would never forget, Tatum Lee had skin that was inked to perfection. She had quotes tattooed on her legs that I wondered about. What had she been through in her life to permanently ink them into her skin?

“What?” she demanded.

I met her gaze and we watched each other cautiously for a few moments. Getting into a conversation may not have been on my list of priorities, but she seemed to be dragging me there.

“I’m wondering what the hell possessed you to put yourself in that situation tonight? Because I’m guessing that you being in that hotel room wasn’t random. Not if you knew that guy murdered your brother.”

Her mouth curled up in anger. “And I’m guessing that you’d do the same thing if someone murdered your family.”

“Yeah, but I’m capable of not getting myself raped or killed.”

“He beat me, and he got his dick out, but he didn’t fuck me with it.”

I leaned in close to her. “He might not have, but he sure as fuck would have if I hadn’t shown up. And a word of warning—you may not play with those kinds of men often, Vegas, but they don’t hesitate to kill you if you piss them off.”

She pushed her face near mine. “Why didn’t *you* kill me? And why the hell do you keep calling me Vegas?”

Fuck, her fight caused my dick to harden. Waiting with a hard-on while King decided what we were doing with her was the last fucking thing I needed, so I moved off the bed. “Go to sleep,” I ordered as I left the bedroom.

After I grabbed a beer out of the fridge I headed to the couch in the lounge room. As far away from Tatum Lee as I could manage. The desire to fuck her wasn’t one I needed to fuel by being near her. She’d complicated shit enough already.



“Nitro!”

I jerked awake at the sound of Renee’s voice to find her standing in front of me, a worried look on her face. Sitting forward, I rubbed

my eyes. "What time is it?"

"You never called me back."

I ignored the accusation in her voice. Pushing off the couch, I said, "What's the time, Renee?" The dark night clung to the windows still. I guessed it to be about three or four in the morning.

"It's just after five. Mum's not good. I needed you and you weren't there for me." Her accusatory tone disappeared and all that remained was her broken spirit.

Fuck.

"What happened?"

"Nothing happened. But she's not coping, and she's getting worse." She paused for a moment, her face crumpling before the tears fell. "I don't know what to do anymore."

I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her close while she sobbed. Forcing down the fury that tried to punch its way out of me, I said, "You're not alone, kiddo. I had some shit to do last night, but I'm here for you." Those motherfuckers would pay for what they'd done to my family.

She clung to me for a while before letting me go and saying, "You need to make her see that psych again. She did better when she saw him."

I raked my fingers through my hair. Easier said than done. "Yeah, she did."

"I don't care if you have to freaking kidnap her to get her there, just make that shit happen. Okay?"

I raised my brows. "Condoning crimes now, are we?" Renee should have been born into a family of lawyers or fucking cops with the beliefs she held about crime.

She ignored my question. It was a long-running difference of opinion between us that we'd probably never resolve. "She's your sister. You need to fix her, because I've tried and I failed."

"Jesus, Renee, you're seventeen and she's your mother. It's not your job to fix her and you sure as fuck haven't failed her."

More tears slid down her face as she stood staring at me, pleading with her eyes for me to make this all better. If only life were that fucking simple. I didn't want to break her even more than she already was, though, so I pulled her close again and said, "I'm going to sort this out, kiddo. You just need to focus on school and your shit, and let me get your mother better."

She hugged me like she never wanted to let go, but Tatum chose that moment to interrupt us. "Nitro! I need to use the bathroom."

Renee's arms dropped from around me as she took a step back. Frowning, she said, "Who is that?"

"A friend."

Spinning around, she headed towards my bedroom. "A friend who can't walk to the bathroom?" Her intelligence and instincts were out of this world, and she liked to challenge me.

"Renee," I called out. "Stop walking."

She didn't.

"Renee!" I barked.

My niece was as fucking stubborn as I was. She took after me more than her mother, probably because I'd practically raised her. At times like this, that came back to bite me in the ass.

Spinning back around, she stalked my way. "Is that the woman from earlier who was in pain? The one you didn't care about?" she demanded. "What's going on here?"

I grabbed her hand. "You need to go home. This doesn't concern you and I don't want you tied up in it."

"Nitro!" Tatum yelled out again.

Ignoring Tatum again, I continued to hold Renee in place. "Go home. I'll come by later and see Lynny."

She huffed out a long breath. "Fine, but only because I really don't want to know what's going on. Just promise me you won't hurt her."

I took a moment to answer her. Finally, nodding, I agreed. "I won't."

I fucking hoped I could keep that promise. There weren't many people I cared enough about to want to honour my agreements with anymore. Renee was one of those people. Hell, she was the one at the top of the list.

TATUM

“Beaten Dog” by Massive

Every muscle in my body ached. That filthy biker had given me the beating of my life last night. I’d copped bruises at the hands of men before, but not like that.

Easing myself to a sitting position, I squinted when the sunlight streaming through the window hit my eyes. Rain had fallen in Sydney all week and the news had forecast more, so the sun surprised me.

Welcome to your bright, shiny future.

“Fuck!” I screamed out as I wiggled some more to straighten. The pain that shot through my entire body was enough to knock the wind out of me, but I wouldn’t let it. My momentary lapse last night when I’d practically begged Nitro to kill me would never happen again. I refused to allow another human to push me to that edge once more.

I swung my legs off the bed so I was sitting on the edge. Nitro had tied my ankles together with rope, but I was going to attempt to shuffle out of the room. I’d been lying awake for what had to be at least an hour and I hadn’t heard him in that time. He also hadn’t come when I just screamed out. Maybe he was asleep. Or, while I highly doubted it, perhaps he had left the house. Either way, I had to take any opportunity to escape that presented itself.

When I stood a moment later, I held my breath as another round of agony took hold. Squeezing my eyes shut, I counted to ten and then back to zero, centring myself.

They will not break you.

You will get through this.

"You going somewhere?" Nitro's voice boomed from the doorway, jolting me.

My eyes flicked open. "Yes, out of this damn room. It'd make my day if you untied my feet."

Amusement crossed his face momentarily. Then the hard set of his jaw that I knew so well, even after only meeting him the night before, settled back in place. "It'd make my fucking week if you did as I said and stayed put on the bed."

"I wasn't put on this earth to make your week."

He crossed his arms over his chest, drawing my attention to his body. That was a bad move. The man had everything going for him physically that would usually turn me on. Muscles that declared strength, and tattoos all over that told a story were my downfall when it came to men, and Nitro had plenty of all those. He also had thick dark hair and a beard, two more preferences of mine.

Concentrate, Tatum.

You're his fucking prisoner for God's sake.

"That mouth get you into trouble a lot, Vegas?"

"It keeps the people out of my life who shouldn't be in it."

He nodded slowly, arms still crossed. "Yeah, I imagine it does." Dropping his arms, he strode to me, his face darkening. "King's just arrived and I suggest you keep it shut around him. He doesn't have as much tolerance as I do."

I squared my shoulders and started to speak, but King appeared in the doorway, interrupting us.

His eyes came straight to me. "Seems you were telling the truth, Tatum. Billy is desperate to get you back."

"Thank fuck," I muttered, earning a scowl off Nitro.

I returned his scowl before shifting my attention back to King. Holding up my hands that were still handcuffed, I said, "Awesome. You can remove these now."

"Not until you tell me what you saw in that hotel last night," King said as he moved towards me.

Staring at him, I mentally acknowledged the crazy glint still in his eyes. Knowing what he was after, I said, "Nothing. I wasn't even in that room."

"Where were you?"

"At the blackjack table all night."

"Did you win?"

"Five hundred bucks."

"Who did you leave with?"

"No one."

Nitro moved out of the way, allowing King to invade my personal space. He didn't say anything for a few moments, but his body language and eyes were a menacing presence. I knew what he was doing; it wasn't like I'd never dealt with a man like King before. Finally, he said, "Good."

"Can I go now?"

Something caused him to snap. His hand wrapped around my throat and he squeezed hard until I almost choked. His fingers dug in, blocking my ability to breathe and causing me pain. When he had me gasping for air, he leaned close and hissed, "I'm not a fan of your smartass mouth, Tatum. Nitro's gonna take you home and you're gonna show him around your house so he knows every inch of it. By the time he leaves, he'll know every point of entry. And if you so much as look at me the wrong fucking way, I'll send him over to do what I wanted to do in the first place." He applied a little more pressure, until just as I thought I would pass out, he let go. "Do we have an understanding?"

I gasped for air, sucking in huge wheezing breaths while staring at King with hate. When my breathing finally stabilised, I snarled, "We have an understanding, but you do that shit to me again and you won't just have Billy to deal with. You think I'm a fucking stripper? I'm not." I held up my hands. "Now fucking undo these and take me home."

Fucking bikers.

King's body tensed and he clenched his fists by his side. He wouldn't hit me, though. Billy would have been out of his mind looking for me last night; he would have made it crystal clear to King to let me go. And King had to know that Billy didn't like it when those close to him were hurt. Everyone in Sydney knew that.

"Get her out of my sight, Nitro," he spat before stalking out of the room.

I watched him leave, more than happy to see the back of him. When I turned to face Nitro again, I found him watching me with an expression I couldn't put my finger on.

"What?" I snapped.

Whatever he'd been thinking was replaced with his standard anger at me. Reaching for my hands, he ignored my question and muttered, "Thank fuck this is over."

Fuck yes.

I felt exactly the same.



Walking into my kitchen, I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. It was good to be home, but most of the tension in my body remained. Until Nitro left it wouldn't shift.

His hand curved over my shoulder causing my survival instincts to ratchet up another notch. "Time to show me around, Vegas."

I turned, shrugging out of his grip even though the movement killed like a bitch, and glared at him. "Don't touch me again." Jerking my chin, I added, "Show yourself around. I have calls to make."

Without waiting for his reply, I grabbed my phone out of my bag. Swiping to see how many calls I'd missed, I squinted through swollen eyes and discovered sixteen missed calls from Billy. "Fuck," I muttered. He really was desperate to get me back.

Nitro watched me for a few moments. He didn't utter another word and he didn't move, but still he managed to knot me with more unease. I had no idea what he was thinking or what he was likely to do. I guessed that was exactly how he liked things to be. It was something I understood, because it was how I operated in my life, too. Being an open book hadn't worked out for me. All it had left me with was betrayal, divorce and no fucking job, so I kept a tight lid on shit these days.

When he finally left the kitchen, I placed my hands on the counter and spent a few minutes taking some deep breaths. God knew, I needed them, even if each one was pure torture. In the space of twelve hours, my life had taken another detour, not one I relished. Having the President of the fucking Storm MC threaten me wasn't something to take lightly. As much as I had Billy and some others in my corner, this town was renowned for turning people against each other.

Maybe it was time to get out. Besides my cousin, Monroe, I didn't have anyone left who I cared for enough to stick around. Leaving

this city was something I'd thought a lot about since Randall had screwed me over, and now that Chris's death had been avenged, maybe it was finally time to disappear.

"Three bedrooms, one bathroom, one toilet, a kitchen, lounge room, dining room, and laundry all with bars on every window," Nitro said, entering the kitchen again. "Nine rooms locked up tight, along with security cameras on each entry and throughout the house, triple deadlocks on the front and back doors, Crimsafe doors and windows, a gun, and two knives stashed in the house... you don't fuck around with security, do you?"

I met his gaze, determined not to flinch away from him again. "There're some assholes in this town, so no, I don't fuck around with it."

He moved closer to me, only stopping when our bodies almost touched. "Getting in your home might prove harder than usual for me, but take heed of King's threat. He knows where you live and he knows who you work for." He dipped his face to mine. "We can find you if we want to. Keep your mouth shut and don't ever mention the Storm MC, and shit will be good between us."

His eyes bored into mine while his order settled between us.

Placing my hand on his chest, I pushed him away. "If I never see or hear about you or your club again, it'll make me the happiest woman on this planet."

His nostrils flared and he made a growling noise deep in his chest. "We have a deal then." With that, he swept one last menacing glance over me before turning and exiting my kitchen.

The sound of the front door closing a moment later, and his bike roaring to life kicked me into gear. Ten minutes later, I had every door and window locked tight. Watching from the front window in my lounge room, I scanned the street making sure no one was out there. You could never be too careful. Not in the line of work I was in.

Once I was sure of my safety, I collapsed onto the couch. My heart beat faster as I remembered the events of the previous night.

The biker.

His hands on me.

His fingers inside me.

The beating he gave me while he got off.

His cum on my ass.

Disgust prickled my skin while the memories came at me relentlessly. I wrapped my arms around my body, needing to feel like I was capable of consoling myself. There was no one else there to hug me; I had to look after myself.

I'd been stupid to go to that hotel room. I knew that, but nothing would have kept me from it. That man murdered my brother. My twin. The one person who loved me to the moon and back, no questions asked.

I shivered as the cold winter air blanketed me. Trying to block the memories, I closed my eyes.

I was so tired.

And my body hurt like a bitch.

I had to be strong; I always was. But in that moment, I clung to the tiny amount of strength I had left. It would be so easy to surrender to the pain, the grief and the exhaustion.

Tears wet my cheeks and for once, I allowed them to.

I didn't hold them back and I didn't deny the sadness swallowing me.

But I only gave myself that moment to feel it. And once I'd let the memories, thoughts and emotions roll through me, I wiped those tears away and sat up straight. Dwelling in the shit of life wasn't productive. Either you checked out or you checked in, and I chose the latter. Which meant I had places to be and people to see.

This life isn't for the weak, Tatum.

You made your bed and now you need to lie in it.

Time to get to work.

NITRO

“Bring Down The City” by Massive

“You made it clear to her not to open her mouth?” King asked when I arrived at the clubhouse later that morning. I’d found him at the bar and had pulled up a seat next to him to discuss Tatum.

“Yeah. She’s not gonna talk, King.” I didn’t know what Tatum was messed up with, but I’d wager a bet she was almost as deep in shit as we were. Working for Billy guaranteed it. She’d be dead the minute she so much as parted her lips, and it wouldn’t be us pulling the trigger.

He nodded as he swept his gaze around the clubhouse bar. The boys had started arriving for Church, and I knew King was keeping track of everyone because he made a point to always know who was in the clubhouse at all times. “Lotta shit going down, so I need you to stay on top of her. First sign of trouble, you deal with it.” Turning his attention back to me, he said, “I just got word that Silver Hell paid a visit to Eric Bones early this morning.”

“And?” We’d expected that.

“They trashed one of his clubs and roughed him and some of his girls up. I need you and Devil to check in on him after Church, and make sure he’s still on board. Max and Calvin have signalled their support, and Kick’s checking in with Stu. Bones, though, is the one I’m unsure of.”

“Will do.” We had some of the most powerful men in Sydney behind us and I’d make sure Bones didn’t forget where his support was best put.

King’s attention shifted to Brittany behind the bar. She placed two drinks in front of us. “Rum is the best way to start a day, don’t

you think?"

King didn't hesitate. He drained his glass in two gulps. "Today, it's the only way." He nodded at mine. "Drink up, brother, we've got Church to get through."

I watched as he left, and then threw back some rum. Gritting my teeth as it went down, I eyed Brittany. She watched me with a concerned look. "What?"

"King's on edge. I've never seen him like that before," she said.

I drank the rest of the rum and stood. Handing her the glass, I said, "King's always on edge. He usually just hides it better."

She leaned across the bar. "Shit's getting a little too real around here, Nitro. I'm not sure I can hang around much longer."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "Why?"

She ran her fingers through her hair. "Someone slashed my tyres yesterday. That's three things now that they've done to try to scare me, and it's working. I know you said the club would keep me safe, but I'm worried." Her voice wobbled as she looked at me with wide eyes full of fear.

I stared at her. She had no grit and we didn't need any weak links. People like Brittany only put everyone else at risk. "We'll find someone to replace you."

She frowned. "I didn't mean I wanted out completely. Maybe I could just take some time off while you guys sort it out."

"No."

Her lips flattened. "So just like that you'll replace me? After everything I've done for the club, you'll just send me on my way without a backwards glance?"

"Everything you've done for the club? You poured beers and ran the bar, which you were paid for."

"I did way more than just make drinks and you know it," she snapped.

"What the fuck else did you do, Brittany? Suck some dick and try to fuck your way onto the back of a bike? That was your choice."

Her face scrunched up in anger. "You're an asshole, you know that? I can't believe I thought that underneath it all, you had some good inside of you."

My body tensed, my own anger surfacing. I should have known better than to fuck someone who was so close to my daily life. "I can

have someone here to replace you in an hour. You want me to make that call?"

She flinched. And then, straightening her shoulders, she said, "No, I'll finish out this week and then I'll leave."

I rested my hand on the bar and leaned towards her. "No, you'll finish up today. We'll pay you for the week, but you won't step foot inside this clubhouse after today."

As I walked away from her, I eyed Kick entering the building. When he reached me, I said, "We need to replace Brittany. Today. You got anyone?"

He nodded, always a yes man. "I can find someone."

"And organise for Jacko to pay Brittany for the week."

"What's going on? Jacko's gonna ask why, so I need to know what to tell him." He was right. Our treasurer never paid bills without verifying them first.

"She's weak, Kick, and she'll burn us if anyone gets to her. I'm not willing to take a chance on that. The stakes are too fucking high and we've all paid a price. I won't pay again."

He nodded. "Consider it done."

I'd never make this mistake again. Brittany had fucked other club members besides me, but it had been clear in her eyes just then that she wanted more from me. Sex would never be about something more for me. Not when trust was a necessary part of that equation. I trusted a handful of people in life and I wasn't looking to add to that small group.



King's lip curled up as he snarled at our newest patched member during Church, "Are you with us or not, Slider? Because if you're not, you need to get up and walk out of here now."

Slider threw him a filthy look. "I'm with you, but—"

King slammed his fist down on the heavy wooden table as anger flared in his eyes. "There's no room for buts. We all agreed upon our course of action before last night, and I for one am fucking committed to it. Silver Hell *will* be decimated. Now, are you fucking with us or not?"

Slider clenched his jaw before giving King one firm nod. "I'm with you."

King shoved his fingers through his hair and blew out a harsh breath. "Right, now that's settled, this is where we stand at last count. Seven of their club members were taken out last night, including their VP and Sergeant-at-Arms"—he glanced at me—"and the motherfucker who has been fucking with our families."

Conversation broke out at that news; it was what everyone had been waiting to hear. We'd all had family members suffer at the hands of Silver Hell.

"And their strip club?" Skull asked, breaking through the noise of everyone talking.

King nodded. "Hyde and Devil were successful there. It's out of action for a while."

Hyde's face lit up. "Watching it burn to the ground was the highlight of my week."

King continued, "Next up is to hit them hard where it will hurt the most after the loss of that club. Bronze and his boys will raid their other clubs and find drugs, which should close them down. They'll be in a world of financial hurt after that, but we need to be ready for the unexpected. Dragon will come after us with everything he has, so I want you to keep your ears to the ground and bring me anything you hear." He lifted his chin at me, indicating that as Sergeant-at-Arms, it was my turn to take over.

Shifting so I could rest my arms on the table, I said, "Our plan hasn't changed. I've given each of you the information you need to carry out the next step. You need something, you come to me." I turned to Kick. "How did you go with that security footage from the casino?" I'd texted him the previous night asking him to take care of wiping all traces of me from the casino.

"All done," he said.

"Thanks, brother."

As I sat back, King asked, "Any questions before we get to work?" When none were forthcoming, he ended the meeting and everyone filed out.

Although the first round of attacks had gone to plan, the mood was anything but celebratory—we had a long way to go before that.

TATUM

“Sucker For Pain” by Lil Wayne, Wiz Khalifa, Imagine Dragons

Billy took one look at me when I entered his office the afternoon after Nitro dropped me at home and swore. “Those motherfuckers will pay for this!”

I held up my hand as I took the seat across from him at his desk. “Storm didn’t do this to me, Billy. It was the Silver Hell biker they killed who did it.”

He ran his eyes over my body, taking in the bruises that had settled into place on my arms and face. The ones on my back and legs were covered by my clothes. They were nastier and I was glad he couldn’t see them. Meeting my gaze, he said, “Fuck, Tatum, did you go to the hospital? Is anything broken?”

I shook my head. “Maybe a rib or two, but other than that it just looks bad. Nothing some painkillers and time won’t fix.”

He threw his pen down and leaned back in his chair. “You’re always so damn practical. It’s what I fucking love about you, but this time I’m taking charge and calling the doctor in to check on you.” At my scowl, he held up his hand and shook his head. “Don’t argue with me. I’ll have him here within the hour. In the meantime, you can start figuring out a way to get Posey off some drug charges brought against her last night. Fucking dumb bitch.”

I pursed my lips. “Don’t talk about the girls like that, Billy. They pay your fucking bills.”

“They also give me more headaches than I care for. Sort it out, Tatum, because otherwise she’s gone. I don’t need her problems on top of all the other shit we’re trying to deal with.”

I stood. “Is she here?”

He nodded. "Yes. And once you've fixed that, I need you to work out the scheduling issues they're having before we go over the licensing for the new club." Reaching for his phone, he added, "I'll text you when the doc arrives."

His concern meant something. It wasn't often Billy Jones cared about someone enough to call a doctor for them. But gushing displays of emotion and thanks weren't something either of us was good at or known for, so I simply nodded. "Thanks, Billy."

As I turned to leave, he called out, "Six years, Tatum."

I frowned as I glanced back at him. "Six years, what?"

Moving to where I stood, he came close and ran his finger down my cheek, so lightly I could hardly feel it. "It's been six years since you smashed your car into mine. Six years since that day you told me to go fuck myself when I accused you of driving like an idiot."

I had no idea where he was heading with this. "And what, Billy? You're not going all fucking sentimental on me, are you?"

The hard glint in his eyes that he was known for remained when he spoke again, as did the hard tone he usually took, and yet there was something undeniably caring in his words. "I was fucking worried about you last night. Don't do that shit again."

I stared at him for a beat. "So long as no one else murders someone I love, we're good."

"Jesus, Tatum." He waved me away. "Go. Take care of business and try to stay out of fucking trouble."



I found Posey in the dressing room. Her eyes came straight to mine and I nodded at the regret I saw there. Taking a seat next to her, I said, "You fucked up."

She fidgeted in her lap, but she didn't shift her gaze. "Yeah," she agreed on a long exhale of breath.

"I'm presuming it was Dwayne's." At her nod, I asked, "Why?"

Hands still fidgeting, she mumbled, "He threatened to kick me out if I didn't score for him. The cops picked me up before I got home with it."

I stared at her for a long moment. Posey was one of our best strippers, always in demand as well as one of the easiest girls we

worked with. Nothing was ever too much of an ask for her and she never caused problems for the other girls or the customers. But she had a personal life from hell that caused her no end of issues, which then became my issues. "Fuck, Posey, we've talked about this before. Dwayne is a dick and you need to get your shit together where he's concerned. If a guy loves you, he's not going to threaten to kick you out all the time just to get what he wants from you."

She nodded like she understood and agreed, but I knew she didn't. Posey was too damaged to understand her own worth. I doubted her ability to stand up to Dwayne, but that never stopped me from trying to get through to her. "I know, Tatum, but you don't understand how hard it is for me. He's all I've got. I don't have any family or friends to rely on, and I know you said you'd help, but—"

I stood and paced in front of her, angry at her woe-is-fucking-me attitude. "That's bullshit you keep telling yourself, Posey, and I'm not interested in hearing it anymore." I jabbed my chest. "I have one family member left in my life. Besides her, I have Billy and that's it, so don't give me that sob story, because you're not the only person in the world who doesn't have a tonne of people in their corner. You rely on yourself in this world, and if you can't, you find a way to get through until you can."

Her eyes widened as she took in everything I said. Swallowing hard, she whispered, "I don't know how."

"Do you want to try?"

She blinked as she stared up at me. "I think so."

I shook my head. "Not good enough. It's either a yes or a no answer. Do you want to leave Dwayne and sort your life out?"

I expected her eyes to dart away from mine, but she surprised me when she held my gaze. "Yes." Her voice may have still had a trace of uncertainty in it, but it didn't waver like I thought it would.

Nodding, I said, "Okay then. What time does Dwayne finish work?"

"Five this afternoon."

"I want you to go home and pack a bag, just the essentials. Then I want you to come back here so I can take you to my cousin's place and get you settled. I'll organise for one of our guys to go back with you in a day or so to get whatever else you want, but for now just pack some clothes and toiletries."

She frowned. "I'm working tonight so maybe I should just stay here until after my shift."

"No, Dwayne will come looking for you. I'm going to get one of the other girls to fill your shift tonight. I want to give you some time away from him, somewhere he won't find you."

"Thank you," she said softly.

"Yeah. Promise me you won't fuck this up, Posey."

She lost her cool then, and tears fell down her cheeks. Wiping at the tears madly, she said, "I'm gonna go to jail, aren't I? For those drugs."

I reached out and moved a stray piece of her hair out of her eyes. Shaking my head, I said, "No, I'll get you a good behaviour bond."

Staring at me in disbelief, she said, "But the cop told me they'd lock me away for this."

I crouched in front of her. "Babe, why do you think Billy keeps me around? It's sure as hell not to dazzle customers with my exceptionally bright smile. You concentrate on that and I'll do what I do."

My phone buzzed with a text.

Billy: Get your ass back here. Doc is on his way.

Standing, I looked down at Posey. "I gotta go. Text me when you get back."

As I headed to Billy's office, I sent a text to Duvall, my contact in the public prosecution's office.

Me: Lunch is on me today.

Duvall: No.

Me: You still owe me, Duvall.

Duvall: You're never gonna let that go, are you?

Me: No, those days are long gone.

Duvall: Fuck.

Me: Twelve at the usual place.

Duvall: Screw you, Tatum.

Me: See you then.

Duvall, of all people, should have known the devil always came collecting once you'd made a deal.



The busy lunch crowd hum filled my ears as I took a seat in the café Duvall and I used to meet at for lunch almost every day for two years straight.

How times change.

His eyes met mine, concerned, before he took another look at my bruises. "What the hell happened to you?"

"Let's just say I had a difference of opinion with someone. I look like I lost, but I actually won in the end, so can we not talk about this anymore."

The concern lingered in his expression, but he frowned. Duvall knew that when I didn't want to have a conversation it was fruitless to pursue it. "Our friendship is slowly disintegrating, Tatum. I try like hell to be there for you, but you freeze me out and only call when you want something. I'm almost done."

I ran my gaze over him. Times might have changed, but Duvall hadn't. He still wore his blond hair cut close to his head, and he still wore the same dark suit he'd always worn. And he still refused to acknowledge or care that nearly every set of eyes in the café was on us, judging us, just like they always were whenever we met.

"I'm a bitch, but I'm a bitch you can't hate, Duvall. Too much has happened between us for that. And as much as you might believe our friendship is dying, it's simply not true." I leaned forward. "Even after all this time, you haven't told me you want to meet somewhere else, away from prying eyes. Why is that?"

"Because I don't give a shit what anyone thinks of the fact I am still your friend. But I will tell you that just because I don't care about the opinions of others, I *do* care that you're using me."

"I'm not using you. I'm calling in what I'm owed."

His shoulders tensed and he scowled. Raking his fingers through his hair, he muttered, "Jesus Christ, is that fucking deal ever going to stop haunting me?"

"The old me would have said yes, but the new me can't. You know that."

"I liked the old you much better."

"Yeah, well you should forget her because she's never coming back. Now we both have to deal with Billy and whatever he throws our way."

"You have a choice when it comes to Billy, but I don't seem to have that luxury."

I stared at him. "You think I had a choice when he was the only one offering me a job in this fucking city?"

"You always had a choice, Tatum, you just made the wrong one. And you still are. You're smarter than this life you've chosen."

A shiver of annoyance ran through me. He had no idea why I'd made the choices I did. "You know what, Duvall? Billy might be a criminal and involved in some dirty shit, but for the first time in my life, I feel accepted, which is a hell of a lot more than I can say for when I worked on the other side of the law."

He raised his brows. "*Involved* in some dirty shit? That's a fucking understatement. The man runs one of the dirtiest operations in this state. Hell, he *is* the definition of dirty. You've changed completely since you left the law—tattoos, gambling, drinking... if that's what feeling accepted does for you, I'd hate to see what not feeling accepted would look like."

I shifted forward in my seat. "I haven't changed. I simply stopped trying so hard to be something I wasn't."

"No, Tatum, you let yourself be swallowed by the filth and the grime. You took so many wrong turns that you just don't know the right way anymore. Saying yes to the devil too many times will do that to a person."

He wasn't wrong, but I also believed the devil had a way of showing a person who they really were underneath all the layers of pretence society encouraged. "I just let my demons out to play, Duvall."

His eyes turned cold before he averted his gaze, looking at something over my shoulder. He was silent for a moment except for a few angry breaths. Then he turned his attention back to me and leaned

his arms on the table. "Whatever it is you need from me today, you've got, but if you still want a friendship with me, this is the last time. And for the record, I would have loved you, demons and all. You didn't have to hide them or pretend they didn't exist."

Heaviness settled deep in my chest at his declaration. I wanted to reach out and touch him, maybe hold his hand, but I didn't. I couldn't. Duvall wanted something from me I didn't have to give. Not anymore. Instead, I pulled a slip of paper out of my bag and slid it across the table to him. "I need these charges to either go away or for her to be given a good behaviour bond only."

He took the paper, his eyes never leaving mine. Searching for something. What, I wasn't sure. He'd never find it, though. Duvall was always looking for the good in people, the redeemable. I didn't have much of either anymore.

As I walked away from him a few minutes later, I said, "For the record, you could never have loved my demons, Duvall. If you got a good look at them, you'd run as fast as you could. And I wouldn't blame you."



"Holy fuck, Tatum. Who the hell did that to you?" My cousin, Monroe, stared at me in shock, her heavily made-up eyes glued to the bruises visible on my arms, neck and face.

I grabbed her by the arm as I moved past the front counter of her tattoo parlour where she stood. Pulling her with me, I said, "You need to make me a coffee."

Her brows arched. "Shit." She knew that meant I had something to tell her that she probably wouldn't like. Glancing at Fox, the only staff member there that day, she said, "I'll be out the back for a bit. Yell if you need me."

He looked up from the tattoo he was working on, showing me those beautiful blue eyes of his that I could get lost in for hours, and smiled as he nodded. Fox and I had a history of the kind of sex you had when you were lonely or just needed to work the tension out of your body. He was the perfect guy for that, being that he ran from relationships as much as I did.

When I had Monroe alone in her staff kitchen, I closed the door and took a moment to collect my thoughts. "He's dead."

She stilled and her breathing slowed. Her long eyelashes did a slow sweep of her skin as she closed her eyes briefly. She then exhaled the kind of breath that felt like it had been trapped inside for years. I knew, because I'd exhaled that same breath. "Good."

I leaned against the counter, placing my hands on it either side of me. "He did this to me."

She lowered her gaze to take in the bruises again. "Babe, how are you even opening that eye? It's so fucking swollen. And how the hell did you go from him beating you to you killing him? Have you got some Lara Croft moves I don't know about? Why the hell were you alone with him? And did you go to the doctor? I can take you if you haven't."

I smiled. Monroe was my person, and she always wrapped me in love. She never failed to find a way to sprinkle some light over my darkness. "Billy called a doctor this morning. Nothing broken and nothing they can do for me. I'll heal in time." I lowered my voice, although I wasn't sure why. It wasn't like speaking softly would change anything about what I was going to tell her. "I found him at the casino and went back to his room with him. I would have killed him if things hadn't turned to shit. A Storm biker saved me. He killed him." We never had secrets and I knew she would keep this information to herself.

Her eyes widened. She knew this was bad news. Monroe had been around the block a few times with me; she understood how this city worked. "Fuck, the fucking irony. You replace one nightmare with another, and they both involve bloody bikers." She frowned. "He left you there?"

I shook my head. "No, he took me with him. I know you don't love Billy, but I'm only breathing today because of my association with him."

She scrubbed a hand over her face. "Jesus, Tatum." Pointing a finger at me, she said, "You have to get out of Sydney now. *Right fucking now!*"

She'd been telling me this for months and I'd been ignoring her, needing to see retribution for Chris's death. What she didn't grasp was that now it was too late. "I can't. Storm have people every-

where, Monroe. You don't escape them. And they have ways of using family to get what they want. I won't put you in it like that."

"Fucking put me in it! I don't care. I just want this to all stop for you." Moving closer to me, she said, "Your life went to shit when Randall screwed you over and I just want to see you smile again."

I took her hand. "I'm safe so long as I don't talk. And I have no plans to do that. I just would have preferred not to get myself on their radar."

She processed that and then said, "Do you want to stay with me?"

I tried not to smile. "So you can keep me safe?"

Her smile matched mine. "Smartass. I could, you know. You might be Lara Croft reincarnated, but I've got skills."

Letting go of her hand, I said, "I know. I've seen you take guys on. You've injured many balls in your life."

"They all deserved it." She sighed. "I'm sick of men, Tatum. Why can't we find the good ones? They have to exist somewhere out there."

"What's your definition of good, though? Maybe you're expecting something that just isn't realistic." I was glad to change the course of the conversation from Storm to her issues with men. Talking about bikers was the last thing I wanted to be doing. And Monroe and I were so close that I knew she'd changed the subject on purpose.

"At this point, I'd settle for a few things—honesty being at the top of the list."

"A-fucking-men. What else?"

"God, I just want someone who knows when to take charge and when to back the fuck off and give me some space. I'm sick and tired of men who want to try to control me, or at the other end of the spectrum, men who don't have any balls to go with their dick. And a guy who picks up after himself would be fucking awesome. Oh, and a piercing or two. Before I die, I need to be fucked with a pierced dick."

I couldn't help it, I laughed. "Good luck on finding a man who picks up after himself. I'm sure the rest should be manageable. And if push comes to shove, surely you could just sleep with a guy who gets his dick pierced here."

She rolled her eyes. "I've told you, I don't sleep with customers."

I shrugged. "You could make an exception for that. It's not like you'd have to see him again."

"Babe, I'm not you. I actually want a relationship and hate one-night stands."

"I don't love one-night stands."

"True, but you also don't want a guy to get too close." She paused for a moment. "Not every guy is Randall."

I sucked in a breath at the mention of him again. "Can we not say his name again today? It's been a bad enough day as it is."

She flicked her long red hair and frowned. "Whose name? I have no idea who you are talking about."

"Yeah, me either." I pushed a stray hair out of my eyes. "I need to ask you a favour."

She smiled. "Anything, you know that."

"One of my girls needs a place to stay while I help her leave the guy she's living with. He's an ass and I'm concerned what he might do once she leaves, so I want to find her a place he would never find her."

"Of course. And if he does come around, remember, I've got skills. I could take him on," she said with a grin.

I laughed. "You could. Thank you, I owe you one."

My phone sounded with a text.

Duvall: All sorted.

Me: My demons thank you.

He didn't reply, so I looked back up at Monroe when she asked, "Who's that?"

"Duvall. I think he's done with me."

"No, he's not. That man has it bad for you."

"Not anymore, but that's a good thing. I don't want to drag him into my shit."

She narrowed her eyes at me. "Did you ever consider dating him when you two got close?"

Memories of Duvall being there for me after my marriage exploded filled my mind. I allowed myself a moment to dwell in them, be-

cause while that was one of the hardest times of my life, he'd made me feel hope. But hope wasn't always productive. How could it be when the dark had already consumed you? When you couldn't remember what light looked like anymore.

My shoulders sagged as I answered her honestly. "I thought about being with him. I thought about how different he'd be to what I'd always known in a partner, and I wanted that. But I don't know the first thing about giving that kind of love back, Monroe. I'd ruin Duvall if I gave myself to him, because dark will always kill light."

"Or maybe light would mix some new shinier colours," she said softly.

I loved her for being a dreamer. As much as I'd given up on in life, I still held onto some of my tattered dreams. Monroe was the one person who helped me remember to breathe life into those dreams occasionally.

As I left Monroe's, a text buzzed through.

Duvall: You're wrong. I could never run from your demons.

NITRO

"The Red" by Chevelle

After Church, I headed over to my sister's house, not sure if I'd find her there or at the bank where she worked. She lived a block from me, having moved out of my place a few years ago.

I found her sleeping on her couch, a bottle of cheap wine still in her hands. Swiping it out of her grip, I crouched next to her. "Lynny, wake up." Finding her in this state was becoming a common occurrence. Marilyn had never been a drinker, but lately she'd started, and I hated watching her sink further into a depressed state.

She stirred as I nudged her.

"You took the day off work?" I asked.

Nodding, she sat up slowly. "Yeah." She grimaced in pain and placed her hand against her forehead. "God, why did you wake me?"

"You feel like hell?"

"Don't give me grief, Nitro. I needed to take the edge off."

I stood. "I get it, but fuck, you're not even trying."

Anger filled her features and she stood, too. "I *have* been trying."

"No," I snapped. "You *were* trying. Now, you've given up, and I'll be fucked if I'm gonna let you fucking give up. Not after everything we've been through already."

I watched as the anger seeped out of her, hating every second of that, because I didn't want her to lose that feeling. You could run on anger, and I needed Lynny to fucking run. "I'm tired of trying. That man...." Her voice drifted off and tears streamed down her face. "He wrecked me, Nitro." Staring at me through those tears, she uttered

the words I'd feared for years, "I don't want to try anymore. I'm done."

Fuck.

I wrapped my hands around her biceps and held on tight. "That man is dead. He can't hurt you anymore. And you are *not* fucking done."

"You don't get it. I don't want to go on."

I let her go and she dropped back down to the couch. Raking my fingers through my hair, I paced the small room, my mind turning over possibilities for dealing with this situation. Eventually, I pulled out my phone and called her doctor.

She sat motionless and watched as I made an appointment for her. After I ended the call, I yanked her up and said, "Get dressed, your appointment is in forty minutes."

"He can't help me."

Red blurred my vision and my muscles tensed. Anger punched through me, and while I knew I wasn't so much enraged by her, but by the asshole who did this, I couldn't contain it while around her. One look at my sister and all I could think about was him. And I couldn't stop myself from spewing words laced with the anger that consumed me. "Yes, he can, and he will. And you will let him. I'm not taking no for an answer, Marilyn. You got that?"

She shrunk away from me as I bellowed my order. When I'd finished, she slapped my face. "Fuck you! You're supposed to be on *my* side. You're not supposed to treat me like shit."

I forced out a harsh breath and scrubbed my face. This was not going down how it should have. And yet, I kept going, fuelled by a desperate need to save my sister. Yanking her to her bedroom, I ripped open her closet. "Choose something to wear, put it on and meet me in the lounge room within five minutes." I turned to leave the room without waiting for her reply. As I left, I barked, "*This* is me being on your side, Lynny. Fucking deal with it."



"Thank you."

Eyeing Renee, I nodded. "She fought us all the way, but in the end she agreed to go voluntarily."

I'd just returned from the hospital where Marilyn had been admitted. Her doctor held the same concerns I did, so he'd pushed for her to agree to treatment.

"Should I pack a bag for her and take it to the hospital?"

"Yeah." I checked my watch. "I'll come back in about two hours to take you. I've just got some club stuff to do."

"Okay."

"And you'll stay with me while she's there." At her frown, I added, "Don't argue with me, Renee. I've got some serious shit going on with the club at the moment and I don't need to be worrying about you out there on your own."

Her frown morphed into a scowl. "I swear, you'd think you were my father with the way you carry on."

A text from Hyde distracted me.

Hyde: Where are you? Got a problem with Sutherland.

Me: At Marilyn's.

Hyde: Get ready to leave. We'll swing by.

"I've gotta go," I said to Renee. "A problem's just come up, so I may be longer than two hours. I'll text you to let you know."

"I'll be a good girl and move into your place while you're gone."

"Fucking amazing," I muttered. "A female who listens to me."

"Don't go getting too excited. It won't happen too often."

I shoved my phone in my pocket. "I'm under no illusions."

She grinned. "That's what I love about you."

"What?"

"You might be unpredictable out there in the world, but here with us, you're predictable in all the right ways. You're always here for me and Mum."

I held her gaze. "Always, kiddo."

She didn't know the half of it.

Thank fuck.



I stared up at the building in front of me before turning to face Hyde. "What's going on? Why the fuck am I standing in front of Billy Jones's strip club?"

"Sutherland has cut us off," Hyde said.

King stepped up onto the footpath. "Dragon got to him."

Jesus.

Sutherland was our gun supplier. We'd discussed the possibility of this happening if we pursued Silver Hell, but I hadn't thought it likely.

"We need ammo, and we need a fuckload of it," Hyde said.

"We stocked up, Hyde. We have time to sort this out," I said. Billy would supply us if need be, but he was the last person I wanted to call on.

"I don't want to take that risk," King said. "I want a plan brought into play today, and Billy is our best option."

"He's also our most expensive option," I pointed out. "I can make some calls, King, work out something else that won't bleed us like Billy will."

"We can do that, too, but I'm not ending this day without knowing this is sorted for now," King said before striding into the club.

Hyde agreed. "I'm with King on this one, Nitro."

Against my better judgement, I followed them. Billy and I didn't have the best history, so fuck knew what would take place when we were in the same room.

A brunette with not much on besides a black dress that barely covered her tits and ass greeted us. Glancing between the three of us, she pasted a hesitant smile on her face. "I'm sorry, but we don't open for another couple of hours."

"We're not here for the show, we're here for Billy," King said.

Smile still in place, she said, "He's not here at the moment, sorry."

King's nostrils flared and he stepped closer to her. "That might be what you tell everyone else, but it's not what you tell me. Let him know that King's here to see him."

She blinked as she faltered on her words. "Honestly, he's not here at the moment."

King's voice darkened with menace. "I don't believe you. Take me to his office." He paused for a moment before barking, "Now!"

Fear chased her smile away and she jumped in fright. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out.

"Gentlemen," a commanding female voice sounded from behind us. A voice I knew. "I don't appreciate you intimidating my girls."

Turning, I found Tatum standing with her arms crossed over her chest, a hard glare in place. Black jeans painted her long legs and a leather biker jacket covered her tits. Stilettos gave her height, and her eyes met mine with little effort. "Vegas," I murmured, taken aback. This woman standing in front of me was not at all like the woman I rescued the previous night. Sure, her eye was swollen and her face and neck were bruised from the beating she suffered, but she stood tall and fucking fierce. And as she shifted her gaze between the three of us, she didn't back down.

King moved towards her, snarling. "Tatum Lee, we meet again."

She squared her shoulders. "So it would seem, King."

"Where's Billy?"

"He's stepped out for a couple of hours to deal with a family matter. Can I help you with something?"

King stared at her like she'd lost her mind. "I highly fucking doubt that. I didn't come here for a lap dance."

She uncrossed her arms. "And you wouldn't get one off me even if you did."

He gripped her arm and I caught the wince of pain that escaped her lips. Pulling her to him, he said, "I'm not a fan of your smart mouth, Tatum. Now call your fucking boss and set me up a meeting."

She didn't fight him, didn't even attempt to wiggle out of his hold. Instead, she simply stood there and said, "The last time I saw you, I told you never to touch me again, so take your fucking hands off me and then I'll see what I can do for you."

He continued to hold her for another few moments before eventually shoving her out of his grasp.

With eyes that roared her hatred of him, she held his gaze while pulling out her phone. When Billy answered her call, she turned and walked away from us to talk with him.

I tracked her ass as she moved away. Tatum had an ass made for sin and legs that begged a man to spread them. I imagined cutting those clothes off her and sinking my dick deep inside her. That cunt of hers would—

"Nitro!"

Fuck.

I snapped out of my thoughts to find King staring at me. "What?"

"Bronze texted. The raids on Silver Hell clubs will go down tonight." Bronze had been on our payroll for years and never let us down. If the New South Wales police force knew they had a dirty cop as high in their ranks as he was, they'd probably kill him before they'd admit it to the public. Just over a year ago the state flushed out what they thought to be all their dirty cops, along with the handful of dirty lawyers they had in the DPP. Since then they had heavily promoted their clean force. For Bronze to have survived that, I knew there had to be more amongst their ranks.

"So we need to sort our supply issue out today," Hyde added.

"Yeah, I'm getting that, Hyde," I muttered, my eyes still on Tatum.

She ended her call and came back to us. Eyeing King, she said, "Billy will be back in two hours. He'll see you then."

With one last glare at her, he turned and stalked out of the club to his bike. She watched him for a beat and then looked at me. "Your president is an ass."

Hyde scowled at her and left, but I closed the distance between us and said, "You'd do well to keep your thoughts to yourself, Vegas." Unable to stop myself, I dropped my gaze to her chest. The little I could see of her tits was hardly enough, but I took what I could and then looked back up at her.

She lifted a brow. "If you knew me, Nitro, you'd know I never keep my thoughts to myself. And right now, I'm thinking *you'd* do well to keep your eyes off my tits."

"I only take orders from one person in this world and I'm not looking at him."

"So maybe you should turn your ass around and leave so that you *are* looking at him."

I reached out to touch her, wanting to run my finger over those lips that were giving me attitude, but she wrapped her hand around my wrist faster than I saw coming, halting my progress.

"You'd also do well never to touch me without my permission," she said calmly before dropping my arm and turning to leave.

Fuck, she was feisty. I wasn't a fan of attitude off a woman, but I couldn't deny my dick was hard as hell. I wondered what kind of man Tatum Lee usually fucked, because it sure as hell wouldn't be a man like me. I'd have to fuck that feisty out of her and I doubted she'd surrender easily, if at all.



I sat on my bike in the clubhouse car park later that night, watching as Brittany left. Thunder cracked overhead as another storm threatened. It'd been a long fucking day and my mind ticked over with thoughts of stopping by a club I frequented to find a woman to lose myself in for the night.

"Nitro."

Turning, I found Kick approaching, a look of concern etched on his face.

"What's up?"

"Silver Hell got to that casino surveillance before we did. They're looking for the blonde who was with you."

"Fuck."

"Yeah, I figured that wasn't good news since she's tied up with Billy."

I scrubbed a hand over my face. It definitely wasn't good news. Not after we'd managed to get Billy to agree to supply us with guns and ammo. If Silver Hell found Tatum, they'd kill her, and Billy would blame us as much as them.

"I'll take care of it," I said.

He nodded. "One other thing, I found someone to replace Brittany. Recommended by Nash, so I'm hoping that means she's not gonna cause any problems." Nash was a member of the Brisbane Storm chapter so I figured he wouldn't recommend someone he didn't trust.

Lightning streaked through the sky as I sped out of the car park. So much for finding some pussy for the night. Instead, I'd be finding Tatum Lee.

TATUM

"I See Fire" by Ed Sheeran

I stumbled as I tried to avoid the cracks in the path as I walked the short distance between my front gate and my front door. I wasn't sure if it was because of the heels I wore or the rum I'd consumed, but I leaned heavily towards the rum. Unfortunately when I decided to drown my feelings with alcohol, I did a bang-up job of it. My feelings were successfully numbed for the night. The only problem with that was they would all return tomorrow. Missing my brother was something that would never go away.

As I pushed open my front door, a figure emerged from the shadows on my veranda and a deep voice I'd heard too many times that day, spoke into my ear, "You've been drinking, Vegas. Not the best move when people are after you. You're lucky it's me here tonight and not someone else."

As I attempted to process what he said, he placed a hand on the small of my back and guided both of us inside.

Fuck.

He was right; I should have known better. I should have done everything to maintain my vigilance, but the painful memories had assaulted me and rum had been my only escape.

And now Nitro was inside my fucking house.

He directed me down my hallway to the kitchen before my mind finally kicked into gear. As it did, I forced my elbow back into his gut and picked up my pace to move ahead of him.

"Fuck," he swore as I stepped out of his hold.

Turning to face him, I reached into my handbag for the pocketknife I kept there. Flicking it open, I held it between us defensively.

“Don’t take another fucking step.”

Surprise flared in his eyes and he stopped moving. “Go fucking figure,” he murmured.

“Go figure what?” I snapped.

He watched me silently for a few moments before stepping forward. His damn reflexes were faster than mine and he swiftly took the knife from me. His hard eyes met mine. “You’ve got a thing for knives, Vegas?”

I slammed my hands against his chest. “Why the fuck do you keep calling me Vegas?”

A vein pulsed in his temple and he clenched his jaw. “Because you’re pretty on the outside but dark and dirty”—he pressed a finger to my chest—“in here.”

My breaths lay trapped in my throat as heat flamed my cheeks. I stared at him while self-loathing filled me. He had no idea how right he was. “Fuck you,” I spat, taking a step back, almost stumbling again.

With a clenched jaw and flared nostrils, he lunged forward, catching me around the waist. He then backed me up against the wall, pressing his body hard against mine. Our breaths came hard and fast as we glared at each other. “I recognise fucked-up when I see it, Tatum. It’s like looking in a fucking mirror.”

I wiggled my arms up between our bodies so I could try to force some space between us, even if it was only a tiny amount of distance. The pain this all caused was almost too much, but no way would I show him that. Instead, I focused on breathing through it, hoping it would subside quickly. “I am nothing like you.”

He nodded. “Yeah, you are. I’ve done my research.”

I swallowed hard, taking in what he’d said while trying to force my shame away. It didn’t matter how many times I told myself I’d moved past my self-disgust, it was a lie; it still consumed me.

When I didn’t speak, he continued, “I don’t know what drives a lawyer to forget which side of the law she’s on, but I’m guessing it was something she’s not proud of. And then, after her profession kicks her out, to go to work for the dirty criminals of this city, getting them out of shit any way she can, that says a fuck-of-a-lot about a person. So don’t tell me you’re not fucked-up because not only do I recognise it, I’ve read all about it, too.”

I pushed against him, but he was too heavy and strong for me, and didn't budge. I wanted to scream at him and kick him and beat against his chest, but I knew it wouldn't get me anywhere. Nitro had me trapped. In the end, I simply said, "What do you want?"

He kept me caged against the wall. "Silver Hell know you were in that room when I killed their man. They're looking for you."

Of course they were.

Fucking brilliant.

"So you've come to save me? Like a white fucking knight?"

Anger growled out of him. "That fucking attitude of yours will get you killed one day, but today is not that day. I'm only here because you mean something to Billy and at the moment he means something to Storm. The minute that changes, you're on your fucking own." He stepped away from me, but kept his hard eyes on mine. "Now, pack some shit, because you're coming with me."

He had to be kidding. "So you can tie me up again and chain me to your fucking bed?"

His boots thudded as he closed the distance between us again. Taking hold of my arm, he yanked me with him while he stalked into my bedroom. I did my best to ignore the pain his grip caused, but it was too intense and a cry fell from my mouth. He scowled at me, as if he wanted me to contain it. "Pack your bag or I'll pack it for you."

He left me then and I sat on my bed, desperate to gather my thoughts. The alcohol hindered my ability to think straight, as did the pain racking my body.

Fuck.

A knock on my front door caused my head to snap up. I groaned when I heard Duvall call out, "Tatum." And when I heard Nitro's boots cut a path to the door, I practically ran in that direction. The last thing I needed was Duvall going up against Nitro.

I arrived just in time to see Duvall's eyes flare with distaste as he took in Nitro. "Who the hell are you?" he asked. He knew the kind of people I worked with, which meant he also understood the risk I took with my personal safety. I guessed he was concerned for me, and that was something I needed to alter if I had any hope of him leaving.

Staring at my friend, willing him to go, I said, "What's up?"

Jerking his chin at Nitro, he said, "*This* is how you're spending your nights now?"

"Careful," Nitro warned in a deep voice. "The next words out of your mouth better not insult either her or me." It surprised me that he'd even care about me being insulted, but I didn't have time to dissect that.

Duvall stepped closer and by the angry expression on his face, I knew he was about to disregard that warning, so I cut him off.

"Yes, this is how I'm spending my nights," I said, knowing he'd back down if he believed I was seeing Nitro. He might have wanted to start something with me, but Duvall never cut in on another man's territory.

He pursed his lips. "Really? You're a biker whore now?"

Nitro growled again, anger spilling out of him. When he took a step forward, my instincts took over and I flung an arm out in front of him, covering his chest and halting his progress. His eyes came to mine, a hard glint in them. I returned that look, now willing *him* to not turn this into something more.

I glanced at Duvall as I angled my body towards Nitro and placed my arms around him. "Yes, really. Did you come here to tell me something?" I hated treating him like this but felt it was the only way.

Nitro's body tensed and he didn't reciprocate my gesture. I couldn't see his face, but I could imagine he'd fixed a filthy look on Duvall.

Taking a step back, Duvall said, "No, nothing that can't wait. I'd hate to interrupt you two." With that, he muttered something else under his breath and strode down my path towards his car.

As soon as he was out of sight, I dropped my arms and returned to my bedroom, resigned to the fact I had to go with Nitro. The front door slamming caused me to jump, and a moment later, Nitro filled the doorway to my bedroom. "You ready?"

"No, I'm not ready. I'd barely started thinking about packing when I had to come and stop my friend from trying to take you on."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "You call him a friend?" The way he said it was as if it was the last thing he'd call Duvall.

"Yes." I didn't encourage any further discussion about it, because I had no desire to hear his thoughts.

He had other ideas. "So you're okay with a friend treating you like shit?"

I grabbed an overnight bag from my closet and started packing it. "He didn't treat me like shit."

He cocked a brow. "You really believe that, Vegas?"

I stopped throwing clothes in the bag. "You don't know anything about my friendship with him or why he said the things he did to me."

"That may be the case, but I still don't believe a friend would insult you the way he did. I sure as fuck wouldn't put up with that."

"I'm not interested in what you think. I just want to get through whatever I have to in order to forget I ever met you and your biker friends. Do you think we can do that?"

He dropped his arms. "It'd be my fucking pleasure."

I took a few deep breaths after he left and then finished packing my bag.

One day at a time. That was all I had to do. If I could get through the shit Randall put me through, and the crap I went through at the hands of the legal world, I could survive a biker.

NITRO

“Me, Myself And I” by G-Eazy, Bebe Rexha

Renee stared at me as Tatum and I entered the house. I never brought women home. Ignoring her puzzled expression, I directed Tatum to my bedroom.

She stopped as soon as she realised where I was taking her. “I am *not* sleeping in your bed.”

“It’s either that or the floor. Take your pick.”

She left me to make her way to the couch. Dropping her bag on the floor, she took a seat and stared at the television that Renee was watching.

Renee’s eyes widened as she glanced between Tatum and me. “Hi, I’m Renee, Nitro’s niece,” she said, giving Tatum a smile.

I couldn’t see Tatum’s face, but I could hear the tightness in her voice when she replied. “Tatum, and I’m Nitro’s prisoner.”

Renee’s smile disappeared. “A prisoner wouldn’t come willingly and I’m pretty sure that’s what I just saw.” Even when she was frustrated or mad with me, that kid was on my side.

“Trust me, if I had a choice I wouldn’t be here,” Tatum muttered.

“And if you weren’t here, you’d be out there dead,” I said.

She swivelled in her seat to look at me, as much irritation on her face as I felt. “I could have gone to Billy’s. He’d keep me alive.”

“When I want someone kept alive, I trust no one to do that job except myself. You’ll stay with me until the threat passes.”

Bewilderment filled her as she left her seat. Grimacing, she clutched her ribs and said, “That is never gonna happen. That threat could take forever to pass.”

“During which time you’ll be with me,” I barked.

"So what, you're gonna take me with you everywhere you go? And what about my job? I've got shit to do."

"That's what phones are for, Tatum. And yeah, you'll be with me. Where I go, you fucking go." Jesus, she had a way of riling me up that usually only Renee or Marilyn managed to do. I didn't often give a fuck what most women said or did. And I sure as hell didn't spend time arguing with them over it.

She stood fuming at me but didn't utter another word. Eventually, she sat and resumed staring at the television with her arms crossed over her chest.

Renee stole one last glance at the both of us before leaning back in her seat and saying, "Well, this should be fun."



I yawned as I made coffee the next morning. It had been a long night and I'd only managed about three hours of sleep on and off. Lifting the mug to my mouth, I eyed Tatum as she entered the kitchen. My gaze dropped to the singlet she wore. It was long and covered her ass, but her legs were bare and I couldn't take my eyes off them or the tattoos inked into her skin.

"I need coffee. Your floor is hard as hell," she grumbled.

I leaned against the counter. "All floors are hard as hell. I offered you a bed."

She moved next to me to make her coffee. "Sleeping next to you is the last thing I will ever do."

Her scent wafted in the air and I froze as a long-forgotten memory surfaced. Visions of a smiling woman and three children laughing at the beach filled my mind.

My mother.

The scent Tatum wore was the same one my mother had worn.

I shoved the memories away. Nothing good came from them. I glanced down at Tatum. "Aren't you cold?" I snapped. "It's the middle of fucking winter and you're wearing a singlet."

She looked up at me. "My, aren't you a cuddly teddy in the morning? And since when do you care about my warmth or comfort?"

I drank the rest of my coffee and pushed off from the counter to place my mug in the sink. "Put some clothes on. We're leaving in half an hour."

"I won't be ready in half an hour, Nitro."

I turned back to face her. "Yeah, you will be."

As I left the kitchen, she called after me, "I don't know what kinds of women you've been associating with, but this one does not get ready in half a fucking hour."

Renee passed me in the hallway, already dressed for school. She was an early riser and had probably already completed an hour of study. "You know, I think I kinda like Tatum," she said with a smile.

Ignoring her, I walked outside and sucked some air into my lungs. Between Tatum's attitude, Renee's smartass comments, my sister's mental breakdown, Storm's problems and memories of my mother, this week was going off with a fucking bang.

My phone rang then, and one look at the caller ID told me the week was only just getting started with me.

My brother.



"I need somewhere to stay," Dustin said ten minutes later when he arrived at my house.

I pushed my fingers through my hair as I listened to my brother. "What happened to the place I found you three weeks ago?" I'd found him a share house and helped him move in, hoping he'd settle there okay. It seemed he hadn't.

His lips flattened in a hard line. "The woman who ran it kicked me out."

"Fuck, what did you do?"

"I didn't do anything. I just tried to kiss her."

Jesus, Dustin would be the fucking death of me.

I slammed my hand down on my table. "I've told you, Dustin, you can't go around kissing women you aren't involved with."

He jumped and his eyes widened. I tried never to lose my temper with him, so my outburst must have confused him. "I don't."

Blowing out a long breath, I said, "Yeah, you do. Problem is, they don't know you like I do, so they don't know you'd never force

yourself on them." Dustin was a simple guy looking for love, who had no clue how to attract a woman. Most women didn't give him the time of day so he tried harder than most men had to. Unfortunately, his efforts were mostly misguided and ended up in these kinds of outcomes—him inappropriately touching women, them crying foul and me cleaning up his shit.

"Can I stay here until I find somewhere?" The hopeful look on his face caused my guilt to surface. If it weren't for me, he wouldn't be in this mess in the first place.

I nodded. "Yeah."

A grin broke out on his face and he threw his arms around me. "Thank you, Nitro." *As if I'd caused some miracle to happen.*

The bathroom door opened across the hall from where we stood and a gust of perfume blanketed us. Our attention was drawn to Tatum who exited the room and announced, "I'm good to go. Quickest fucking time I've ever gotten ready, which means you"—she pointed at me—"owe me coffee."

"Wow," Dustin exclaimed while staring at Tatum. She'd dressed in skin-tight jeans again, this time with knee-high boots that had a killer heel. The jeans showed off her legs and ass while the black fitted long-sleeved top she wore could stop traffic. And although bruises and some swelling still painted her face, her beauty couldn't be mistaken.

"Put your tongue back in your mouth," I said, not taking my eyes off her for one second. I didn't need to look at him to know he was drooling. Any straight male would be.

Tatum shifted her gaze to Dustin and did something I hadn't seen yet—she smiled. When she moved to where he stood and extended her hand in greeting, my breathing slowed and my chest expanded. All the tension I'd felt a moment ago vanished and I watched in fascination as she spoke to him.

"Hi, I'm Tatum. I'm guessing you're Nitro's brother." Her smile filled her face while she waited for his reply.

He shook her hand and I knew his shyness had kicked in by the way his body shrunk a little and his eyes turned down. "How can you tell? We don't look anything alike." Even his voice had softened and turned hesitant. Disbelieving. He had a point; no one ever assumed we were brothers.

"Oh, I can tell. You have the same nose and even though your eyes have more sparkle in them, they're the same beautiful brown that his eyes are." I was fairly certain she'd never thought of my eye colour as beautiful, but I appreciated her referring to his as that. God knew, Dustin could do with the confidence boost.

I watched as my brother, for the first time in his life, visibly drew his body up and puffed his shoulders back. Returning her smile, he said, "I'm Dustin."

"It's great to meet you, Dustin." Facing me, she lifted her brows and said, "You're gonna need some more linen and maybe a mattress or two if we're all gonna be staying here."

I fought the smile tugging at my lips. Grabbing my keys off the table, I muttered, "Smartass."

She shrugged. "Just stating facts. I don't wanna sleep on that floor again."

I held her gaze. "And I told you how to avoid that."

She pursed her lips but didn't say anything else on the subject.

"Can I come, too?" Dustin asked.

I shook my head. "No, you stay here. There's ice cream in the freezer and noodles in the cupboard." His two favourites.

His face lit up. "And Netflix."

Tatum smiled. "Netflix is the best."

He turned his grin to her and nodded. "It really is."

Renee joined us. "Are we still on for this afternoon?"

I frowned. "What's this afternoon?"

"You were going to take me out driving so I could clock up some more hours."

"Sure. Five?"

She nodded and then headed into the kitchen.

I eyed Tatum and jerked my chin towards the front door. "Let's go, Vegas."

The smile she'd given Dustin disappeared. "Joy," she said sarcastically before traipsing out to my garage.

I ignored her sarcasm and instead focused on her ass. Not a bad trade-off at all.

TATUM

“We’ve Gotta Get Out Of This Place” by The Angels

Rain beat down on the roof of Nitro’s ute as he drove us to a destination unknown to me. This weather was depressing as hell. I’d never been a fan of rain that lasted longer than a day. Looking out the window, I saw puddles of mud everywhere, which only further depressed me. Mud meant dirt and water that found its way into your shoes and onto your clothes if you accidentally stepped too hard in it or if a car sloshed it at you. Mud was messy. I hated messy.

“Where are we going?” I demanded, turning to face him.

Those brown eyes of his met mine, and a shiver struck me at what I saw there. “Thanks for what you said to Dustin back there.” The words pretty much choked themselves out of him. I doubted Nitro was a man known for giving thanks.

I nodded as his emotions washed over me. This was a whole other side to Nitro. “How old is Dustin?”

“Thirty-four.”

“That’s younger than you?”

He glanced at me again but didn’t reply straight away. I wasn’t sure if he would, but then he did. “Yeah, two years.”

“I’ve worked with a lot of guys like Dustin, guys who get themselves into trouble because people confuse their intentions in all sorts of situations. Just because they don’t process shit as fast as the rest of us doesn’t make them any less of a person.” I’d overheard his conversation with Dustin about women misunderstanding his behaviour and had heard Nitro’s worry for his brother. His concern showed a new side to him that I’d been surprised to discover.

“You took on their cases?”

"Yes."

"How did they afford you?"

I angled my body so I leant against the window, facing his direction. "Some had family that paid, but a lot I took on for free or cheap. Billy brought a lot of them to me for help."

He frowned. "Billy?" The name dripped from his mouth in distaste.

"Yes, Billy. A lot of people think he's the scum of the earth—"

"That's because he *is* the scum of the earth."

"Not always, Nitro. Sometimes the man surprises you."

Silence settled between us for a few minutes while we each turned over our thoughts. I ended up breaking it when I said, "So, you have a brother and a sister. Is she younger than you, too?"

His grip on the steering wheel tightened as he nodded. "Marilyn's five years younger than me."

"And your parents? They're still alive?" I wasn't sure what fuelled me to keep talking, but that sliver of emotion I'd seen from him had gotten to me. It made me want to figure out why he was the way he was. It was the lawyer in me—always digging, searching, wondering what made people tick so I could figure out their next likely move.

His knuckles whitened as he squeezed the wheel even harder. "I'm not here to talk about my family," he snapped.

It figured. I was actually surprised he'd given me what he had. But still, I wanted more. Shifting in my seat, I said, "You didn't tell me where we're going."

"To the clubhouse."

My phone rang.

Billy.

"Tatum, where the fuck are you?" he demanded when I answered his call.

"And good morning to you, too, Master."

"This isn't the time for your smart mouth. I'm standing outside your house and you're not here. And I fucking need you."

"I'm not there because I was kidnapped by a biker last night and I'm with him." I ignored Nitro's grunt next to me.

"What the fuck?"

I sighed. "I'm okay. But apparently Silver Hell want me dead because of my involvement in their member's death the other night

and Storm want to keep me alive. They sent one of their guys to look after me until this all blows over. The only catch is I have to stay with him."

"Jesus, the shit you get yourself into. How the hell am I supposed to get stuff done without you?"

"I can work from anywhere, Billy. What do you need?"

"I could protect you, you realise. You don't need to do what Storm say."

"I don't think they're gonna let me go."

He was silent for a moment. "We'll see. But until then, I need you to work on Graham's defence. They formally charged him last night." Graham was one of Billy's security guys who'd managed to get himself into some trouble over a fight between club patrons. He'd punched one of the guys a few times too many and the cops had been brought into it.

"Shit. Okay, can you email whatever you have and I'll work on that today. Is Jensen taking the case?" *One of the lawyers Billy used.*

"Yeah."

"Good. I like working with him."

"I'll send the file when I get back to the office. And Tatum, I'm getting you out of there." He hung up before I could respond.

Dammit.

This was going to get messy.

Turning my face to the window, I counted to ten slowly and took a few deep breaths while focusing my thoughts.

"You still do law work even though you were disbarred?"

Looking back at Nitro, I said, "I don't practice law anymore, but I advise the lawyers that Billy hires."

"As in, they're puppets doing whatever you tell them to?"

"That's one way to put it."

He stopped at a red light and stared at me. "You must be good."

"I am. I dig for the shit that can't be found easily, and put in the hours most don't want to. And I figure out how to make whatever I find work for us."

"You win every case for him?"

I nodded. "I haven't lost a case in years."

You're so full of shit, Tatum. You even believe your own lies. Lying to win doesn't really count as winning.

My stomach knotted with guilt and self-hate.

Not wanting to talk anymore, I said, "Your niece seems like a good kid."

"She is," he said before we fell into silence again. Exactly the path I'd hoped the conversation would take.

It was the truth about Renee. After Nitro took me back to his house last night, they'd discussed some family stuff they had going on. I'd deduced her mother was in hospital due to her current mental health, and it appeared that Renee was perhaps more able to care for herself than her mother was. It also seemed to me that she got away with a bit where Nitro was concerned. She'd given him hell for a few things and he'd let her. That had both surprised me and impressed me. It was another side to Nitro I wouldn't have expected.

And then he'd grunted at me about my sleeping choice and gone to bed after I reiterated that I would not be sleeping there with him. Renee had set me up with a pillow and blankets. She'd also apologised that there was only one couch and she had taken it.

I stared at the rain streaming down the front windscreen of the car and thought about Nitro. He was turning out to be a contradiction, but then, I should never have doubted that. If there was one thing I'd learnt in my line of work, people always were. Especially the troubled ones.

We reached our destination and, after making his way through the two security checkpoints, he pulled the car into a car park that was miles from the front door of the clubhouse. The reason being, that there were a lot of bikes there that morning.

I met Nitro at the front of the ute. "You having a meeting here today?" I asked, glancing at all the bikes as we walked towards the clubhouse.

"You could say that." He jerked his chin at a biker who we passed on the way. "Slider."

The guy nodded in response. "Nitro."

"You boys are big on conversation."

He stared down at me and ignored my sarcasm. "We get the job done."

Another sarcastic comment died as it left my mouth when a loud bang sounded from behind us. Shock rippled through me as confusion set in, and Nitro's arm came around my shoulders right before he pushed me to the ground.

My ears rang with the sound of an explosion and the vibrations of it slammed into me. A scream tore from my mouth, but I couldn't hear it and I couldn't feel it. Numbness set in as I tried like hell to process what was happening.

Nitro's body covered mine, his strong arms sheltering me from the terror of what was happening.

I was suffocating.

Couldn't breathe.

My chest is going to explode.

And then—"Vegas, you breathing?" Nitro's heavy body moved off mine and he pulled me up.

I stared into his concerned eyes, surprised to see worry there. It was all I could focus on. Even the pain ricocheting through me didn't register. *Why is he bothering to check on me?*

"Tatum!" he barked, shaking me. "You good?"

Men ran past us.

Yelling.

Bodies colliding.

Confusion.

Anger.

And all the while, Nitro stayed with me, making sure I was all right.

I blinked. Nodding, I croaked, "Yeah, I'm good."

His chest heaved with a heavy breath. "Go inside and wait for me."

He let me go, and when I didn't move, he yelled, "Now!"

My attention drifted beyond him and I took in the car that had exploded. As the realisation settled in my bones that we'd been that close to danger, I turned and ran towards the clubhouse.

What the fuck had I gotten myself into?

NITRO

“Live And Let Die” by Guns N’ Roses

King barked orders like he was running World War III. It felt like he was. The bomb in Slider’s car had killed him and injured three more members who had been entering the grounds on their bikes. They’d been lucky to escape death.

A hand landed on my shoulder and I turned to find Hyde behind me. “You and I are gonna round up some boys and go take a look at Silver Hell’s clubhouse. I have a feeling they’re not gonna be there, and wanna confirm it before we set new plans in play.”

“We also need to sort out what we’re gonna do with our families, Hyde. Our resources will be spread thin now, too thin to allocate a watch over everyone.” Ever since we’d realised Silver Hell’s agenda to harm club members’ families, we’d stationed men to watch over them. We needed those men back after this and I’d be fucked if I was gonna leave Renee and Dustin out there on their own with this kind of threat hanging over us. I wanted them at the clubhouse, safe.

“Yeah. You round up the boys while I discuss that with King,” he agreed and left me to go talk with King.



Two hours later, Hyde, Devil, Kick and I entered our clubhouse after verifying that Silver Hell were nowhere to be found. We’d checked their clubhouse, as well as the bars and clubs we knew they frequented. After that, we called around to see if anyone knew where

they were, and were met with silence. Either no one knew or they weren't talking.

Chaos had broken out while we were gone. We returned to find the clubhouse packed with men, women and kids. The noise was deafening, the tension visible.

Pushing our way through to the office, the four of us relayed what we'd discovered to King.

"This had to be Silver Hell," he said.

Hyde nodded. "Seems that way."

King's face hardened. "I want them flushed out, and I don't care how we do it. Visit all their strip clubs, all their friends, anyone and everyone, and find out where they are."

His phone sounded with a call and he dismissed us as he pressed it to his ear.

I was halfway down the hallway outside of his office when he called me back. "You look like you wanna kill me," I said when I stood in front of him again.

"That blonde is proving to be a fucking headache, Nitro."

"Why?"

He held his phone up. "That was Billy. He's outside and wants her to leave with him. Says he'll reconsider our new agreement for him to supply weapons and ammo if we don't allow her to leave."

"I'll take care of it."

"Make sure you take care of it so that it never causes me another headache."

I lifted my chin at him signalling I would and then stalked out of his office to find Tatum.

I found her sitting in the clubhouse bar talking to a woman behind the bar who I'd never met. "Vegas," I barked, cutting in on their conversation.

Her head whipped around and I was met with a glare. "I'm in the middle of a conversation."

Ignoring that, I said, "I need you to come with me."

She remained silent for a good few moments. I figured she was weighing her options, but there were none to be had and she figured that out fast. Sliding off her stool, she said goodbye to the woman and followed me out of the bar.

I led her outside to the front gate where Billy waited. The expression on his face was pure rage. "What the fuck, Nitro? I'm not good

enough to enter your fucking clubhouse?"

Before I could answer, Tatum cut in. "What are you doing here, Billy? I told you I couldn't leave."

His eyes darted between the two of us before settling on her. "And I told you I could protect you. You don't need to stay with him." The contempt was clear in his voice. Billy and I had a hard history.

I spoke up. "She's not going anywhere, Billy. Silver Hell has her on their radar. They get to her, you'll come after us, and that's not something we need."

He stepped closer to me. "I don't think you understand that if you *don't* allow her to come, I'm pulling our deal."

I held my ground. "No, you're not."

His lip curled up. "Get King here. I'm sick of talking to an idiot who doesn't know what's good for his club."

Fury punched through me, and not just for this conversation, but for the shit he'd put Marilyn through in the past. Gripping his shirt, I snarled, "King's busy. You'll deal with me—"

"I'm not leaving," Tatum cut in.

We both faced her.

"What the fuck?" Billy snapped.

She pushed her shoulders back. "I said, I'm not leaving."

"Jesus, Tatum," he muttered, and I sensed the kind of irritation that sounded like it was common between them. "Why do you always have to argue with me over shit?"

"Why do you always have to try to control me?"

He scrubbed his hand over his face, pissed off. "You stay with him, I can't guarantee your safety."

"I'm not asking you to, Billy. I'm asking you to trust that I know what I'm doing."

"I do trust you. I'm just wondering why the hell you're choosing a biker you've just met over me who you've known for years?"

"I have my reasons." Tatum projected an image of strength but somewhere in those words I heard that waver. And like Billy, I had to wonder why she willingly chose Storm over him.

Stepping away from him, I said, "I'll be by tomorrow to pick up our supplies."

His eyes bored into mine, full of hatred and venom. "I'm not sure I want to supply you anymore."

I didn't have a chance to reply before Tatum went to battle. "Billy, whatever you've got going on with Storm has nothing to do with me. They saved me from that asshole and now they're looking out for me again. If I really wanted to leave, there's not a damn thing Nitro could do to keep me. It's my choice to stay. Don't base your business decisions on this."

Billy's hate-filled expression didn't alter as he took a step back, but he listened to everything she said. "Send someone else tomorrow, Nitro. I don't ever want to see you again."

As he strode away from us, Tatum said, "What the hell happened between you two?"

"A lotta shit a long time ago," I muttered before stalking back inside the clubhouse.

Shit I'd never forget. And if I was the kind of man who forgave, I'd never forgive it either.



After I dealt with Billy, I searched for Renee and Dustin in the clubhouse. I'd called them earlier to let them know it wasn't safe to stay at the house. They'd both promised to be at the clubhouse by the time I returned. However, I couldn't find either of them anywhere. Instead, I found Tatum.

"Vegas, you seen Renee or Dustin?"

She glanced up at me from the table she sat at in the bar. "No, should they be here?"

"Yeah. It's not safe for them to be out there on their own." I pulled out my phone and sent both a text.

"Do you want me to go get them? Like, if you have other stuff to do, I could take your ute and find them."

I paused as her words settled over me. It was an offer I wasn't used to people making. In my world, help didn't often come from those outside my family or the club. And I didn't much trust anyone else. But whichever way I looked at it, I couldn't see what Tatum would be angling for by making the offer.

When I didn't reply, she pursed her lips and said, "Or not. If you don't want my help, that's fine, too."

I pulled out the seat across from her and sat down. Tension rolled across my shoulders as unease punched its way through my body. "Why did you choose to stay here rather than go with Billy?"

"You were hardly going to let me go."

"Billy went into bat for you. I would've thought you'd have let him try harder."

"I'm not dumb, Nitro, I could see a problem ahead for you if I hadn't chosen to stay. Billy would never have let it go."

"Since when do you care about my problems?"

Her eyes searched mine as silence hung between us. She sat back in her seat and crossed her arms. "I wouldn't exactly say I care about your problems. I just didn't want any part of Billy losing his shit with you."

I turned that over in my mind. Something still didn't gel for me. "I'd imagine you see Billy lose his shit often."

"I do."

I leaned forward. "So why did you care about that happening between us?"

"Why do you care why I care?"

"My job is to keep you safe. I don't need any surprises catching me off guard, so I want to know the shit running through your mind."

"Bullshit. What's running through my mind has nothing to do with your ability to keep me safe."

I slid my chair closer to her, taking note of the way her whole body tensed. "Maybe I just wanna know why you chose to stay here with me."

Her breathing slowed a fraction and she remained silent for a beat. She lowered her voice when she finally answered my question. "You've saved my life twice now. Both times you didn't have to. I don't know why I chose to stay with you, but if someone helps me when they get nothing out of it, it means something to me."

Not the answer I expected.

Not by a long shot.

I stood and reached for her phone. After I sent myself a text so I had her number, I said, "I'll text you when I'm ready. You can come with me to find them. It'll give you a break from the noise here. Turning to leave, I paused and added, "I did get something out of it, Vegas. I kept Billy on side."

Her voice filtered through the crowd as I walked away. “Not the first time.”

TATUM

“Voodoo Child” by Rogue Traders

The silence in Nitro’s ute was bliss. After a morning of being cooped up in the clubhouse with rowdy bikers and their family members, I craved the peace and quiet. Nitro had taken forty minutes or so to text after he left me in the bar, and I hadn’t hesitated to meet him out the front when the message came through.

“You waiting on a call?” he asked after about fifteen minutes of us keeping to ourselves.

I looked up from my phone that I held in my hands. “Yeah, from my cousin. One of my girls is staying with her at the moment and I just want to make sure she’s doing okay. Her boyfriend is an ass and it wouldn’t surprise me if he’s gotten in her head and convinced her to go home.”

“Does she usually take this long to return your calls?”

“No.” And that had me worried.

He nodded but didn’t say anything further. We drove the rest of the way to his house in silence, but instead of my mind being focused on Monroe for that time, my thoughts were completely fixated on Nitro. I wondered what had happened to him in life that made him so closed off? I’d met a lot of men who didn’t do much talking, but none quite as detached as Nitro. As much as I didn’t want it to be the case, the man fascinated me. Because while he appeared to be a moody asshole, I’d become convinced there was a lot more to him under all that. It was probably buried deeper than most people would be willing to search, but I wasn’t most people.

He pulled his ute into the driveway of his house and jumped out. I followed him inside as fast as I could in an effort to escape the rain.

Nitro's home was as cold as he was and I shivered as I entered it. Following him down the hallway, it struck me again how bare his home was. Each room had the absolute necessities in it; actually, some rooms didn't even have that. Two out of the three bedrooms were completely empty of furniture, the lounge room had only a couch and television, and besides those rooms, there was only a kitchen, dining room, bathroom and laundry.

"How long have you lived here?" The words were out before I could stop them.

Nitro didn't slow down to answer me; he simply called over his shoulder, "Fifteen years."

"Fifteen years?"

He finished searching the bedrooms and turned to face me. Frowning, he replied, "Yes, fifteen years."

"Why don't you have any furniture if you've lived here that long?"

Staring at me like I'd asked the world's most redundant question, he said, "I gave it to my sister when she and Renee moved out."

"They've just moved out?"

"No, they got their own place a few years ago." He continued his search of the house while I followed blindly behind him, unable to let go of my need to understand him.

"And you still haven't replaced the furniture?"

He stopped abruptly and gave me his attention again. "Why the twenty questions, Vegas?"

I held his gaze. "I'm trying to figure out why you don't have any furniture."

"No, you're trying to figure out *me*. You're a lawyer, it's what you do. But I'm telling you now, there's nothing to figure out. I'm a man who has no interest in furniture or decorating or any of that bullshit, so quit with all the questions."

I stepped closer, leaving very little space between us. "I don't believe that, Nitro."

"Believe what?"

"That there's nothing to figure out. I think there's a lot you keep hidden."

His nostrils flared and when he spoke again, his voice held a dangerous tone. "Last night you wanted nothing to do with me. I'm not

sure what the fuck happened between then and now, but let's go back to the way we were."

My lips spread out in a grim smile. "That's the thing about life... We can't often go back to the way things were."

"Yeah, well, *we* can, and we will." His words fell out in a harsh directive before he pushed past me and stalked to the front door. When he reached it, he called out, "Wait here while I go check for Dustin at Marilyn's house. Lock the door after I leave." With that, he left, the front door banging after him.

I strode to the door and locked it.

God, he could be a prick. A moody, stubborn prick who I would avoid if I knew what was good for me.

It seemed I never quite learnt my lessons very well in life.



He'd been gone for about ten minutes when two men snuck into his front yard, balaclavas in place, and guns in their hands. I'd been keeping watch from the front window of his lounge room when they appeared.

They were almost to his front door when one of their phones rang. The guy with the phone paused to answer it while the other one waited behind him. A short conversation ensued before the guy with the phone slipped it back into his pocket and said something to his mate. They then continued their trek towards the front door.

My fingers curled around the gun I'd found stashed in Nitro's cupboard when I searched it just after he left me alone. I hadn't been able to resist snooping, but had been disappointed when all I'd found was the gun. As well as owning very little furniture, he didn't keep many personal belongings.

I watched as Nitro entered the yard, picked up his pace and advanced on the two guys fast. A few moments later, he punched the guy at the back in the head, causing him to stumble forward. With the element of surprise, he managed to wrap his arm around his neck and knock the gun out of his hand.

The guy struggled, trying to shift Nitro's arms. As he fought, his friend turned around to help him, but Nitro pointed his gun in his direction. "Stay where you are or you'll stop breathing," he barked.

The guy ignored Nitro's threat and immediately lunged at him. Nitro fired, but the guy had ducked low enough when he'd lunged to avoid the bullet. When he landed, it was with enough force to knock all three of them to the ground. A fight then broke out, and I feared that Nitro was at a disadvantage being on his own against two.

Exiting the house, I made my way to where they fought. Nitro's eyes briefly met mine as he knocked one guy flat on his back before turning to deal with the other guy who was right behind him. I didn't miss the scowl in his glance, but chose to ignore it. Pointing the gun I held at the guy Nitro had just knocked down, I said, "Don't move, asshole."

He stared up at me, his eyes holding a clear challenge. "Or what, blondie?" As he said the words, he moved to stand.

Without hesitating, I shifted the gun so it aimed at his leg, and I pulled the trigger. "Or I'll fucking shoot."

"Motherfucking bitch!" he roared, his agony spilling out all over the place.

The gunshot slowed him, but it didn't stop him completely. Figuring from the way he moved that I must have only grazed him with the bullet, I took aim again. That time, the bullet did what I wanted it to—it slowed him right down, planting him on the ground, clutching at his bullet wound. A string of expletives and threats spewed from his mouth, but my attention had already shifted to Nitro.

"You got a spare bullet there, Vegas?" He had the other guy on his knees facing me. Nitro had his arm around his neck in a vice grip, and the guy struggled for breath while trying to claw his way out of the choking hold.

I nodded. "Where do you want it?"

"In his leg."

As I took aim and shot, a black van screeched into Nitro's driveway and two Storm bikers jumped out. Everything happened in a blur after that. Nitro and the two bikers quickly moved the two men into the back of the van and then the vehicle and all the men were gone, leaving me staring at Nitro in surprise.

"Where did they come from?" I asked as he guided me inside his house.

"I saw their bikes on my way back here from Marilyn's and called King for backup."

I jumped as he slammed the door closed behind us. Staring at him, I processed the anger written across his face. Anger that seemed to be directed at me rather than at what just happened. "What?" I demanded, tensing for an argument.

"I gave you one directive when I left the house—stay inside." His eyes flashed with as much fury as his body seemed filled with.

"You needed help so—"

"No, I didn't. What I needed was to know you were inside away from those assholes."

"I seem to recall that you asked me to put a bullet in one of those guys *after* I already did the same thing to the other guy. How is that *not* needing my help?" God, he was so damn infuriating.

"While I appreciated that, I would have preferred for your safety to not have been compromised."

"My safety wasn't compromised so I don't know why you're carrying on about it."

He blew out a long breath and raked his fingers through his hair. "I'm carrying on about it because I don't want this kind of shit to happen again."

We faced off, both glaring at each other in silence for a few moments. I was annoyed as fuck at his inability to admit my help was appreciated, but the lawyer in me took the time to think through what he'd said and why.

Finally, the tension in my shoulders eased and I said, "You were worried about me."

He blinked and his breathing slowed. It took him a beat to reply, and when he did, it came out a little snappish. "Of course I was. The last thing I need is Billy coming down on me because you got hurt."

I shook my head. "No," I said quietly, "you were worried about me and it had nothing to do with Billy."

His face clouded over and he clenched his jaw. "Tatum, we don't have time to stand around arguing over this. You need to get our ass outside and in my ute so we can find Dustin and Renee and then get back to the clubhouse." He barked his orders like he was used to them being carried out.

Stepping closer to him, I said, "I'm not sure why you can't just admit you were worried about me, Nitro. It's okay to care about someone's safety." With that, I pushed past him so I could head out

to his damn ute. Bloody men and their inability to admit when they cared about someone.

NITRO

“Kick Start My Heart” by Alannah Myles

I'd had enough of Tatum Lee and her argumentative ways. The woman seemed intent on pushing as many of my buttons as possible. Every time I thought we were getting somewhere and that she would just do as I said, she managed to get under my skin, again.

And yet, she fucking impressed the hell out of me. When she'd put a bullet in the Silver Hell member without flinching, and then done it again, I'd watched in awe. I wanted to wring her neck for not staying inside while at the same time, I wanted to rip her fucking clothes off and see just what she was made of.

I wanted to know if she fucked the way she seemed to live—full of passion and fierce energy. And that shit right there sent alarm bells ringing all over the damn place because wanting to know that about a woman wasn't something that ever interested me.

I turned to her, my hands squeezing tightly around the steering wheel as I thought about her naked body wrapped around mine. “What's your cousin's address?”

She'd been silently watching the streets pass by as I drove. At my question, she faced me, a frown set across those gorgeous lips of hers. “Why?”

“So you can check on her.”

“What about Dustin?” Renee had texted just after we'd left my place to say she was at the clubhouse, so Dustin was the only one we still needed to find.

“I'm pretty sure I know where he is. The fact Silver Hell sent two members to my house just now tells me they didn't send anyone earlier, so I'd say he's safe and we have time to look in on your cousin.”

"I thought you were in a hurry to get back to the clubhouse."

I gripped the steering wheel even tighter. "Fuck, Tatum, do you ever stop questioning shit?" I glanced at her as I asked this and caught the flattening of her lips as she stared at me.

A moment passed, and then she rattled off an address before adding, "Thank you."

I gave a quick nod and steered the car in the direction of her cousin's place.

Fifteen minutes later, we pulled up outside a tattoo parlour. I cut the engine and turned to her again. "She works here?"

Reaching for the door handle, she shook her head. "No, she owns it."

As I followed her inside, I wondered who I was about to meet. If her cousin was anything like Tatum, I'd have my hands full.



"Monroe, meet Nitro, the pain-in-my-ass biker who likes to boss me around," Tatum said, gesturing towards me before adding, "Nitro, meet Monroe Lee, my cousin."

Monroe eyed me warily before asking Tatum, "This is the biker who saved you?"

Tatum nodded.

The wary glint in Monroe's eyes didn't leave, and resentment crept into her voice as she said to me, "Why can't you leave her alone? She's done nothing to you or your club."

Before I could reply, Tatum held her hand up. "It's okay, Roe, he's actually trying to keep me alive. Silver Hell found out I was there the other night." Her eyes met mine. "But he does like to issue orders left, right and centre, which is annoying as hell."

Her cousin didn't back down and I saw Tatum's feistiness in her. They looked nothing alike—Monroe had voluptuous curves and huge tits whereas Tatum's curves were much smaller, and Monroe had flaming red hair in contrast to Tatum's blonde—but their inner fight seemed the same.

Monroe squared her shoulders and challenged me. "So you'll keep her alive and then let her out of your sights?"

"I don't make promises to anyone."

"Figures," she muttered, her glare not letting up. I had to respect a woman who stood her ground.

"Why haven't you been returning my calls and texts this morning?" Tatum asked, diverting her cousin's attention. "I've been worried about you."

Something passed between the two women and Monroe's eyes softened. "I'm sorry, I forgot to charge my mobile and I paid the shop's phone bill late, so they suspended my service."

Tatum let out a long breath and her body visibly relaxed a little. "Thank God."

Monroe touched her on the arm. "Posey's okay. She's out the back with Fox, giving him a haircut."

Tatum frowned. "Huh?"

"Yeah, who knew your girl was a hairdresser as well as a stripper? We've been quiet this morning and got to chatting, and when he found this out, he asked her to cut his hair." Her gaze zeroed in on Tatum's face. "How are you? That eye still looks nasty."

"I'm sore, but I'm okay."

"That eye's gonna take a little while to heal and so are her ribs," I said.

Monroe's attention swung swiftly back to me. "If it wasn't for bloody bikers, she wouldn't be in this mess," she snapped.

I stepped forward and got in her face. "Careful," I warned. "Far as I can see, Tatum got herself into that mess."

Monroe's eyes flashed with venom and she shoved her face closer to mine, which intrigued me. These Lee women seemed to have no fear. "Because a *biker* murdered her brother!"

Tatum slid between us, her back to me, and forced Monroe away. "Let it go, Roe. Nitro hated that man as much as I did."

"I don't get it, Tatum. Yesterday you wanted nothing to do with Storm and now you're defending *him*."

"A lot can happen in a day. I'll fill you in later, okay?"

Monroe sent one last glare my way before agreeing to what Tatum had asked. It was obvious to us all, though, that the last thing she wanted to do was let it go.

"Tatum," a petite blonde woman said as she entered the parlour from a back room. She walked with hesitation, her eyes not meeting mine. "Did Dwayne go by the club last night?"

"I haven't heard anything to say he did," Tatum replied. "How are you doing?"

Before she could answer, a guy joined us. Tattoos covered almost every inch of skin I could see, and I figured the familiarity between him and Monroe that he worked with her.

Leaning casually against the front counter of the parlour where we stood, he frowned at Tatum. "Who the fuck gave you those bruises, T?"

I folded my arms across my chest and clenched my jaw. This guy may have been familiar with Monroe, but there was something intimate about the way he spoke to and looked at Tatum. *Something that irritated the fuck out of me.*

"No one important, Fox, and he won't ever do it again," Tatum said. The fact she seemed closed off to discussing it with him caused the tension in my shoulders to ease a little.

"Yeah, well if he does come back, you call me, okay? I'll take care of him for you, babe."

"He won't be back," I grunted, unfolding my arms. "And I've got Tatum under control."

Her gaze swung to meet mine and she raised her brows. "You've got me under *control*?"

"I've got the situation under control." I didn't let her gaze go.

"Yeah, that's better," she said, irritation still clear in her tone.

We stood watching each other for a few moments, a new tension settling between us. It was as if everyone else in the room faded away leaving only the two of us. Again, I found myself facing an inner battle of being both frustrated with her and turned on, all at the same time. This was an unfamiliar feeling and it unsettled me. I usually kept sex separate to every other part of my life. The women I fucked weren't women I associated with, and I never formed a relationship with any of them. Brittany was the exception to that and my association with her hadn't turned out well.

Monroe's voice cut through my awareness. "No one controls Tatum, Nitro."

Without taking my eyes off Tatum, I said, "I'm getting that impression."

Fox pushed off from the counter. As he moved past Tatum, he placed his hand on her stomach and slid it across her body as he said, "I've missed you, T. You should call me."

She gave him a smile, and although it seemed vacant and didn't reach her eyes, I couldn't help balling my fists at my side.

Fuck.

My stomach churned with annoyance, which in itself also pissed me off. What did I care if he was fucking Tatum? She was nothing to me. Nothing but a woman I had to keep alive for my club.

And yet I couldn't deny that the sight of his hand on her stomach sent a wave of fury through me. I didn't want his hand anywhere on her body.

TATUM

“Break On Me” by Keith Urban

I eyed King warily. The man scared me, and it wasn't often I said that about anyone. Nitro and I had arrived back at the clubhouse hours earlier after finding Dustin and since then, Nitro had been busy with club stuff. I spent the afternoon catching up on work in the bar as well as chatting with Renee. King had wandered through the bar a few times, directing a glare my way each time. There was something about him that I wasn't quite sure of. What I did know for certain, though, was that King was a man to be kept at arm's length. The sooner I escaped his radar, the better.

“He's okay,” Renee said, dragging my attention back to her.

“Who? King?”

She nodded. “Yeah.” At my frown, she continued, “I know he comes across as freaking scary, but he's helped our family a lot over the years. Don't get me wrong, I wouldn't cross him, but I definitely know he's loyal to those who are loyal to him.”

I looked back over at King who stood near the entrance to the bar. He was deep in conversation with one of the club members, a nearly bald guy who glanced at me a few times while they talked.

Turning back to Renee, I said, “All I know is that for those he has no loyalty to, he's unpredictable and can be an asshole. And word on the street is that he's a man to avoid, so it'd be fair to say I'm not impressed by him.”

She smiled. “I like that about you, Tatum.”

“What?”

“That you say it like it is. And that you don't let Nitro get away with shit.” At my surprise, she added, “He might be my uncle and I

might love him to death, but he can be a jerk. He's way too bossy and I like that you challenge him."

I laughed. "You're smart for a teen, you know that?"

She stared at me in mock offence. "Are you saying teens aren't smart?"

As she spoke, my attention shifted from her to the bald club member King had been talking to. He made his way to us and rested his hands on the backs of our chairs. "Tatum, you got a minute?"

Looking up at him, I asked, "Who are you?"

"Devil."

I liked that he asked me rather than bossed me into giving him a minute. "Sure," I said, standing and following him out of the bar to a kitchen.

I was surprised to find Nitro there, his head down while he scrolled on his phone. When Devil and I entered, he looked up but didn't say anything before going back to what he was doing on his phone.

He'd pretty much ignored me since we left Monroe's. He ran so hot and cold with me, but since he'd spoken to Fox, he'd been like ice. I hadn't asked him yet, but I wondered if he knew Fox somehow, because irritation had rolled off him while in Fox's presence.

"What's up?" I asked Devil, ignoring Nitro.

"Got a question for you about Billy. How likely is he to renege on a deal?"

"Your gun deal with him, you mean?"

"Yeah."

"Usually I'd say that if you don't piss him off, you'll have no worries. The fact he's pissed off at Nitro doesn't help you."

Nitro's head snapped up. "In other words, you're telling us he's unreliable."

"No, what I'm telling you is that *you* shouldn't be involved in the deal at all."

He scowled. "That's not practical. We don't make deals with assholes who dictate which member they will and won't work with."

"There's always a first time for everything, Nitro."

"No," he said, his voice rising, "there's not. Not for me."

"God, are you always this frustrating?" His refusal to bend did my head in. As far as I could see, this was a no-brainer. All they had to do was get another club member to take over this deal.

He shoved his chair back and stood, his chest puffing out as he pushed his shoulders back. "I'm trying to get shit done for my club, and all we need to know is one simple thing, Tatum—will your asshole boss go back on the deal we made with him?"

I stepped closer to him. I had no idea what caused him to get so worked up this fast, but I was just as worked up now. "I don't like you referring to him as an asshole all the time. And I've answered your damn question. You stay out of it and there won't be any problems." With that, I stalked out of the kitchen back to the bar. Trying to have a rational conversation with Nitro was ridiculously hard, and it was safer for me to leave than to keep arguing with the man.

Pulling up a stool at the bar, I ordered a drink. If I had any luck, it'd put all the irritation out of my mind for a few hours.



"Tatum, I think you've had enough for tonight," Renee said at around ten that night.

I blasted a smile her way and raised my glass. "I'm only getting started." With that, I emptied my glass and placed it on the bar for a refill.

The chick behind the bar had kept the drinks coming all night and she didn't let me down. Swiping the glass, she said, "The same?"

I nodded before glancing back at Renee who frowned at me.

"I'm going to bed," she said. "Don't drink too much more. You really have had enough."

"You're a sweet kid, Renee. Nitro's lucky to have you in his life."

Watching her walk away, I couldn't help but think about my brother. Chris used to look after me in the same way Renee appeared to care for Nitro. I missed him so much it physically hurt. Monroe loved me hard, but it would never be the same as a twin's love. That kind of love came from a place I couldn't even begin to describe. Without having to think, we just knew how the other was feeling; we knew when the other needed us; we felt pain and hurt and all the emotions of each other on a bone-deep level. Knowing I'd never have that again had almost killed me. I'd wanted to die when Chris died.

"Tatum."

I squeezed my eyes shut as Nitro's voice washed over me. When I opened them again, I found him sitting on the stool next to me. "I'm not in the mood," I said, weariness kicking in. I really wasn't. The last thing I wanted to do was go another round with him.

"Not in the mood for what?"

I drank some of the rum that had been placed in front of me before saying, "For your bullshit."

He didn't respond straight away, but I did note the vein that pulsed in his temple. I drank some more rum and waited for him to speak. Finally, he said, "Renee told me you've been drinking all night."

Frustration with him consumed me and I swivelled on my stool to fully face him. Ignoring the pain that shot through me as I did that, I snapped, "Am I not allowed to drink while being held hostage?"

That vein ticked again.

"You can drink as much as you want."

"So why are you here then?"

He stared at me in silence for a long moment. Then, raking his fingers through his hair, he said, "If you've got something to say, say it. I'm not a mind reader."

I drained my glass of rum and leaned closer to him, wobbling on the stool from all the alcohol I'd consumed. "Billy has always had my back and was one of the people who dragged me from hell after my brother was murdered. You might not get on with him, but I do, and I refuse to talk to you about him anymore, so if you've come here to ask me more about him, you can leave now." The words rushed out and I was almost breathless by the time I got them all out. I gripped my empty glass hard as I acknowledged the tension I felt in his presence. I'd never had this kind of feeling around a man before. It was putting me off my game, causing my mind to short circuit.

He curled his hand around my wrist. "Anyone ever tell you how fucking sexy you are when you get all passionate about something?"

My gaze dropped to his hand. His touch fucked with my ability to concentrate even more than his presence already had. My lower belly was in a state of what-the-fuck-are-you-doing? My skin was in

a state of “holy fucking hell let him touch every part of you” and my vagina had pulled out the fucking welcome mat.

“Vegas,” he growled, and my eyes immediately shot back up to meet his.

“I don’t know why you insist on calling me that,” I muttered. Nicknames were for people you liked. I didn’t want him calling me that. We had no relationship other than the one where he made sure I survived and then we never saw each other again. I could ignore my desire for him if we could just get to the part where we went our separate ways.

“And I don’t know why you always argue about shit.”

“Because you make me!” I blurted it out and instantly regretted the outburst. It was so unlike me, and that right there was what Nitro did to me—he made me forget who I was now and what I needed to do to get through my days. He caused my mask to fall.

“How the hell do I make you argue with me?”

I snatched my arm from his hold and moved off the stool. Picking up my bag, I said, “I don’t know, you just do.”

He slid off his stool. “Where are you going?”

“To bed.”

“Yeah, where?”

It was then I remembered where I was and the fact I had no clue where I would sleep that night. As that realisation hit, I did something I never did. I burst into tears.

“Fuck,” I spluttered, madly wiping the tears from my face. *Why the hell am I crying? I never fucking cry.*

The harder I tried to stop crying, the harder I sobbed. It was all too much. The fact I was almost raped; Nitro and King dictating what I had to do; another club after me; a fucking bomb... it all overwhelmed me. And although I was damn good at not acknowledging when I felt like life was too hard, I struggled with that this time.

Nitro stared at me, his body stiffening as a look of complete bewilderment settled on his face. In amongst all the thoughts flying at me, I wondered if he’d ever seen a woman cry before because it sure as hell looked like he had no idea how to handle me.

And then he did something that took me by complete surprise. He moved close, put his arms around me and enveloped me in a hug. It was an awkward hug, but one nonetheless.

I rested my head against his chest. I was tired. So damn tired. Closing my eyes, I cried my exhaustion out. Nitro's arms remained around me, like a reassuring blanket keeping me warm when all I felt was freezing cold.

I didn't move when I stopped crying. I didn't want to. And Nitro didn't force me to. Instead, he said, "Come, I'll show you where you can sleep." With one arm still around my shoulder and my body pulled into his, he led me out of the bar. It didn't escape my attention that while he held me firm, he did his best not to hurt my injuries.

His room was small. It contained a double bed, wardrobe, and chair, as well as a tiny bathroom. Totally like his house—minimal furniture, no personal items to be seen. Renee slept on the bed, and there was an inflatable double mattress on the floor.

Letting me go, he jerked his chin at the bed. "You sleep next to Renee."

I looked up at him. "Where's Dustin sleeping?"

"He's in another room."

I nodded. "Okay." Moving to the empty side of the bed, I removed my boots and jeans before sliding under the sheets.

Nitro watched me and once I was settled, he left the room. It didn't take long for sleep to claim me. The long day full of drama and the alcohol I'd consumed made sure of that.



"Mum!"

Where was she?

I ran to her bedroom to find her.

She wasn't there.

I searched the whole house.

She was nowhere.

Tears fell down my cheeks as my body crumpled against the wall.

My heart raced in my chest.

She was always home. She never left us alone after school.

Chris entered the room, and I knew from his face and the way his shoulders hunched over a little that he didn't have anything good to tell me.

"Mum's gone," he said, waving a piece of paper in the air, his eyes sad. "And she's never coming back."

My dream slammed into my consciousness and I sat up straight in bed, pain from my ribs spreading through my body like ripples across water. Sweat coated my forehead. My hair stuck to my neck in a clammy mess. Tears wet my cheeks.

"Oh, God." I dry-heaved as I shoved the blankets off and stumbled into the bathroom. This dream always made me feel sick, and the alcohol in my system only made it worse.

Leaning over the toilet, I vomited.

More pain ricocheted through me.

I vomited again.

Another round of pain gripped my body. I thought for sure my ribs would snap from the violent shudders as I threw up.

Please make this stop.

Please.

I swayed as another wave of nausea assaulted me.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I reached out and placed my hand on the wall to hold myself up. My head swam with dizziness and I struggled to draw breath in.

Just as I thought I would pass out, strong arms circled me from behind, taking care to avoid my ribs as best they could. Warm breath hit my ear as a deep voice said, "Vegas. I've got you."

Always saving me.

I leaned my head back, against his chest, and took a deep breath. Nausea rolled through me again and I retched one last time. Nitro held me and pulled my long hair back as I vomited. I wasn't sure why, because it was already coated in puke.

When I finished, he slid one arm across my chest and held me tight. His body leaned away from mine as if he was reaching for something. A moment later, he flicked the tap on before then placing a wet washcloth to my forehead.

"You need to vomit any more?" he asked.

I shook my head slowly. "No, I'm done."

His arm dropped from my chest and he turned me to face him. Handing me the washer, he said, "Here, clean your face. I'll get you a towel so you can have a shower."

He was right—I needed a shower. But I wasn't sure I had the energy to give myself one. I took the washer, though, and nodded. "Thanks." It barely came out as a whisper, but he heard and returned my nod before leaving to find a towel.

The coolness was a welcome relief against my warm skin. I held it over my face the entire time Nitro was gone. Truth be told, I didn't want to move it away. I liked the dark shield it gave me from the world.

I didn't want to deal with the world that night. All my emotions had been stirred up in the last forty-eight hours, and I'd gone from being numb to feeling like I wanted to come out of my skin. My soul was alive with feelings and I didn't know what to do with them. My usual response was to bury them deep, but that didn't seem possible.

"Here."

With another deep breath, I removed the washer from my face and looked up at Nitro who stood watching me with a serious expression tinged with concern.

I placed the washer on the vanity and took the towel he offered.

When I didn't speak, he asked, "You need anything else?"

"No, I'm good. Thank you."

He hesitated for a beat, as if he was unsure whether he was still needed. It seemed so out of character for him. Well, for the man I knew so far. Something told me there was a whole other Nitro hidden under the gruff asshole exterior he presented to the world. Certainly not a Mother fucking Theresa, but I'd seen enough to know he had the ability to care for people.

Once he decided I was okay on my own, he left the bathroom, closing the door quietly behind him.

I sagged against the vanity.

Fuck.

I took a minute to centre myself before pushing off from the vanity and slowly removing my clothes. It fucking killed to move because of the agony my ribs were giving me, but I eventually stepped into the shower and let the warm water soothe my aching body.

I cleaned myself and washed the vomit from my hair. Nitro's toothpaste was in the shower so I also cleaned my teeth. I couldn't recall the last time I'd been that sick. Usually alcohol didn't cause me that kind of hell. Which told me it also had to do with my messed-up mind.

When I finished, I dried myself off and wrapped the towel around me. I had clean clothes in my bag that we'd picked up from

Nitro's house earlier that day, so I opened the bathroom door to go in search of them.

Nitro sat on the seat waiting for me. Darkness surrounded him except for a small amount of light shining in from outside, just enough to see. Enough to make out the uncertainty etched on his face. He stood as soon as I entered the room. His gaze dropped to take in the towel I wore and he immediately reached for my bag and placed it on the chair.

"Thanks," I murmured and unzipped it.

He remained silent while I dug around in the bag for something to wear. The stillness in the room unnerved me more than I already was. I suddenly found myself in a state I hadn't found myself for years.

I need shelter.

Someone to tell me it was going to be okay.

That I'd get through this Silver Hell nightmare.

I needed to borrow someone's strength to make it through the night. Because for the first time in a long time, I felt so alone in the world.

Swallowing down my desperate urge to beg Nitro to be that person for me for one night, I concentrated on dressing.

He stood close, watching, waiting. When I was done, I glanced up at him. "Sorry to wake you."

He frowned and opened his mouth to say something but quickly snapped it shut. "You good now?" His voice was gruff.

No.

"Yeah." My voice cracked and I tried to cough it away. When tears pricked my eyes, I quickly turned away from him and muttered, "Night."

I took a step away, my body slicing through the heaviness that clung to the air around us.

A single tear slid down my cheek.

I took another step, holding my breath, willing the tears away.

God, what the hell is wrong with me?

Nitro's hand clamped around my wrist. "You were crying in your sleep." His voice was still gruff and it sounded like he was uncertain about pursuing this conversation.

I stilled and slowly turned back to look at him. As I did that, an avalanche of tears fell. I didn't even try to hide them. Instead, I

stared up at him in all my vulnerability. The effort it took to hide myself was too great to keep up.

My hand turned as I did, and I curled my fingers around his wrist. Holding tight, I said, "Can I sleep next to you tonight?"

I wasn't sure what I expected from him, but it wasn't what he gave me. His eyes held mine, never wavering. His uncertainty vanished and he nodded. Letting me go, he stepped back to let me past.

Sometimes the person you least expected was the person there for you in the dark of night. *In the middle of your nightmare.*

Nitro gave me what I needed that night. He let me settle on my side next to him and when I reached for his arms, he spooned me, wrapping me in his embrace.

He lent me his strength.

And for the first time in longer than I could remember, I slept like a baby.

NITRO

“Knocking’ On Heaven’s Door” by Guns N’ Roses

Something shifted between Tatum and I during the night. Our bodies were tangled when I woke up, my dick hard as hell and the desire to fuck her stronger than I’d ever known with any other woman. Aware that her ribs still gave her hell, I attempted to untangle us slowly. One of her legs was draped over my body, as was an arm. Half her body was actually on me and her face was buried in my chest. As I moved, she stirred. A moment later, her eyes met mine.

The way her body moved when she woke meant she pretty much ended up completely on top of me, her tits pressing into my chest and her pussy sliding over my morning wood. Which meant my dick screamed its need loud and clear for both of us to notice.

She’d worn only panties and a T-shirt to bed and the shirt had ridden up. My hand landed on the bare skin of her waist when she shifted. The control it took not to slide it down into her panties was immense.

“Morning,” she said with a sleepy smile as she planted her hands on the mattress either side of my body and pushed herself up so she straddled me.

“Fuck,” I groaned. “You trying to kill me here, Vegas?” Glancing down the length of my body, I took in her pussy and legs either side of me. My dick was fucking straining in his effort to get inside her. And to be hit with that smile first thing in the morning—if a man wasn’t already awake, that smile would wake him up.

“I’m pretty sure you’re invincible, Nitro.”

I raked my fingers through my hair and took a deep breath. “And I’m pretty fucking sure any man who had you sitting on top of him

when he woke up couldn't withstand you." Jesus, Tatum was the only woman I'd ever known who'd managed to make me want to flirt with her. I could have spent hours in that bed trying to get in her pants.

She grinned and it struck me that she'd had a complete turnaround in mood from the middle of the night. "You're so much nicer first thing in the morning." With that, she moved off me and stood.

"No, I'm nicer any time a woman shoves her tits in my face. It's got nothing to do with the morning."

She glanced down at me. "I didn't shove my tits in your face. If they came anywhere near you it was accidental."

I sat up and tracked her ass as she walked into the bathroom. The door closing behind her caused me to groan. I wanted more of that sexy banter with her. And fuck if that thought didn't come out of the fucking blue.

My phone rang while she was in the bathroom.

King.

I answered it, "What's up, King?"

"Need you to go for a run today, brother."

"Where to?"

"We got a tip-off about where Silver Hell are hiding out. I want you to take some of the boys out there to check on it."

"I'll be ready in ten."

We ended the call and I waited for Tatum to finish in the bathroom so I could take a shower. When she exited, I said, "I've gotta head out to check on something. Can you do me a favour?"

"Depends what that favour is," she said, her tone a little flirty. Fuck Silver Hell and them getting in the way of me staying in this room.

"Can you check on Renee and Dustin for me this morning? Make sure they're okay." Renee was already out of bed and had left the room. She loved to watch the sunrise every morning.

Her eyes softened. "Sure."

"Thanks." I took the few steps to the bathroom, but before I entered, I turned back to her. "You good, Tatum?"

Surprise flickered across her face, as if she hadn't expected me to ask. "Yeah," she said, but I heard the hesitation in her voice. "Thank you for last night."

I nodded and slipped into the bathroom.

I wasn't sure what had happened during the night, but I couldn't deny the pull I felt to her. From everything I'd seen so far, Tatum was fearless, but in the middle of the night, her nightmares had come to life. I told her she'd been crying in her sleep, but what I didn't tell her was that she'd also been thrashing around in the bed.

I'd wanted to wake her up and drag her into my arms.

I'd wanted to take her bad dreams from her.

When she'd asked if she could sleep next to me, I hadn't hesitated to say yes. Because if there was something I knew well, it was the nightmares that claimed your sleep and fucked with your head. I couldn't stop mine, but maybe I could help ease hers if only for a night or two.



"Where did this tip-off come from?" I asked Kick as we stared at the empty block of land we'd been told Silver Hell were staying at.

"I'm not sure, but I guess it was to lessen the number of members at the clubhouse."

"Yeah, my guess, too." I'd called King to advise him to be alert.

King had sent us, along with four other members, to check the site out. Our orders were that if we found anything we were to call it in and sit tight, keeping an eye on them, rather than to take them on. King had more members ready to send if we found anyone. The site was just out of Gosford and had taken us a little over an hour to get to. I was pissed off at the time we'd wasted.

"Right, let's round the boys up and head back," Kick said, his expression revealing he was as annoyed as me.

Five minutes later we pulled back out onto the highway and straight into a shit-storm of bullets. We'd discussed the possibility of that happening and had been vigilant, but our enemy had hidden well. Before my brain caught up to the fact that bikers were roaring onto the highway from behind trees, one of our members copped a fatal bullet and his bike careened off the road, crashing into a tree. There was no time to think about that, though, because eight Silver Hell members were gunning for us. If I wanted to keep breathing, I needed to think fast.

Thank fuck we brought a van with us. King always insisted on it whenever we went on a run. He liked to ensure we always had extra weapons if we needed them. Blow was driving it, and when I made the signal for him to pull up, he screeched to a halt. I was the closest to him and quickly circled back and pulled in behind. The back doors opened and he threw me a rifle.

Kick and Devil had taken point, which gave me some breathing space. Silver Hell members fanned out across the highway about fifteen to twenty metres in front of us. I stepped out from behind the van, took aim at the closest member and squeezed the trigger. His attention had been on Kick, so he never saw the bullet coming.

As a Silver Hell member fired at me in retaliation, I ducked behind the van for shelter. Blow took over from his point at the front of the van, as was our practiced plan. I waited a few moments before sticking my head around the side to see what was happening. Kick was stationed on the ground behind his bike, narrowly avoiding bullets, as were two of our other members. Devil ran my way.

I moved back behind the van and reached inside for another rifle. Devil rounded the back of the van, and over the sound of gunfire, I yelled, "Anyone else taken a hit?"

He shook his head as he took the rifle from me. "No."

We stepped out from behind the van together, rifles ready. I whistled loud, alerting our members to get down. They immediately ducked and we opened fire. Blow also fired from in front of the van while Kick and the boys continued shooting from their positions.

Devil and I had the best aim of any Storm member and soon half the Silver Hell members were down. As the gun battle waged on, I knew there was only one way this fight would be won. And so did they.

Kick made the first move, running from his bike towards Silver Hell. Devil and I covered him while also moving forward. Our other members followed suit and soon the battle plan changed. Knives and fists replaced guns as our weapons of choice and we engaged in a furious fight to the end.

The lonely stretch of highway was a silent battleground, but we filled that silence with the sounds of shattered bone and tortured grunts.

My face was a blood-coated sticky mess by the time we'd managed to shrink our enemy to two. Blow had been knocked uncon-

scious, but not before he took out a Silver Hell member. Kick dragged him to the van before re-joining us. With Silver Hell losing so many members, I thought we had a good chance at making it out without losing any more of our men, but I was proven wrong.

"Kick!" Devil shouted, drawing my attention because of the horror-filled tone he used.

Time passed in slow motion as I watched Kick take a bullet to the chest. He didn't go down straight away, but as soon as he did, my fighter instincts took over.

Without processing the consequences, I charged at the guy who shot Kick. Grunting low and deep, my body slammed into his and pushed him backwards. I didn't stop moving until he was on his ass, at which point I bent over him and punched him hard in the face. I punched him straight on, so fucking hard that his skull hit the road with a loud thud.

Running on autopilot, I delivered bone-crushing punch after punch to his face. My hands were coated in blood and he'd stopped moving, but I continued slamming my fist into his face.

It felt good.

Satisfying.

My brain filtered out the sounds around me. My only focus was killing this motherfucker.

"Nitro! Fucking put a bullet in him and be done, brother," Devil yelled out.

With one last punch, I straightened, wiping the sweat from my forehead, really only succeeding in replacing it with blood from my hand. As I did this, another gun sounded and I whipped around just in time to see Jerry, another of our members, go down. Bullet after bullet riddled his body and I knew he had no chance of surviving that.

"Motherfucker!" Devil cried out. Aiming his gun, he shot the guy who killed Jerry. At the same time, I pulled my gun out and fired at him, too. I then turned and pumped bullets into the asshole who shot Kick, ensuring he would never take another breath.

As I surveyed the scene in front of me, my breaths came hard and fast. Devil and I were the last men standing. Blow was unconscious in the van. Jerry and Kick lay dead on the road, and Cruise, our first member to take a bullet that day, was dead on the side of the road.

“Fuck!” I roared, meeting Devil’s eyes. “Fucking hell.” I could hardly catch my breath as adrenaline and anger raced through my veins.

Devil’s eyes were wild. Murderous. Clenching his jaw, he thundered, “They will fucking pay for this. I don’t care if it takes me the rest of my life, they will regret this day.”

We stood in the middle of the highway with bikes and bloody bodies strewn around us with the smell of death and destruction in our nostrils, and I vowed to go to hell with him. We would burn in the depths of hell to exact our revenge.

A grunt filled the silence around us as we promised retribution. My head whipped around to see who made the noise. It was Kick. His leg twitched as he gasped for air. Jesus, he was still breathing.

Devil and I moved fast, getting Kick into the van. I drove while Devil did what he could to keep Kick alive. On the way, I called King so he could organise a clean-up crew and the collection of our bikes. And I sent prayer after fucking prayer out that Kick survived this. Not that I believed in the power of prayer, but at that point I figured we needed as much help as we could get. I wasn’t sure Kick would make it.

TATUM

“Falling For You” by Lady Antebellum

The day passed slowly. Or maybe that was because my mind kept drifting to Nitro, and that then caused the ache between my legs to intensify, which in turn made me wonder when he'd be back. This all, of course, led to time dragging while I waited. Not even my work managed to consume me like it usually did.

“Fuck,” I muttered. *Who am I today?* I never spent my time thinking about a man in this way anymore. I couldn't deny, though, that most of my time had been spent on him that day.

Nitro had been there for me last night. When I'd been an emotional mess, he'd looked after me in ways a man never had before. Not even Chris had been there for me like Nitro had. Who would have thought a man who appeared so closed off from people would be the one there in the middle of the night?

When I'd woken that morning, I'd felt like shit. My head hurt—from both a mild hangover and from crying during the night. I'd expected Nitro to be all awkward with me, so the first thing I did was smile at him, trying to stop any possible awkwardness. Either that smile worked really well or Nitro was so horny that his dick was doing all the thinking.

He'd flirted with me, which was the last thing I'd expected from him. For a guy who wore moody like a uniform, he sure knew how to have some sexy fun with a chick. It was absolutely what I'd needed that morning. The only problem being that he'd stirred a whole lot of desire in me that I'd been trying to avoid thinking about since I'd met him. Being attracted to his looks was one thing, but this was

something else altogether. I was beginning to see Nitro in a new light and I couldn't deny I liked these new sides to him.

"You waiting for your man?"

I glanced up to find the dark-haired woman behind the bar watching me expectantly. She was the one who'd kept my drinks coming the night before. I shook my head. "No, I'm not with any of the bikers."

Frowning, she cocked her head. "What about that guy you were with last night, just before you left?"

"Nope. I'm stuck here with him, but he's not mine."

Still frowning, she said, "Huh, coulda fooled me. The way he hung off every word you said and the way you guys argued... I would have sworn you two were together."

My belly fluttered. I placed my hand on it as if to tell it to settle the hell down. "You misread him. Nitro doesn't hang off any words I say. Although, if I were to tell him I wanted sex, he'd probably hang off those words."

She laughed but her expression soon turned serious. "I know what I saw and trust me when I tell you that I don't generally misread people. I have a kind of sixth sense about people."

I paused for a moment. "Are you a psychic or something?" She did have that look about her with her long wild hair, crystal jewellery, earth-mother waif figure and flowing dress.

She hit me with a brilliant smile that turned her pretty face into magnificent beauty. "I wouldn't say that, but I do sense things." She held out her hand. "I'm Kree by the way."

I shook her hand. "Tatum. Nice to meet you." And I actually meant it. I didn't bother with most people anymore, but Kree had an energy that drew me in.

"You want a rum?"

"God, no." Memories of being sick during the night ran through my mind. "But I would love an orange juice."

She frowned. "It sounds like that rum last night didn't treat you well."

"Let's just say I won't be having any more for a long time."

As she poured me a juice, a blood-curdling scream filled the bar and I turned to see who it came from.

King had a petite woman in his arms just outside the doorway and I could vaguely make out her head buried in his neck. Loud

sobs came from her. And then she lifted her face to his and screamed, "No! He can't die!"

King said something to her that I couldn't hear, and she once again placed her head on him and sobbed. He held her for a few minutes. I was fairly certain he would have held her for longer except for the fact a screeching noise outside distracted him and he left her to go out there.

The woman leant against the wall near the bar entrance and I watched as her body slid down it to the floor. Shudders racked her body. The pain she felt was palpable. So much so, it pierced my heart. Feeling my way through that pain, I slid off the bar stool and made my way to her.

Joining her on the floor, I pulled her into my embrace. Running my hand over her hair, I tried to soothe her and take some of that pain from her. But I knew—*God, how I knew*—people couldn't carry your load; they could only wipe your tears and wait your time out with you.

I'd only been sitting with her for a few minutes when King stormed back inside. He halted when he saw me, surprise in his eyes. A beat of silence passed between us and then he nodded, as if he was pleased with what he saw.

"Can you take her to Nitro's room?"

I put two and two together and knew why he wanted her taken away. Nodding, I said, "Yeah."

"Thanks," he said gruffly. It was the first sign of emotion other than anger or frustration that I'd seen from him.

He turned and exited the clubhouse, and I somehow managed to get the woman to a standing position. Her arms clung to me and her head remained down while she cried.

I placed my hand under her chin and tilted her face to look at me. "I'm going to take you somewhere quiet now. You good to walk?"

Eyes that held her distress stared back at me. She didn't speak but she did nod, so I held her close and led the way to Nitro's room. I laid her down on his bed and settled myself next to her, sitting with my back to his headboard with my arms wrapped around her.

We sat like that for a long time. I wasn't sure how long it had been when she sat up and said, "I-I need to go." She stumbled over her words and gulped back a sob. "Need to know if he—" Her hand flew to her mouth as her face crumpled. "Oh, God."

Her long hair had fallen across her face so I tucked it behind her ear. "King will come to you when he has news. He knows where you are."

She blinked a couple of times as she processed what I said. As she did that, her vacant stare seemed to shift and her awareness altered so that she actually saw me. "Who are you?"

"I'm Tatum. You?" I didn't bother giving her any further details because I figured she was in no frame of mind to even want them. She surprised me, though.

"I'm Evie, Kick's wife. Are you with one of the guys or a family member?"

"Neither."

Her forehead crinkled. "Huh?"

"It's a long story."

She grimaced. "I have time."

Yeah, I guessed she did and maybe I could help her pass it. I leaned my head back against the headboard and exhaled. "I'm here because Nitro's under orders to keep me alive. Silver Hell want me dead, and Storm want me alive because of my ties to a guy they're in business with."

"Why do they want you dead?"

"One of their guys murdered my brother. I was involved in his death recently and they found out." The words came out clinically as I stared straight ahead and concentrated on keeping my mind as blank as the wall I was looking at. *Concentrated on keeping my sadness at bay.*

She reached for my hand and held it. The gesture took me by surprise. Touch was something I'd denied myself for a long time. Well, except for sex, but that didn't count anymore because that was purely physical. There were no emotions tied to it. Evie's gesture was bound with emotions and I sucked in a sharp breath. Monroe was my person. My *only* fucking person. No one else was allowed to breach my walls. And yet, in the space of a few days it felt like my damn walls were being scaled all over the place.

I ripped my hand out of hers at the same time the door flung open. Nitro entered in a gust of caged energy, his eyes wild, his face covered in blood, his clothes torn and dirty. He came to a sudden stop when his eyes landed on us.

"Fuck," he muttered, his chest rising and falling with hard thuds.

Evie bolted forward in the bed, scrambling in her haste to get to him. "Is Kick—" The words tore from her, cutting off abruptly as if she didn't know which word to use next.

My soul twisted with an ache I'd never rid myself of at the pain I heard in her voice. That kind of agony would always touch me regardless of my efforts to maintain immunity.

Nitro faltered and his eyes came to mine. Searching. Needing. *Unsure*. He shoved his fingers through his hair as he shifted his gaze back to Evie. "He's with the doc."

I left the bed. Looking up at Nitro, I said, "Evie will be the first to know when there's news, right?" I wanted him to reassure her of that and hoped he would.

He didn't let me down. "Yeah."

Evie, however, seemed anything but convinced. "No... I need to see him now." She was confused. Disbelieving. Before either of us could stop her, she ran from the room.

"Christ!" Nitro turned to go after her, but I grabbed hold of his wrist to stop him.

"Let her go. She needs to see for herself."

He frowned. "There's nothing to see. The doctor is still working on him."

I nodded. "Yes, and she needs to see and hear that from King."

He moved past me to the bed, sitting on the end of it. His shoulders hunched and he lowered his chin to his chest. He remained silent until I closed the door behind me. Looking up, he said, "Thanks for looking out for Evie."

I sat next to him. I wasn't sure why except that for the first time since I'd met him, he seemed like he needed someone. Even if it was just to sit with him. I stole a glance at his face. It was hard to find skin under all the dried blood. "I take it the other guy lost."

He held my gaze for a long time before answering me. God, how I wondered what thoughts ran through Nitro's mind. It felt like he either ran from them or got lost in them, but I wasn't convinced he was often comfortable with them. *Something we had in common*. "That depends on your definition of winning."

I didn't need him to spell it out for me. And I didn't push him for more. Instead, I walked into the bathroom. Locating a clean washer in the drawer, I wet it and walked back out to him. Standing in between his legs, I began the task of cleaning up his face.

This was something I knew well. My brother had often turned up on my doorstep in this state. Caring for him had always been my responsibility. How could it not be when his journey in life had been dictated by my own?

Nitro hissed when I accidentally pressed too hard on his cheek. His hand landed on mine and he halted my progress. "I can do this myself."

I pulled my hand away from his face. "Yeah, you can, but I'm doing it, so just let me."

"Always arguing with me," he murmured, allowing me to go on.

I worked in silence and when I'd cleaned the blood from his face, I said, "I'm going to get some ice for your face. Wait here."

I hurried down to the bar because I figured he had work to get back to and no time to waste. Kree loaded me up with ice and a towel to wrap it in. When I arrived back in his room, he was in the shower. He didn't take longer than a few minutes and when he exited the bathroom wearing only a towel around his waist, I sucked in a breath at the magnificence of his body.

Nitro was a powerhouse of hard muscle that went hand-in-hand with his fearless warrior instincts. Standing before me, almost naked, his masculinity caught me off guard and a rush of desire hit me. My thoughts stalled and I momentarily forgot what I was doing. All I could focus on was the throbbing need deep in my core. A new hum filled my entire being, unlike anything I'd ever felt before.

Damn.

Shit.

No.

"You got ice?" His deep voice snapped me from my hypnosis.

"Ah... yeah," I mumbled, shoving the towel with the ice in it at him, almost dropping it as I did so.

He frowned, his eyes searching mine. "You good, Vegas?"

Fuck, no, I wasn't.

I was fucked.

Completely.

I nodded, swallowing hard. "I'm good."

I was so far from good.

I wanted something I didn't want to want.

I wanted him.

How the hell did my world turn in such a short space of time? What the fuck triggered that? Because whatever it was, I needed to un-trigger it.

He took the ice from me and turned to head back into the bathroom, grabbing clothes on the way. I was helpless to do anything but watch him walk away. My eyes stayed glued to the powerful muscles that built his back. And that ass. *God, that ass.* Even covered in a towel it was hard not to stare at.

I was so engrossed in his back and ass that he caught me off guard again when he dropped the towel and dressed without closing the bathroom door.

Fuck it, I was out. I yanked the bedroom door open and left as fast as I could. I needed to find a quiet corner and gather my thoughts. I needed to wipe everything that had just happened from my memory. Somehow, though, I suspected Nitro was not a man to ever be wiped from a woman's memory.

NITRO

“The Way It Goes” by Keaton Simons

“You’re fucking kidding me!” I stared at King in shock, waiting for his reply. It was nearly midnight and I was exhausted after the shit we’d been through, but what he’d just told us had sure as fuck drawn my attention.

Weariness lined King’s face; he was feeling it as much as anyone, maybe more so. “I’m not,” he said. Although he didn’t give me the answer I wanted, I heard the misgiving in his voice. “Bronze is under pressure to clean this mess up and he doesn’t think he can keep us out of it much longer if we continue the way we have been. He wants us to lay low for a while and let the dust settle. That shit Silver Hell pulled today didn’t help.”

“So,” Devil cut in, “any idea how long we have to back off for?”

“Not to mention, how the fuck does he expect us to not retaliate when Silver Hell come at us again?” Hyde said, a scowl on his face. “Because sure as shit they’re going to.”

King held his hand up signalling he wanted the floor. “The list of potential charges he rattled off is enough for me to pay attention. I’m going to call a truce—”

The room erupted in chaos as he made his announcement. None of us wanted a truce; we wanted to bury the motherfuckers.

“Enough!” King roared, slamming his hand down on the table in front of him. “Let me fucking finish!” When he had everyone’s attention again, his eyes glittered with the crazy he was known for and he continued, “The truce won’t be forever. And we’ll use the time to make plans. No one kills a Storm member and gets away with it. I fucking promise you that.”

With that, he stood and ended the meeting before leaving the room. I knew he was heading back to see the doctor about Kick. I also knew he wouldn't sleep until he knew Kick was going to pull through. That was King—loyal to his men until the very end.



Tatum's eyes met mine as soon as I entered the bar after I left the meeting. She looked away almost as fast as she looked at me.

I pulled up a stool next to her at the bar a moment later and jerked my chin at the woman Kick had found to replace Brittany. Kree Stone. From what I'd heard, she'd kept the bar running with no problems the last couple of days.

"What can I get you?" she asked as she drew close. I didn't miss the frown she sent Tatum's way before giving her attention to me.

I ordered a beer and once she left us, I said to Tatum, "Something bothering you, Vegas?"

She'd left me without a word earlier. That was after she made it clear she wanted to clean up my face. Fucking confusing. I had no clue what was on her mind and I had no interest in dealing with female issues that night, but I also didn't need shit interfering with club business. If there was a problem, I wanted to know about it for that reason only.

She faced me. "I'm just trying to get through this, Nitro, and right now I don't feel like talking."

I swallowed some beer. "That makes two of us, but I need to know if you've changed your mind about staying here."

The confusion she looked at me with matched my own. "Why would I have done that?"

"Because there's a lot of shit happening around here. And you seemed to be taking it okay until you walked out on me this afternoon. You've gone from wanting to clean my face to not wanting to look at me or talk to me. I don't know what the fuck happened, and I don't really care except if whatever it was causes you to call Billy and screw up the shit we've got going on."

She pushed off her stool and picked up her phone. "I'm not going to screw anything up. And fuck you. Just when I start thinking you've got something here"—she jabbed at my chest—"you prove

me wrong." With one last filthy glare, she stalked away from me. If I thought I was confused before, I was at a fucking loss after that outburst.

I threw back some more beer. "Fucking women," I muttered as I raked my fingers through my hair.

"I see you fucked that up."

Jerking my head up, I found Kree watching me. "Fucked what up?" I demanded.

"You were an asshole to her just now."

I gripped the beer bottle tighter. "Most women would tell you that's my specialty, but I don't see how I fucked anything up because there was nothing *to* fuck up."

Her mouth spread out into a small smile as she shook her head. "Clueless too, I see." She rested her elbows on the bar. "I'll give you a tip—when you want to sleep with a woman, you should never tell them you don't care about something that's on their mind. It makes their vagina snap closed."

My shoulders tensed. "Let me give *you* a tip, Kree. Stay the fuck out of my business if you want to keep this job. And for the record, I might have wanted to fuck Tatum, but pussy is easy to come by. And when it comes without fucking baggage it's even better."

"That's where you're wrong. Sure, travelling without baggage seems easier, but when all is said and done, it's what's in the baggage that makes the trip sweeter."

I drank the rest of my beer and shoved the empty bottle her way before sliding off the stool. Without another word, I stalked out of the bar. I didn't need another woman getting in my face that night. Tatum was enough of a fucking handful to be dealing with.



The next morning, I woke before sunrise after only a few hours sleep. Renee was fast asleep but Tatum was nowhere to be seen. I dressed and went in search of her.

She sat outside, wrapped in a blanket, on the wooden bench I often sat at myself when I was seeking solitude. The first rays of light cracked through the sky as I stepped through the front door of the clubhouse, illuminating her face as she stared out into nothing. She

turned to me as I approached, the hard set of her jaw from last night gone.

"It's cold. You should get something warmer on," she said, surprising me. *Always surprising me.* I'd expected another tongue-lashing, not more care from her.

She was right, it was cold, but my jeans and long-sleeved T-shirt were enough for me. I didn't tend to feel the cold too much.

I sat next to her. "You sleep okay?"

She stared at me for a long moment before sighing. "Do you really care?"

I scrubbed my hand over my face. "Fuck, Tatum, I'm not a complete bastard. I know you think I am, but—"

Her hand moved over my arm and her fingers curled around my wrist. "I don't think you are, but you sure make it hard for people to think otherwise."

My gaze was glued to her hand wrapped around my wrist. Her touch heated my skin like no other woman's ever had before. The desire to fuck her took hostage of my mind. And on top of that, there was something else. Something I'd never experienced before. A desire to take her into my arms and just be with her. The idea of simply holding her, even if I wasn't inside her, took hold like a needy fucking child.

Jesus, I was losing my shit. Even my breathing was under siege. Breaths forced their way from me in choppy waves. I stood, forcing her to let me go. "I'm hoping to get you home today or tomorrow. We should have things settled soon so it'll be safe for you to be home." I said, leaving the rest of our conversation unspoken.

She blinked. It was her only reaction to my swift change of direction. Thankfully, she moved right along with me. "How's Kick?"

I gripped the back of my neck, massaging the kinks out. "I'm about to check on him. Doc was hopeful he'd pull through the night, but it was touch and go for a bit there."

"So you guys have a doctor on call who comes here rather than you going to him?"

I nodded. "Yeah, it's better that way."

"I bet," she muttered, her words full of acid.

I wasn't a fucking mind reader so I had no understanding of why she switched her inner bitch on all of a sudden. My irritation at whatever the hell was happening between us flared into anger. "You

bet? You have no fucking clue who we are or what we stand for, so don't come here and throw your opinions at me."

Her eyes widened and she stood in such a hurry and came at me with such force that she nearly knocked me over. I didn't see her hand coming until it was too late. She slapped my face and spat out, "That was for all the asshole things you've said to me! And maybe you'll recall that I didn't choose to come here. And as far as me giving you my opinions... get the fuck used to it, because I keep my mouth closed for no one."

As she strode back inside, I tried to push the realisation away that I'd checked on Tatum before Kick. I really was losing my shit.



"Kick's doing better," King said to me later that afternoon. "Doc's hopeful."

We stood out the back of the clubhouse, the cold wind whipping around us. Winter this year had been a bitch with unusually high winds and heavy rain, and that day hadn't been any different.

I shoved my hands into my pockets. "Evie's doing okay? The baby?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I had the doc check her out, too, and she's fine."

"Good."

"I'm meeting with Dragon tonight."

"And?" I understood the need to call a temporary truce, but I didn't like it. That was why King would always make a better president than me. I would have led Storm right into hell because of my need to seek revenge. There would have been no coming back if I was in charge.

"I'll take Hyde and some of the boys with me while you and Devil watch over things here. I'll call you once it's done." He stopped for a beat, his eyes boring into mine. "If that call never comes, you need to see this through."

Fuck.

"That's not a scenario we ever wanna see around here, King. Take me and leave Hyde. He can see shit through if needed, but you never want to leave that up to me."

Determination lit his eyes as he shook his head. "No," he said with force. "Hyde's not in the right place mentally to do it at the moment. You are."

I sucked in a breath. "I don't know what's going on with Hyde, but I'm telling you, honest as fuck, that I'd take everyone down with me if I had to lead the club out of this shit. There would be no club left."

The determination in his eyes glittered and morphed to crazy. "I'm counting on it, Nitro. If this goes south today, I want you to deliver a level of pain they've never known." His face twisted with hate. "I want you to rip their fucking hearts from their bodies and burn their club to the ground."



I sat at a table in the corner of the clubhouse bar alone that night, waiting for King's call. The mood in the bar was sombre. We all knew what hinged on the meeting with Silver Hell, although no one besides Devil knew of King's orders for what was to go down if he was unsuccessful. That shit had fucked with my mind since he'd issued the directive. I was a soldier, not a fucking leader. I'd been indoctrinated in the art of war from a young age and had always known my place as a soldier. I served. I carried out orders. I got shit done. What I didn't do was command, so that call from King needed to come.

Tatum entered the bar with Evie and took a table on the other side of the room. My presence remained unknown so I was able to observe her freely. She'd stayed out of my way all day. In fact, I hadn't seen her since she'd slapped me that morning. That didn't mean she was far from my mind. On the contrary, she'd fucking filled it nearly all day.

I couldn't get the night she'd slept in my arms out of my head. Or pretty much anything since that night. Tatum was broken and I found myself wondering who did that to her. I knew a lot about her, yet I knew nothing important. Someone somewhere had shattered her, and she'd built walls of steel around her heart. Her mood altered so often I struggled to keep up. The fact I tried to keep up pissed me off.

"Nitro, you need to come and sort Dustin out."

Renee stared down at me. She'd had a hard few days at the clubhouse, hating the confinement. Most of her time had been spent in my room working on school assignments. Standing, I said, "What's he done?"

A tired sigh escaped her lips. "What do you think he's done? The usual."

"Jesus," I muttered.

"It's okay, he hasn't taken it too far yet, but I can tell the woman has had enough of him. I came to you before it got out of hand." Thank fuck. The last thing I needed to be dealing with was another of Dustin's screw-ups.

I followed Renee, stealing one last glance at Tatum. Up closer, I could see that her lips were pressed together in a smile that didn't reach her eyes. She watched Evie talk, but I wasn't convinced she heard her.

I caught her attention as we moved past her. Our gazes locked. She didn't smile, but she did sit up straight in her seat and turn her head to track my movements. She bit her bottom lip and her chest rose as she took a deep breath.

My phone rang at that moment. I held her eyes while I answered it, distracted as fuck. "Yeah?"

"Nitro."

King.

I snapped to attention, letting Tatum out of my sight. "You're done?"

A pause. And then, "It's done."

I let out the breath I'd been holding for hours.

Thank fuck.

TATUM

"To Be Loved" by Curtis Stigers

Three Weeks Later

"You look like shit," Monroe said as she poured me a drink. Sliding it across the kitchen counter, she added, "Is Billy working you too hard?"

"It has been busy, but nothing more than usual." I drank some of the rum and Coke she gave me. Friday afternoon drinks had been a thing for us for a year, ever since the day I was disbarred. We usually frequented a pub near her work, but for the last three weeks we'd chosen to have drinks at my house instead.

Her eyes narrowed at me. "So what gives then?"

It wasn't a question I hadn't asked myself. What the fuck *was* wrong with me? I leaned my elbows on the table and rested my chin in my hands. "I honestly don't know, Roe. I thought I'd feel better after that Silver Hell biker was dead, but I don't. I feel worse. Or, maybe not worse, just something different, but still bad. Ugh, I can't even describe how I feel." Tears pricked at my eyes and I sighed. Pointing at my eyes, I muttered, "And look! I fucking cry for no reason these days. Ridiculous." I shoved my drink away. "And I don't want rum. I want Milo."

The room turned silent while we stared at each other, me through tears, Monroe through surprised eyes. And then she did what Monroe does—she moved into action and tried to fix me.

She picked up the glass of rum and emptied the liquid into the sink. Then, she pulled the fridge open and grabbed out the milk. Next, she reached into the pantry for the tin of Milo I always had on hand and made me the drink I craved.

Placing the mug of Milo in front of me, she said, "Drink that and let's work this shit out because no fucking way can I have Friday drinks in your house anymore. And I certainly can't do fucking Milo on a Friday afternoon. *Milo!*"

My mouth curled into the first smile I'd smiled all week. Placing both hands around the mug, I drank my drink and waited for her to continue.

"Right, let's count all the ways you're fucked." She held up one finger. "Firstly, you were raped and beaten up by an asshole biker. And I know you say it wasn't rape, but it doesn't matter if he didn't fuck you with his dick, it was rape. That's gotta screw you up and I'm pretty sure you haven't even attempted to emotionally deal with that." She held up a second finger. "Next, your brother was murdered nine months ago and as much as you thought that his murderer getting what he deserved would make you feel better, that was never gonna be the case. The only thing that would make it all better is if Chris had never been killed in the first place." She held up another finger. "Third, you've spent the last three weeks watching your back because although Nitro told you that you were safe, who the hell knows what these fucking bikers are capable of? I know you hate admitting defeat, but, babe, you are scared. And I don't blame you, but you need to talk about this shit and stop bottling it up. That's what's bringing you down—you won't ask for help and at this point, you need all the help you can get."

I nodded slowly. "You're right. You always are." Tears slid down my face. "But I don't know the first thing about asking for help, Roe."

Her face softened and she reached for my hand. "Oh, babe. I'm always here for you. I do think, though, that you should consider therapy."

My whole body tensed at that suggestion. Dredging up my past was the last thing I wanted to do.

When I didn't agree with her, Monroe leaned forward across the counter and said softly, "Let's not forget your mother's death, the end of your marriage and your disbarment. I know those things

aren't as recent, but they're all things I don't think you've finished working through. You get up every day and put on your boss-ass-bitch pants, and you take care of everybody else's problems, but you never take care of yourself, Tatum. I want you to love yourself first and I'm fairly fucking sure you're gonna need a professional to guide you through that process."

I exhaled, long and hard. And I made a snap decision. Monroe was right. I was sick of feeling like shit. It was time to reclaim my life. And I was going to need a fucking shrink to even begin to wade through the crap in my heart.

I raised my mug of Milo at her. "Cheers, Roe."

She raised her glass and said, "Cheers to a psych? Or cheers to something else?"

I laughed and drained my mug. "Cheers to a psych and no more fucking Friday afternoon drinks at my house."



Billy glanced up at me as I entered his office three days later. He did a double take and put his pen down as he frowned and shoved his chair back to stand. "Jesus fucking Christ, Tatum. What the hell happened to you?"

I collapsed into the chair across from him. Leaning my elbows on my knees, I looked at him through puffy, blurry eyes that had done more crying in two hours than they'd done in years. "I hired a shrink. She made me talk."

His body sagged in what looked like relief and he sat back down. "Thank fuck."

I smiled. "You *do* care."

He scowled. "Of course I fucking care. I put a guy on you after King sent you home and you had me worried for a minute there that he hasn't been doing his job."

I sat up straight and frowned. "Wait. You have someone watching me?"

"Did you think I wouldn't?"

"I don't know. I guess I just never thought about it."

He sighed. "When are you going to figure out how important you are to me? And I'm not just talking about the shit you do for me

here. It fucking killed me when you chose Storm over me. I needed to know you were safe and with you locked up in their clubhouse, I had no idea. I won't allow that to happen again."

"I don't care what anyone says, you're a good guy, Billy Jones."

"Yeah, well don't spread that around. I have a reputation to uphold and it's easier to get what I want if people think I'm a bastard."

Moments like this were so rare with Billy. Hell, moments like this were rare in my life full stop. My heart expanded to take it all in. For once, I didn't push the warmth away. I let it all in and fuck if it didn't feel good.

Tears threatened again, so I swiftly changed the subject. "Posey's back tonight."

"Good. Almost four weeks without her and they're screaming for her. Has her asshole-ex finally decided to leave her alone?"

"Yeah. He's actually moved to Melbourne." I gave him a smile. "Thank you to whoever you got to help with that decision."

"I should have done that sooner. Any news on those drug charges?"

I stood. "Duvall got them dropped completely. They wouldn't have stuck in court."

He grew pensive for a moment. "It seems Duvall is a worthwhile ally."

"Whatever you're thinking, stop. Duvall has done his time with you, Billy. I won't be asking him to help us ever again."

He raised his brows. "And it seems your heart isn't completely buried."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "You're confusing the hell out of me today."

"Why?"

"When I came to work for you, you told me this was no place for emotions and that I should never get involved with anyone we worked with. Now it seems like you want me to open myself up."

His eyes flashed dark. "To me, Tatum. I want you to open up to *me*. Don't mistake my words for something they're not." He dismissed me with a wave of his hand. "Go work your magic with the girls. I'm sick of hearing them bitch about each other. Sort them out for me."

It was no wonder Billy had the reputation he did. He was a contradiction. One minute you felt the sun with him, the next, clouds. I

understood that roller coaster because I lived it, too. And I'd always have his back regardless.

NITRO

“Cold Hard Bitch” by Jet

“I don’t want to,” Marilyn said as we pulled up outside my house.

“I know, but even your doctor agreed this is for the best,” I said, opening the car door and exiting.

I made it around to her side and took in the foul expression on her face. She shoved the door open, her mood in full swing. “So you and my doctor are going to run my life now, are you?” With that, she stalked inside, leaving me to contemplate the intelligence of my decision to have her stay with me for a while. Yet, there wasn’t even a choice as far as I was concerned. I’d go to the ends of the fucking earth to make sure my family were okay.

I grabbed her bag out of the boot and followed her in, ready for whatever she threw at me. As soon as the front door closed, she swung around, glare still in place. “Is everyone staying at the moment?”

Dustin dropped the TV remote and moved off the couch. “The mattress is mine. The floor is too hard for my back. Even Tatum said the floor was too hard.”

Marilyn frowned. “Who is Tatum? And just for the record, I’m not sleeping on the damn floor, Nitro. I’ll go home to my bed before that ever happens.”

A smile lit Dustin’s face as he proceeded to fill Marilyn in on Tatum. I blocked his voice out and took Marilyn’s bag into my room. He hadn’t shut up about Tatum for weeks and I’d heard enough. My dick had fucking heard enough, because every time her name fell from his mouth, it shot straight to my cock. I needed a goddam break.

They were arguing about sleeping arrangements again by the time I made it back out to the living room. Raising my voice, I barked, "Marilyn can take my bed and I'll take the fucking floor. Okay?"

Both heads whipped around in surprise. "No need to yell," Dustin said, hurt flashing in his eyes. He didn't cope well with anger.

I raked my fingers through my hair, agitated as hell and unsure why. "Yeah, well you two need to let up. We all have to stay here for a bit and I'll lose my shit if you keep arguing."

Marilyn withdrew after that, burying her head in a book on the couch. Reading was her preferred way of blocking out the world and her doctor had warned me she was spending nearly every waking hour with her nose in a book. As far as I was concerned, better that than drowning herself in a bottle of cheap wine. The main thing I cared about was that she kept up with her bi-weekly therapy sessions, and I would make sure that happened.

Dustin stared at Marilyn for a beat. He'd always struggled with our sister's tendency to spiral into dark places. His mind couldn't seem to wrap itself around anything but light and happy. They may have fought a lot, but Dustin would do anything to put a smile on Marilyn's face.

Finally, he turned and headed out the back door. I knew I'd find him in the shed if I needed him. He'd be working on one of my bikes. I always had at least two out there I was working on. It was the one thing we did together. The one thing that eased both of our demons.

My phone rang, dragging me from the problems at home.

Hyde.

"What's up, brother?"

"Need you to meet Billy today to collect our next shipment."

"I thought you were doing it with Devil." I was the last person Billy would want to see. Not that I gave a fuck, but I was all for keeping peace at the moment.

He blew out a harsh breath. "Got some family shit to deal with that I can't get out of. And King's busy. I could send another one of the guy's with Devil, but he wants you to do it with him. He would have taken Kick, but no way would King let that happen." He was

right. Although Kick was itching to get back to work, he hadn't recovered enough to do this.

I swiped my keys off the table. "I'm in. What time?"

He gave me the info and then said, "Thanks, brother. I owe you one."

It struck me how odd the conversation was after we ended the call. Hyde never told anyone he owed them.



Devil and I arrived at the drop-off point dead on time. We'd attempted to be early, but traffic had dictated otherwise. We backed the van into the driveway as were our instructions and sat with it idling while we waited for the signal to reverse into the garage.

Billy used a house in Alexandria for this. The street was narrow with high fences all the way down it. Trees and flowers everywhere gave an impression of a friendly neighbourhood, but I always wondered what people did behind closed doors. Most people I knew had shit to hide.

Two bangs on the back of the van signalled it was time to reverse. Devil eased the van backwards and the automatic garage door closed at the same time as bright lights illuminated the space. I jumped out and took in the length of the garage. It wasn't your standard suburban fit out. By my estimation, another two vans could fit there.

Heels clicking across the cement floor and the jangle of bangles drew my attention. I looked around to find Tatum walking our way. Jesus, could she get any sexier? I adjusted my pants as my gaze travelled the length of her. She wore the tightest fucking jeans known to man and a white tank top with a skull and wing design on it that sat perfectly across her tits and revealed her toned arms inked with those tattoos I could spend hours investigating. I'd checked out her ink briefly when she'd been holed up at the clubhouse, and the designs were so intricate and full of such detail that I knew the more you looked, the more you'd find. I wanted to know what she'd chosen to mark her skin with for life.

"Tatum," I greeted her, planting my feet wide and crossing my arms over my chest.

If she was surprised to see me, she hid it well. Instead, she nodded and said, "Nitro." And then shifting her attention to my left, she said, "Devil."

"Billy's not joining us today?" Devil enquired.

Shaking her head, Tatum said, "No, he's been called away and asked me to take care of this delivery." She motioned for one of the men who flanked her to open the boxes on the wood pallet in front of us.

Devil and I inspected the shipment and once we were satisfied with it handed payment to Tatum. After we loaded the guns into the van, Devil lifted his chin at her. "Good doing business with you, Tatum. It's a sweet change from seeing Billy's ugly mug." With a wink, he headed to the passenger side and waited in the van for me.

Tatum's eyes met mine. It'd been three weeks since I dropped her at her home and told her to stay safe. It hadn't been three weeks since I'd seen her, though. Dustin might not have stopped talking about her, but I hadn't stopped watching her. Not every day, but a couple of times a week at least. I needed to make sure she was okay. That Silver Hell hadn't broken our truce. That was what I'd told myself to begin with, anyway. I wasn't so sure anymore.

"You good?" I asked.

She nodded. No smile, though. "Yeah."

The pull to her was intense. I'd felt it every time I watched her. Pure animal need pulsed through my veins when I caught a glimpse of her and it did my head in. The fact I had never experienced that with another woman told me she was dangerous. So I checked on her, but that was all I did.

Devil banged on the side of the van, reminding me to stop fucking around. Tatum took a step back. Her expression still blank, her thoughts a mystery. No more words were exchanged and a minute later, I exited the garage.

"Billy should send Tatum to do every delivery," Devil said. "A woman who knows how to execute a transaction with no emotions and no problems. She might just be my perfect fucking woman."

My gut twisted at the thought of Devil pursuing Tatum and I gripped the steering wheel hard.

When he continued to describe the ways she was perfect, I scowled. "Can we talk about something fucking useful?"

He raised a brow and smirked. "I see the blonde has you wound tight, brother. You tap that?"

My irritation only grew. "No, I didn't fucking tap that."

His smirk disappeared. "I'm thinking you need to. Because I've gotta tell you, you've been a bundle of fucking joy to be around since we called the truce. I'm not blind, Nitro. I saw the way you were with her and any fucker could see your dick was straining to get in her pants. So take care of business and get your shit together because we need your fucking attention on the club right now, not on some chick."

I smashed my hand down on the steering wheel. "*Fuck.*"

Fuck it all to hell.

He was right.

TATUM

“Kill The Lights” by Luke Bryan

I held the glass to my mouth, eyeing the blackjack dealer over the rim. Adrenaline spiked in my veins and my heart beat faster as I contemplated winning this hand. I'd been counting the cards and by my calculation I would win this hand. Throwing some rum back, I indicated to him that I would stand. I then drummed my fingers on the table as each player finished their hand. Holding my breath, I watched in anticipation as the dealer completed his, a thrill shooting straight through me when he busted.

Fuck yes.

“You look like you can afford to buy me a drink, Vegas.”

Nitro's deep voice and warm breath on my bare shoulder startled me and I jumped. “Fuck,” I muttered, swinging my head around to face him. Amused eyes watched me with intent, affecting me in the way only he could.

I gathered my chips and slid off the stool. Looking up at him, I said, “How do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Your face is so damn serious but it's like your eyes are laughing at me.”

Those beautiful eyes of his flashed with amusement again. “Fairly sure you bring that out in me,” he murmured. I had no idea what he meant but didn't ask him to elaborate. At that point, I just wanted to cash my chips in and get another drink. Alone.

“Are you here looking for another biker to send to hell?” Memories of the night we met at this casino filled my mind. It was just over

three weeks ago and yet it felt like I'd known Nitro a hell of a lot longer.

"Smartass," he muttered, but he wasn't scowling at me. He actually appeared to be in a great mood. Well, as much as I assumed Nitro could experience a great mood.

When he didn't give me anything else, I said, "Okay, well, I'll let you get on with whatever it is you're doing."

As I took a step away from him, his fingers snapped around my wrist and he stopped me. "What I'm doing here is you, Vegas." His voice took on a husky tone, the kind of tone that hit a woman right in the belly and caused her brain to stop working.

I stilled and my breathing slowed. "Me?" It was a dumb question because he'd made his reason clear, but I needed the extra time to collect my thoughts.

He nodded, his eyes boring into mine.

When I didn't speak, he moved his mouth to my ear. "Let me buy you a drink."

I stared at him in confusion. Nitro asking me to *let* him do something seemed way out of character. Narrowing my eyes, I said, "What do you want?" He had to be after something more than just sex.

"I thought I made that clear."

"I thought so, too, until you asked me to let you buy me a drink. Now I figure it must be about more than just sex." I pointed a finger at him. "I swear to God, Nitro, if Storm want something out of me, they—"

He dropped his mouth to mine and silenced me with a kiss. And Jesus Christ, not just any kiss, this one cracked my soul wide open with its intensity. When Nitro kissed, he fucking claimed you. He used his mouth to say all the things he didn't say with his words.

His hands slid along the sides of my face so he could push his fingers into my hair. Taking hold of me, he bent me to his will. His body pressed against mine while he deepened the kiss. Tongues collided and breath was stolen. My senses were consumed completely by this man who bewildered me with his complexity. One minute I hated him, the next I wanted to know every damn thing about him. I wanted to slap him, kiss him, yell at him, comfort him, understand him, tell him to fuck off. But in that moment all I wanted to do was kiss him forever.

When he ended the kiss, he said, "Why the fuck do you always have to argue with me? When I say I want something, I want it. I don't play games and I don't do shit in order to get something else out of it." The honesty blaring from his eyes grew deeper if that was even possible. "I want to fuck you, simple as that."

Breathless, I pressed harder against him. "In that case, I don't want a drink. I just want your cock."



The last time I saw Nitro was two days prior when he collected guns from me. He'd asked if I was good. That was it. He'd certainly not given me any indication that he wanted to sleep with me. So I'd maintained my distance even though I hadn't stopped thinking about him for three long weeks.

Standing in my hallway, watching him pull his shirt off before reaching for my waist and yanking me to him, I wondered how I'd missed his desire. It was clear as day in his eyes and it was sure as hell blaring from his body. After we arrived back at my place, he'd hardly let me out of his hold. His hands or his mouth were all over me, often all at once. It had taken him a good half hour to move us to the point of him removing his shirt because he hadn't wanted to let my mouth go.

I placed my hands on his chest. "Things would move along a lot faster if you took my clothes off."

He dipped his face and teased my mouth with his teeth, biting my lower lip before kissing me. "You in a hurry, Vegas?"

Fuck no, I wanted to drag this out for as many hours as possible. But I was eager for that cock of his. Trailing my fingers over his broad chest, I said, "We've got all night as far as I'm concerned, but the sooner we're naked, the better."

He grinned, surprising the hell out of me. I hadn't seen a grin on Nitro's face yet. I liked it. "You make a fucking good point."

Stepping back, he assessed my body, as if he was contemplating something. Whatever it was passed quickly and then his hands went to my thighs. I wore a short red dress and his touch on my bare skin was electric. My eyes fluttered closed and I sucked in a breath when

he slid his hands up my legs under my dress. Truth be told, I damn well stopped breathing for a moment.

"You like that?" His voice flooded my body with goosebumps.

Moving my hands from his chest to his waist to balance myself, I managed to say, "Don't stop."

"Wasn't planning on it."

His hands continued their exploration, pushing my dress up to expose my panties. I watched as his eyes zeroed in on them. Nitro might have been a man who held his thoughts and emotions close to his chest, but he sure as hell wasn't a man who hid his need. I loved the effect I had on him—the way his nostrils flared as his breathing laboured, and the way he licked his lips while his gaze lingered on my breasts. Seeing it only caused my own need to blaze brighter.

He dropped to his knees and skimmed his fingers over my panties before slipping them under the fabric. His touch was exquisite and totally not what I expected from him. Nitro vibrated with a ferocious intensity—rage and violence rolled into one—that I thought sex with him would be a frenzy of rough moves and hard thrusts from the get-go. But he proved his unpredictability again.

I threaded my fingers through his hair, gripping tightly when he ran a finger along my entrance. A moan escaped my lips and a shudder ran through me. I glanced down as he bent his face to press his mouth to my panties. The powerful muscles in his back flexed sending another jolt of desire to every nerve ending of mine. There was something about the strength and fearlessness he possessed that spoke to me. Made me feel safe. Nitro seemed invincible and that was something I connected with on a deep level. I needed that armour surrounding me in life because I'd had mine stripped from me.

His mouth explored me through the thin material of my panties before he decided he didn't want that barrier anymore. Strong fingers hooked over the top of them and a moment later they lay on the floor while Nitro's mouth kissed my most sensitive place.

I swayed a little as he grasped my ass and ran his tongue around my clit. He then proceeded to alternate that with pushing his tongue inside me. Pleasure rushed at me and I had to focus hard on standing because his tongue was so damn talented my legs grew weak.

When a growl rumbled from him, vibrating through my pussy, I moaned loud and came. Hard as fuck. Nitro sure did know how to make a woman orgasm. And he also knew how to keep me guessing

about what would come next. Before I'd come down from that high, he was on his feet and had me over his shoulder while he carried me to my bedroom.

"Fuck," I muttered, caught off guard, but loving it nonetheless.

His hand connected with my bare ass, slapping me. "I hope you're ready, Vegas."

My legs squeezed together. I was more than ready. Touching his back, because hell, I could hardly stop myself from touching those muscles, I said, "Bring it. For the love of God, fucking bring it."

We reached the bedroom and without slowing, he dropped me onto the bed and removed his boots and clothes. He moved so damn fast I had trouble keeping up. I warred with myself between begging him to slow down so I could take in all those divine muscles, and speeding it along to get to the good part.

Next minute, he was on top of me, taking my dress off. When it lay in a heap on the floor, he rested his arms either side of me on the bed, caging me in. His gaze traced my face before moving down my neck to my breasts. He ran his tongue between them, his eyes back on mine. "You taste so damn good. I want to lick every fucking inch of you."

"You wouldn't hear any complaints from me if you did."

He licked me again and I trailed a finger along my skin following the line his tongue took. Still holding my gaze, he said, "You like touching yourself?"

I smiled and nodded. "I've had a lot of practice at it."

That grin appeared on his face again, causing me to smile harder. Fuck, I loved it when he blessed me with that. "Show me."

"To be clear, I prefer not to do it on my own."

I cupped one of my breasts and jerked my chin down at it, letting him know he should join in. His grin died, replaced with a smouldering look that sent heat to my core. Dipping his face, he sucked the breast I held into his mouth. Swirling his tongue around my nipple, he found my gaze again and held it.

My fingers massaged my breast, moving closer to his mouth. When they almost met, he flicked his tongue out to lick them. He shifted on the bed so he could take hold of my hand and suck each finger into his mouth, one by one. Slowly. It was sexy as hell and I could have watched him do it for hours.

"You surprise me, Nitro."

He stopped what he was doing and placed both hands back on the bed. Shifting so his face came to mine, he sucked on my bottom lip and said, "How?"

I ran my hand through his hair before sliding it down his neck and back. "I thought you'd be more demanding, rougher."

Heat flashed in his eyes and he ground his cock against me. "Careful what you ask for," he rasped.

My fingernails dug into his back. "You think I can't handle rough?"

More heat flashed. Darker. Edgier. He shifted again, pulling me up effortlessly so that he knelt with me straddling him. With one hand around the back of my neck, grasping me tightly, and the other cupping my ass, he said, "I didn't want to give you rough if you weren't ready for it."

I blinked.

"The rape?" It was barely a whisper, but he heard and nodded.

"Yeah."

We stared at each other. The light in the room suddenly became too bright for me. I needed it off. I didn't want him to see me. It was as if my soul was on display and he could see every inch of it.

Every crack.

Every wound.

Every flaw.

I pulled away, trying to scramble out of his hold, but he tightened his grip and held me in place. "Vegas," he said with a shake of his head, his voice low. "Don't."

I wrapped my hands around his biceps. "Let me go, Nitro," I demanded.

His nostrils flared. "I will if that's what you really want. But one minute you're telling me you can handle rough, the next you're shutting down on me. I wanna know what gives. Was it because I brought up the rape?"

My heart beat so fucking fast I thought it would beat out of my chest. It wasn't the damn rape, but I didn't want to admit the truth to him. Fuck, I'd sound like an idiot if I admitted his thoughtfulness had gotten to me. I didn't know what to do with kindness anymore. It confused me. Made me question shit because who the hell dealt in it anymore? And it made me feel more vulnerable than I could deal with. I didn't want him to see all the things wrong with me.

I took a deep breath and tried to get my heart to slow down. Relaxing my body in his hold, I said, "I'm good. I just had a moment there. Sorry."

I expected him to relax, too, and get back to where we were, but he didn't. Again, catching me by surprise. He let me go and moved off the bed. Raking his fingers through his hair, he said, "Don't fucking say sorry for something that wasn't your fault, Tatum. Don't ever do that." His voice had so much emotion and force behind it that I wondered where it came from. It felt deep, like he'd lived it himself. Whatever *it* was.

I sucked in another deep breath, thinking about what he said. All the while, he stood in silence watching me. Waiting. Finally, I darted off the bed so I could turn the light off. Relief hit me instantly. Such an odd feeling. I never had an issue having the light on during sex, so I didn't know where this was coming from.

I made my way back to where Nitro stood. Light filtered in from the hallway, but I had just enough darkness to feel comfortable. And I had enough light to make out the confusion on his face. All credit to him, though, he didn't question my choice. He simply stood and waited for me to speak.

"Thank you," I said softly, forcing myself to talk about something that made me want to curl into a ball and disappear.

"For what?" Still so gruff and demanding.

I wrapped my arms around me. Around my nakedness. As if covering that up would cover *me* up. "Fuck," I muttered, stumbling over my feelings. *Why was he forcing me to do this?* He continued watching me intently, still waiting. "Oh, for fuck's sake, for caring enough to take it into account." I threw my words out there like they were a throwaway emotion when they were so far from that.

Nitro's nostrils flared again and annoyance flashed across his face. But he dealt with whatever had pissed him off and regained control. Clenching his jaw, he said, "I want to kill that motherfucker over and over for what he did to you." He reached out and smoothed a flyaway strand of my hair back behind my ear. His gesture startled me with its intimacy and gentleness. Especially when he appeared anything but gentle.

I curled my hand around his wrist hanging by his side. "I want that, too, but more for what he did to my brother," I whispered.

It was true—while the rape had been awful, it hadn't fucked me up as much as Chris's murder. And the fact Nitro was the one who saved me meant I only viewed him as a protector, not as a man who might threaten me.

We stood in silence for a few more moments. Soaking in everything that had taken place. I'd expected none of it. And although I hadn't shared with him how he made me feel exposed and vulnerable, I'd opened up more to him than to anyone in my life, besides Monroe.

He took a step away from me and I let his wrist go. When he reached for his jeans, I halted him. Finding his eyes, I said, "Stay."

"I don't think—"

I shook my head. I didn't want sex. That wasn't what this was about. "Just hold me. Please."

His breaths slowed for a beat. He didn't respond straight away and I thought he would say no. But then he nodded. "Okay."

As I closed my eyes a little while later, with Nitro's arms wrapping me in safety, I let out a breath I'd been holding for three weeks. A breath I hadn't realised was trapped.

NITRO

“Pour Some Sugar On Me” by Def Leppard

Tatum was a furious sleeper. Both nights I'd slept with her in my arms, she'd tossed and turned like she was fighting demons. She'd also cried. Both nights. And had mumbled stuff about someone called Randall. I got the impression he was one of the demons she wanted to kill.

I woke before her and watched as she lay peacefully next to me. She'd finally stopped thrashing at around four and had been sleeping quietly for three hours. I wondered if she survived on that small amount of sleep each night and knew deep in my gut that she did. Tatum's nightmares had her in their grips. The way she lived her life told that part of her story.

Unable to stop myself, I traced her lips. Kissing that mouth was high on my priority list, but I wanted her awake for that. She snuggled against me, a smile flitting across her face. She flung her arm across my chest and buried her face into my side. Fuck, she was softer like this and my dick hardened more than it already was. I was attracted to her fierce side, but this softness called to the part of me that wanted to take care of those in my life. The part of me that never wanted anyone to hurt the way my life had.

Selfishly, I ran my hand over her bare ass and spread her legs so that one of them hooked over mine. I wanted to touch her every-fucking-where but wouldn't until she signalled that was what she also wanted. The restraint this took caused me physical pain. When she mumbled something and lifted her head, relief flooded me.

“Nitro,” she murmured and I got a kick out of the smile in her voice.

Smoothing her hair, I said, "Morning, Vegas."

She smiled and shifted some more, pressing her body harder against mine as she did so. "I thought you'd be gone by now."

I frowned. "Why?"

"Most do." Her words fell out absently while she trailed her fingers over my chest.

I had no right to feel what I did over that statement, but I couldn't help myself. I didn't like that she slept with other men, but she wasn't mine and never would be so I let that go. "I'm not most."

Her smile grew and her fingers skated along my jaw before reaching for my lips. Lifting herself up, she straddled me and bent to place a kiss on my mouth. "That, you are not." She stared down at me thoughtfully. "You're a fucking contradiction, is what you are. I never know what I'm going to get with you."

I cupped her ass. "You ready to finish what we started last night?"

Her eyes flared with heat and she drove my dick wild when she bit her lip. "Yeah." She slid her body down mine so she lay on top of me. "And Nitro?"

I dug my fingers into her ass cheeks, eager as fuck to get inside her. God, how I fucking needed to be there. "Yeah?"

Her eyes held mine. "I'm ready as hell for your kind of rough."

I was done.

At the edge.

Nothing would hold me back after that invitation.

I pushed up, my arm tight around her, and flipped us. Once she was under me, I gripped her legs roughly and spread them wide. Positioning my mouth at her pussy, I took what I'd been thinking about half the damn night, and I took it the way I'd wanted to the last time I'd sampled her.

It was a frenzy of need and urgency as my tongue worked her pussy. I held nothing back, giving her a glimpse of what fucking me would be like.

My rhythm was jagged.

The pleasure I delivered, bruising.

Sex was how I dealt with life. I brought all my confusion, hurt, and rage with me and for the hours I was with a woman, handed them to her. Most never came back for seconds. I was too much for them.

Tatum's fingers dug into my scalp as she gripped my hair so hard I thought she'd pull it out. I hissed at the sensation it evoked in me. I fucking loved the pain. "Fuck, Nitro...", she panted. "More... give me more."

I growled into her and squeezed her ass, pulling her up off the bed with me as I moved to a kneeling position. Her head remained on the bed, her back arched up and she wrapped her legs around my neck while I feasted on her.

Sucking and licking, I lost myself in her.

Her taste.

Her scent.

The sounds she made.

It all collided, exploding like a brilliant storm in my mind.

When I finally lifted my face from her, I took in her arms flung across the bed. Her eyes squeezed closed. Her breaths coming hard and fast. She'd totally surrendered to the ecstasy.

I dropped her on the bed and quickly moved off it to find a condom. She complained as her ass hit the mattress. "Why did you stop?"

Rummaging in my wallet, I located what I was after. Eyeing her, I said, "Tell me, Vegas, do you fuck as hard as you fight?"

She shifted onto her elbows and met my gaze. "Do you fuck as brutally as you do?"

My breathing grew ragged as we watched each other. Pointing at the end of the bed, I said, "Come here and suck my dick. I need to see your lips around it."

She did as I said, no arguments. Fucking first time for everything. She threw her legs over the edge of the bed and our eyes locked as she took me into her mouth.

Fuck me.

My eyes rolled back and I groaned as she ran her tongue over me and sucked me hard. Fisting her hair, I held her face against me, my instincts to fuck her mouth taking over.

I wanted to shove my dick down her throat.

I wanted to go deep.

I fucking wanted her to swallow my cum.

Her hands moved to my ass and she kept them there while I rocked into her. The urge to thrust grew more insistent, until it got to

the point where I wanted to feel her cunt wrapped around me instead of her lips.

Pulling out, I stepped back and quickly slid the condom in place. I then jerked my chin towards the bed and growled, "I want you on your back."

She moved fast and a moment later, I was positioned over her with my dick against her pussy. So fucking wet. I bent my face and ran my tongue over her throat, giving her some teeth at the same time. I bit her, not too hard, but with enough pressure that her back arched up off the bed. When she moaned, I pushed my dick inside her a short way before pulling back out.

"Tell me how much you want me to fuck you, Vegas," I ordered as I licked a path down between her breasts.

"So fucking bad." Her legs came around me, hooking together at my back.

When her fingernails clawed my shoulders, I grunted and dropped my mouth to her breast. Biting with more pressure than before, I marked her skin. The need to leave a mark behind overwhelmed me like never before during sex.

"Fuck," she cursed, but it was clear from her tone how much she liked that.

Unable to hold back any longer, I slammed my dick into her. Neither slow nor gentle, I fucked her how we both needed it.

Raw and animalistic, I thrust into her over and over. It was erotic and filthy all at once. We each clung to the other, our grips needy and hard, while our bodies came together to get our fill.

By the time we came, I'd fucked her cunt so furiously I wasn't sure how she'd stand that day. She'd scratched and bitten me to the point where I wouldn't be able to take my shirt off without someone thinking I'd been attacked. It was downright fucking dirty and I'd never had sex so good.

I collapsed on top of her and she hugged her arms and legs tighter around my body. Dropping my face to nuzzle between her shoulder and neck, I caught my breath, inhaling her scent.

"Jesus, Nitro, you know how to fuck," she said, still breathless. Her head was buried against my shoulder and I felt her warm breath on my skin.

Pushing up off her, I rested my hands on the bed either side of her. My gut squeezed at the sight of her wild, thoroughly-fucked ex-

pression. "What are your plans tonight?"

Her tongue swiped over her bottom lip before she sucked it into her mouth and bit it. She hesitated but only for a beat. "I'm free."

I moved off the bed. Reaching for my jeans, I said, "I'll come over."

"I'll be home after eight."

As I headed into her bathroom to deal with the condom, I stretched my neck from side-to-side. Fucking Tatum had worked the kinks out of my shoulders and neck. An awesome side benefit.

I disposed of the condom and put my jeans on. I'd head home for a shower and check on everyone there before going to the clubhouse. Exiting the bathroom, I ran into Tatum.

Dropping my gaze, I took in the exercise gear she held. "You going to the gym or something?"

"Gonna have a shower and then go for a run."

I lifted a brow. "After that?"

"Yeah." At my frown, she added, "I get the best run in after sex. You should try it sometime."

"I'll give it a miss."

As she entered the bathroom, she called over her shoulder, "Lock the door on your way out, Nitro. I'll see you later."

And then the bathroom door closed behind her. And I realised that sex with Tatum might be something I pursued. A woman who fucked like she did and then didn't hang around afterwards was a woman I needed in my life.

TATUM

“Habit Of You” by Keith Urban

“You saw the shrink again today?” Monroe asked as she filed paperwork in her tiny office at the back of the tattoo parlour. “Didn’t you just see her?”

I sat at her desk and watched her work. She was anal about filing and keeping on top of admin. A bit like she was anal about keeping her house clean. “I saw her on Monday.” Three days ago. “We agreed I’d see her twice a week to begin with.”

She stopped and glanced at me. “How did it go today, babe?” The concern in her voice could not be mistaken.

I wrapped my arms around myself as a shiver ran through me. “It sucked. I’ve cried more this week than ever. And now I’m exhausted, which sucks, too, because I’ve got a sure thing for tonight and I’m gonna need all the energy I can muster.”

Her eyes widened. “Okay, sister, let’s run through all that. What did you talk about with her today?”

“Mum. Dad. Chris. We’re still going over shit from decades ago. I’m ready to move on, you know?”

“Yeah, but you need to get all that shit out. Your mum fucked you up big time.”

I hugged myself harder. “That’s the goddam truth. And yet, I can’t bring myself to hate her. It would be a hell of a lot easier if I could just do that.”

“What’s your shrink got to say about that?”

I sighed. “At this point she’s just doing a lot of listening. She seems to just want me to talk. Oh, and sleep and watch my diet and practice self-fucking-care.” Irritation pricked my skin. Therapy

hadn't turned out to be anything like I imagined it would be. I was ready for answers and solutions, but all my therapist seemed to be about was everything but telling me *how* to fix myself. I wasn't sure therapy was actually for me.

Monroe laughed. "Tatum, I know you're a big believer in taking action and fixing problems in a logical, efficient manner, but emotions can't be dealt with like that. You can't just follow a generic step-by-step plan and magically fix yourself. This is going to take time and consistent effort. You're going to have to be gentle on yourself." She paused for a moment. "And you're going to have to get on the self-care bandwagon, babe."

"God," I muttered. "You sound exactly like her. I think you missed your calling in life."

She left the filing cabinet to come sit at the desk. Her eyes lit up as she said, "Now, tell me about this sure thing. And don't leave anything out. But first, does he have a pierced dick?"

I couldn't help it, I laughed. It broke some of the tension in my body and I unwrapped my arms from around me and relaxed back into the chair. "I love you, Roe."

She groaned. "You kill me, girl. Tell me!"

"No, there is no pierced cock for me."

"Ugh, why don't all men pierce their bloody dicks? I think it could bring about world peace. Like, seriously. Could you imagine all the satisfied, happy women wandering the earth after having sex with big, fat, pierced dicks? World peace, I tell ya."

I shook my head in laughter. My cousin and her crazy sex shit. "We really need to find you a man with a piercing, don't we?"

"Yes. But first, you need to tell me where you found this guy and all about him. Is he a lawyer? No, wait, let me guess. You met him at the therapist's office. He's a doctor!"

I cringed. She would hate what I was about to tell her. "It's Nitro."

She sat up straight and stared at me with shock. "A fucking biker, Tatum? Are you on drugs?"

I held up my hand in defence. "Roe, it's only sex. It's not like I'm putting his fucking ring on my finger and traipsing through the kitchen barefoot."

She blew out a long breath. "Okay, you've got a point. Sorry. I forgot for a moment it's you we're talking about. You of the one-

night stands and zero commitment. So long as you stick to that, though. Don't go letting him boss you around."

"No bossing around, I promise."

"So, the sex is good?"

"Out-of-this-fucking-world good."

She narrowed her eyes at me and if I knew my cousin at all, I'd bet money she was about to grill me for every little detail. "Like, on a scale of one-to-ten, he'd be a what?"

I leaned forward and grinned at her. "An eleven," I whispered.

She whistled low. "Fuck me, Tatum. How do you always get the good lays and I always get the flops?"

I kept grinning. "You always go for the good boys. Maybe it's time for you to find a bad one and let him rock your world."

She waved her hand in front of her. "Pfft, you can keep the bad boys to yourself, babe. I haven't got time for their shit."

As we laughed and joked, neither of us acknowledged the fact that I had been the one to marry the good boy all those years ago. The truth was that good guys weren't always what they told you. At least with a bad boy you knew upfront what you were dealing with.



I drained my glass of rum and refilled it straight away. My third one for the night. I'd needed something to take the edge off and I couldn't wait for Nitro to arrive for that to happen. So, alcohol it was.

It had been a rough day. Both at work and with my head. My damn emotions had put me through the wringer. Seeing the therapist stirred too much shit up that I'd rather forget. I'd forgotten it for so long that it was surprising me as we dug for it. And not in a good way.

I jumped at the sound of someone banging on my front door.

Nitro.

I placed my glass down and walked the short distance to the door. Opening it, I found him standing with his forearms resting on the door jamb.

"Vegas," he murmured as his eyes slowly travelled my body. Nitro's attention on me like that was addictive. I'd only just begun

sampling it, but I wanted more.

He dropped his arms, stepped inside and scooped me around the waist as he kicked the door shut. His mouth landed on mine and he kissed me for a long time. When he ended the kiss, he said, "You got any of that rum left?"

I pulled my thoughts together after that kiss and nodded. "Yeah."

He followed me into the kitchen and I poured him a drink, noticing the exhaustion that lined his face. I knew Storm and Silver Hell had called a truce, so I wondered why he looked so worn out.

I added some ice and then passed him the glass as he asked, "What's running through that head of yours?"

"You look tired. Exhausted, actually."

"Got a lot going on." Such a man of few words.

"You know what I can't figure out?"

"What?"

"Why King gave in so easily after everything that fucking club did to yours."

He clenched his jaw and threw half his rum down his throat. "He had his reasons."

"Fuck, do you ever say more than a few words at a time, Nitro?"

He closed the distance between us, the vein in his temple pulsing. "I don't want to waste time with words tonight. I didn't come here to fucking talk."

It was true. My pussy clenched at his words, but at the same time something odd happened. I wanted him to fuck me—no denying that—but a tiny part of me wanted to have this conversation. Wanted to know his thoughts. I pushed all that aside, though, because I didn't want to deal with those feelings. I just wanted him to wipe my mind of everything for a few hours.

He looked at me like he wanted to eat me. Then, he reached for the glass of rum he'd placed on the counter and pulled a cube of ice from it. A second later, he skimmed it across my collarbone and down to my breasts. The fingers of his free hand curled over the edge of my tank and he pulled it down a little so he could run the ice over my breast.

His mouth met the ice and he licked the melting liquid over my skin. Backing me against the kitchen counter, he let my tank go so he could reach under it and caress my stomach, then my waist and up to my breasts. His hand covered me perfectly when he slid it into my

bra, and I arched into him as he rubbed my nipple between his fingers.

The ice melted while he massaged my boob, right before his mouth latched onto my nipple. I gripped his biceps and moaned as his teeth nipped at me and his fingers worked their magic. The way he started sex all slow and intimate turned me on so damn much. I knew what was coming, and I wanted it, but *this*, this I could take for fucking hours.

He lifted his head and met my gaze. His eyes were glazed, full of need, the kind that made me want him sooner, *faster*. Fuck, I was needy for him. Grinding against me, he rasped, "These tight pants you wear get me hot as fuck, but I gotta tell you, it's a lot fucking easier to get to you when you wear a dress."

I slid my arms over his shoulder and around his neck so my fingers were in his hair. Gripping him hard, I said, "I'm sure you'll find a way to get them off fast."

His eyes darkened and he dropped his head. Sucking in a few harsh breaths, he looked back up at me. Pained. "You test me, Tatum."

I had no idea what he meant. "How?"

He took hold of my waist, his fingers digging into me. "You make me want things," he bit out, his voice a dark warning.

My heart banged against my chest. Red flags would be flying all over the place for most women at that moment, but not for me. My whole body lit up at what I'd heard in his voice. I leaned closer to him. "Tell me."

He hissed and swore. "Fuck." But I knew I had him when he spun me around, slid his arm around my waist and pushed his erection against my ass. "You sure about that?"

I gripped the kitchen counter, breathless. I hadn't been more sure of anything in a long time. "Yes."

He took a moment and then he produced a pocketknife, pressing the tip of it to my chest. Not hard, but with enough pressure to send my pulse racing. "You ever played with knives, Vegas?"

I stared at the blade against my skin. It both excited the hell out of me and scared the ever-loving shit out of me. "No," I panted out, lightheaded at the thought of what he wanted to do with the knife.

He ran the tip of the blade across my skin, not drawing blood, just lightly pressing against me. His breathing grew ragged and his

body dominated me in a way it hadn't yet. Nitro wanted this bad. Even though I couldn't see him, I sensed how turned on he was.

Placing the knife on the counter, he turned me so I faced him, and wrapped his hand around the back of my neck. My scalp burned from the grip he held me with and my breathing slowed at the fierce energy vibrating off him. "I never fuck a woman in any way she doesn't want. Let's just get that out of the way." He licked a line from the base of my throat up to my mouth. He then consumed me with a kiss that he poured all his need into. When he finally let my mouth go, he said, "I want to cut those pants off you. I want to slice your underwear in half. And I want to run that blade all over your skin, but I won't do any of that if you don't want me to." His eyes bored into mine, waiting for my answer.

My heart stuttered. My whole body tensed. What he asked was too much. The danger thrilled me, but my common sense kicked in and prevented me from saying yes to all of that. He might have saved my life a couple of times, but no way in hell did I trust a man I'd just met with a knife anywhere near me.

"I can't. No." I shook my head as the words fell out of my mouth.

His jaw clenched and he nodded his understanding. Reaching around me, he swiped the knife off the counter and shoved it away. He then moved his hands to the button on my pants. Undoing it, he met my gaze. "It would have been faster my way, but we'll play this your way."

I exhaled, thankful for that. His signal that he was good with my refusal. Which was a good thing because I wanted sex with Nitro. After he fucked me that morning, I'd gone for an hour-long run and my head had felt so clear afterwards. He'd fucked some of the knots out of my body and some clarity into my mind. And I needed all the help with that.

NITRO

“Animals” by Maroon 5

I leant forward in the ute and watched as Dragon loaded case after case into the back of his van. “Fucking hell,” I muttered as I turned to see what Hyde made of this.

His dark expression matched mine. “Yeah, that about covers it.”

“He’s planning something.” Those cases were full of guns, and from our surveillance, we knew he’d had a delivery of guns the week prior also.

Hyde pulled out his phone and dialled King. Leaving it on speaker, he said, “They’ve got something planned.”

I waited for King’s outburst. He’d been on edge for weeks and his moods revealed how tense he was. However, instead of a tirade, we got silence. And then—“Keep on him. I’ll arrange more men so we can put eyes on him 24/7.” We’d been spreading our guys thin watching a few different Silver Hell members, but keeping someone on Dragon full-time hadn’t been necessary because he hadn’t been involved in anything but sitting in their clubhouse issuing orders. Devil had called in his movements earlier that day when he’d left the clubhouse, causing King to send Hyde and me to watch him.

Hyde frowned. “You occupied, King?”

“Yeah.” His voice was tight. Reserved. Before we could ask any more questions, he said, “Call me if you have anything. Otherwise I’m busy.”

“What the fuck?” Hyde asked to no one in particular when King abruptly ended the call.

I shrugged. “We’ll find out soon enough.”

Hyde stared at me. "Where's your fucking head at these days, brother?"

I didn't like the accusation I heard. Hyde had been riding my ass for days, and I'd had enough. "Where the fuck do you think it is?"

"I'll tell you where it's not. It's not focused on your club, and that shit needs to stop today. We need you alert and ready at a moment's notice, and I'm not convinced you're any of those things."

My shoulders tightened and I clenched my fists. I'd fucking knock him out if he kept this shit up. "I'm here every-fucking-day, from almost sun up to way past sun-fucking-down, Hyde. I'm giving everything to this club and I'm ready for whatever Silver Hell bring at us. I don't know what the fuck's gotten into you this week, but I'm goddam tired of you breathing down my fucking neck for something I haven't done."

His glare didn't let up. "So that's why you forgot to tell us that Silver Hell had a meeting with Sutherland this week and why you were late for Church two days ago. Yeah, I'd say your commitment is solid, Nitro." He turned the keys in the ignition. "Sort your shit out and do it fast."



I sat back in the armchair, wrapped my hand around my dick, and watched as Tatum came towards me. I'd been thinking about her all fucking day. Her sweet cunt was never far from my thoughts these days. Almost three weeks of fucking her daily, usually twice a day, and I had turned into a junkie. I craved being inside her in a way I'd never craved pussy. Hell, the fact I kept coming back for more even though I knew she'd never let me fuck her the way I wanted to, said a fuck of a lot.

"Been thinking about you today," she said as she stood in front of me, positioning her feet on the floor either side of my legs.

I ran my eyes over her naked body and pressed a hand to her thigh, curling my fingers around her leg. I continued to slide my other hand up and down my dick. "Tell me what you were thinking."

"I was wondering how it would feel if you fucked me bare."

I gripped her leg harder and pumped my cock a little faster. Her voice was like a stream of sex floating all around me. She intoxicated

me with that fucking voice, almost as much as she did with her scent and her touch and her taste. "You wanna feel my dick, skin-to-skin, Vegas?"

She bent and her legs slid along mine as she sat on me. I wished like hell I was naked, too. One thrust and I'd be inside her. She linked her hands around my neck. "I bet you're thinking that if you didn't have those jeans on right now, you'd be inside me already."

Tatum's mind worked in ways I appreciated. Smart as hell and dirty as fuck, she was in sync with me when it came to sex. Except when it came to letting me take my blade to her. "How about you take them off so I can show you how good I feel?"

She pressed her body hard against mine and brought her lips close to my mouth. So damn close I could feel her breath. Could practically taste her. "How about I drag this out so that by the time you show me how good it feels, you're worked up as fuck and you bring your fury with you."

I scooped her hair into my hand and tugged it. "My fury?"

She rocked into me. "Yeah," she murmured, biting my bottom lip and sucking it into her mouth. "I like it when you slam that dick of yours into me like you're trying to push it all the way through me."

"Jesus," I hissed. "You're a dirty fucking girl, Vegas."

Her eyes held mine. "I'm an honest fucking girl, Nitro. I don't pussyfoot around when it comes to sex. I like cock and I fucking love yours. *And* I have no issues telling a guy how I like him to use his cock."

Her honesty was something that drew me to her. I liked her no-bullshit approach to life. Letting go of her hair, I ran my hands down her back and cupped her ass when I reached it. Holding her tight, I pushed up out of the chair, taking her with me. Her legs wrapped around my body and I walked us into her bedroom.

I deposited her on the bed and then undid my jeans. Her eyes tracked my movements and her breathing picked up as she watched my clothes fall to the ground.

Lowering myself to the bed, I moved over her. I slid my dick through her wetness and said, "Do you know what *I* have no issues with?"

"What?" she panted.

"With a woman who tells me like it is. And whose cunt is as greedy as yours is for me."

She folded her legs around me and clung tightly. "Well, I'm telling you right now, you need to get that dick inside me and you need to do it fast."

My eyes searched hers. "I don't have a condom on, Tatum."

She knew what I was asking and what I was saying. At her nod and, "I know," my restraint snapped and I thrust inside her exactly how she liked it. *With all the fury I'd been living that day.*

"Oh, God," Tatum moaned, squeezing me harder. "Yes!"

Fuck, being inside Tatum was where I needed to be. It was as if I broke away from the world the minute I entered her. All the complicated shit in my life was left behind, all the worry eased, all the baggage I carried dropped. When I was deep in her, all I chased was the hush, the calm, the fucking peace that being with her brought me.

Her fingernails clawed down my back as I pounded into her. She met every thrust, taking it hungrily and pushing me for more. In return, I drove my dick as far into her as I could, as hard as I fucking could, giving her the fury she wanted.

I fucked her like a savage.

Wild.

Clawing at each other.

Teeth biting.

Breathless.

I didn't hold anything back and neither did she. Our bodies collided in a violent rush of demand and desire. We both needed this. Almost as much as the air we breathed.

"Fuck... fuck... *fuck*," she panted as she squeezed me deep inside her and came. Her eyes closed and she slowed her movements as she drew every drop of pleasure from her orgasm.

I'd watched Tatum come every single time I'd fucked her. I made a point never to miss it because she was so fucking beautiful when she had my dick buried inside making her feel good. It was the only time I saw the real Tatum, the one who let herself feel and experience everything happening to her. The rest of the time she held me at arm's length, throwing wall after wall up at me. Guarding that cracked heart of hers. Not that I wanted her heart, but I wanted a peek inside. I wanted to know what made her so damn fearless and so fucking fragile all at the same time.

My balls tightened and I rammed into her one last time before coming inside her. Every muscle in my body tensed as the orgasm

tore through me, releasing a fuckload of pent-up pressure.

I collapsed onto the bed beside her. Spent. Completely done for. It was the first time I'd ever fucked a woman without a condom and it was fucking amazing. Turning, I found her watching me, a look of absolute bliss on her face.

Smiling, she said, "I could give up exercise at the moment."

"You want me to up my game, Vegas? I could work out those muscles of yours more often."

She rolled my way, curling her arms into her body. "Fuck, I don't think I could take it more than twice a day from you."

"You wanna test that theory?"

Another smile on her lips. "You don't give up easily, do you?"

"Never have, never will. What's the point of life if you crack at the first sign of hardship."

"Who taught you that? Your parents?"

I stared at her. We'd never talked much after sex. Usually we were both in a rush to get out the door in the morning or we passed out exhausted late at night. This was new and I wasn't sure if it was a road I wanted to travel with her.

When I didn't answer, she pushed me. "I'm actually not thinking it was your parents."

That was enough for me to bite. "You've got it all figured out, have you?" My words came out a little harshly. She had no fucking clue what my parents taught me.

Reaching across the bed, she trailed a finger along my lips. "And there's the Nitro I haven't seen in a few weeks."

Irritated, I sat up and threw my legs over the side of the bed. "Let's not do this, Tatum."

"Do what?"

Glancing back at her, I bit out, "Let's not turn this into something it's not."

"Oh, so just because we fuck, we can't talk?" Her voice rose, letting me know I'd pissed her off.

I stood and reached for my jeans. "You were never interested in talking before."

She sat up and glared at me. "Yeah, well maybe I wanna talk now." Moving off the bed, she came to me. "Maybe I'm interested to know stuff about the guy I'm screwing."

I kept moving, doing up my jeans. I then grabbed my shirt off the floor and threw it over my head. When I was dressed with my boots on, I eyed her. "Maybe it's time to call it quits. Neither of us wanted anything but sex, so let's not push it."

I exited her place without a backwards glance. I had to keep moving forward. Away. Getting myself involved with Tatum in any way other than just sleeping with her was a bad idea. I knew it in my gut. And I knew it in my fucking heart.



"What the hell crawled up your ass?" Renee demanded the next morning while we discussed the driving test she would be taking at some point. She wanted to do it soon, while I didn't.

I scowled at her as I settled against the kitchen counter and took a gulp of coffee. Ignoring her question, I said, "I'm just saying that you're gonna need a hell of a lot more practice before you go for your licence."

She placed her hand on her hip and threw me a glare. "I've almost clocked up my hours. I'm a good driver. When are you going to admit that instead of being an asshole to me about how I need to get more practice in?"

I raked my fingers through my hair. "I never said you weren't a good dri—"

"Yes, you did! Well, you insinuated it when you said I needed more hours up before you'd let me go for my test. And a head's up, I don't need your permission to sit my damn test. You're not my father."

Fucking hell. Renee knew how to fucking wound. Something she'd learnt from her mother. I gathered the shred of patience I had left for this conversation. If it had been anyone other than my niece, I would have lost my cool long ago. "I know I'm not your father," I grit out. "But I'm the only father figure you've known, so you'll listen when I've got something to say. You *are* a good driver, Renee, but the thousands of hours experience I have driving gives me a better perspective on this. I don't want you out there on the roads with all the dickheads who don't give a shit about you, your safety or your fucking life, until you've clocked up some more hours. And I don't

give a fuck if the government says you only need a hundred and twenty hours, I say you need more. You're fucking precious to me and I'll guard your life with everything I have, so that means this argument is over. I win."

She stared at me in stunned silence.

I drank some more coffee and barked, "What?" Jesus, I swore if she kept pushing me, testing me, I really would lose my shit. It had been a rough night of little sleep after I'd left Tatum's and I didn't have the patience I usually did with her.

"That is maybe one of the nicest things you've ever said to me." Her voice cracked and it looked like tears were pooling in her eyes. "I'm sorry I said that thing about you not being my dad. You mightn't be my father but you practically raised me and I love you for it." She broke down at that point, confusing the hell out of me. Where had that come from? Renee wasn't one to cry easily.

I pulled her into my arms. "Fuck, kiddo, I know." I was fucking useless when it came to this shit. It was a good thing I had no kids of my own because I'd fail them when it came to dealing with emotions. When she moved out of my embrace, I said, "What's going on, Renee?"

She wiped the tears from her face. "Nothing. I'm just being stupid."

When she tried to walk away, I grabbed her arm. "Don't ever say that. You're not stupid and nothing you feel is stupid." I hated her reluctance to open up, but I hated more that Marilyn and I had taught her that. Because we had. Kids learnt from example. I knew that better than anyone, and the example we'd set was to shut down and avoid feelings.

Tears tracked down her cheeks again. Blinking through them and sniffing, she managed to get out, "It's everything. Mum, life, your club, Dustin... it's too much. I don't know how to deal with it anymore."

Fuck.

I scrubbed my hand over my face. Her words hit me in the gut. They rang true for me, too. Our fucked-up family and my club problems weighed me down like a tonne of bricks on my shoulders most days. The last few weeks had been a reprieve almost. The weight had felt bearable for some reason, but the heaviness had returned

overnight. It caused my mood that morning and my lack of patience with Renee.

“I’m going to fix this, Renee.”

She stared at me as if she didn’t quite believe me. However, she nodded and said softly, “I hope so.”

It was the quiet desperation I heard in her voice that made me swear to myself that I would make good on my promise. No fucking way would I chance Renee living in the same darkness her mother did.

TATUM

“Scars” by Papa Roach

I exited the car park and headed towards the front door of the club. The warmth of the late September day spread across my back as I walked and inhaled the spring scent I loved. It was my favourite time of year. Right before the heat of summer. It could have been worse, I guessed. I could have lived in Queensland.

“Tatum, wait up,” Posey called out from behind.

I slowed and gave her a smile when she caught up. “Hey, girl, why are you here so early?” She wasn’t due at work for a few more hours.

“I had a hair appointment nearby. Didn’t want to make the drive home to then just come back.”

I eyed her long dark hair. “Looking good.” I took in her glow. “It’s good to see you looking so happy.”

She smiled. “Yeah, life is better and I have you to thank for that. Thank you for caring when so many wouldn’t have.” The genuine gratitude was clear in her voice.

“I’m glad.” This kind of exchange was awkward for me. It wasn’t often that anyone bothered to thank me for anything. Not even Billy half the time.

Thankfully, we were interrupted when Duvall joined us. Posey quickly excused herself, clearly nervous about being near him.

He watched her go. “She’s not a bad kid. Just got mixed up with the wrong guy.”

I laughed. “Kid? She’s not much younger than us.”

“Age doesn’t mean shit when your maturity levels are out of whack, Tatum.”

"That's true." I narrowed my eyes at him. "Why do you look so tired? They working you hard?"

He sighed. "When do they not?"

Duvall was a good-looking guy. Blond hair, a strong jaw, and blue eyes that saw more than anyone knew gave him a face that women never forgot. And when they got a look at his tall, well-built body they threw themselves at him. The thing I respected the hell out of was the fact he never used any of those things to work his way through a string of women. Duvall was one of the good guys. His kindness and honesty were just a couple of the reasons I forgave his attitude towards me since I'd left the law. I knew he was disappointed in the choices I'd made for my life and that his disappointment manifested as moodiness or anger.

I jerked my chin at the club. "What brings you out here?"

His eyes held mine. "You."

There was something in his tone that made me want to walk away from this conversation. But I didn't. My friend deserved more than that. "What's up?"

"How are you?"

Oh, God. I definitely did not want to have *this* conversation. Duvall liked to push me for more than I wanted to give. He came from a touchy-feely family who spewed their emotions all over the damn place. Great people, but I was out when it came to doing that. I gave him a smile, as if that would be enough. "I'm doing well."

"Yeah, see that's where I don't believe you." And out came the side of Duvall I didn't like—his arrogant side. This was the Duvall who thought he knew better than me. He didn't drag his arrogance out often, but when he did, I hated it because it usually ended in us having a fight.

I cocked my head, my annoyance flaring. "Why?" I challenged him, my tone one step away from bitchy.

"Tatum, don't bullshit me. I see straight through it."

"I don't know what bullshit you think I'm feeding you, or why you think that, but I'm telling you that I'm okay and life is good."

He raked his fingers through his hair and muttered, "Fuck." He paused for a beat before throwing out, "I've seen the footage of you leaving the casino with that asshole biker, so I bloody know you are not okay."

Oh fuck. I thought only Silver Hell had seen that footage. My mouth formed an *oh*, but I quickly snapped it shut when he zeroed in on it. "It's not what you thin—"

Anger filled his features. "For fuck's sake, don't give me that line. I deserve more than that from you." He thumped his chest, his eyes wild. "*I* was the one who was there for you when Randall tossed you to the wolves. *I* was the one who picked up the pieces with you after he broke you. And *I'm* the one who has stuck by your side all this time. I deserve more than your lies."

I knew I should have avoided this conversation. It had gone from bad to epic proportions of fucked in less than a minute. I couldn't tell Duvall the truth, but I had to give him something because otherwise he would go after Nitro for something he didn't do. My mind raced with an answer, and for once, it failed. This was usually one of my strengths, stringing a line of bullshit together to get people out of shit, but not that day. Instead I stood in front of my oldest friend—the one who had stuck by me even though he never knew the truth of why I committed the sins I did—and stared at him in silence while my heart cracked a little more, if that was even possible.

I was tired of the lies.

Exhausted by the thought of hiding parts of my life for a second longer.

I didn't want to live like this anymore. I wanted the life I should have had, not this one.

When I didn't say anything, Duvall grabbed my bicep. "He beat you, Tatum! Black and blue. How can you stand here and deny that when it was clear as day to see on that footage? Fuck, I can't even wrap my head around you dating him after that."

I didn't attempt to wriggle out of his hold. I just wanted this to all go away. But I couldn't figure out what excuse to give him to make him leave it be.

Neither of us heard men approaching. We were both so engrossed in our conversation. It wasn't until King's voice cut through the air that we turned to see him watching Duvall with a murderous gaze.

"Let her go or you'll have me to deal with." He didn't raise his voice but he spoke in a low, threatening tone that couldn't be mistaken. I had no doubt that King would hurt Duvall if he didn't do as or-

dered. The thing I couldn't work out, though, was why King was taking my back.

Duvall dropped my arm and stepped back. He opened his mouth to speak, but something caught his attention behind King and suddenly he stalked towards whatever it was.

And then he began issuing his own threats. "You fucking asshole! I'm going to make you pay for what you did to her!"

I turned just in time to see Duvall throw a punch and to see Nitro duck to avoid it before landing his fist on Duvall's face. He knocked Duvall backwards and raised his fist as if he was about to punch him again, but then thought better of it and dropped his arm.

King yanked Duvall away from Nitro and roared, "Enough!" as Duvall attempted to get another punch in.

Nitro's eyes locked onto mine and I felt the familiar pull to him. The need he stirred in me was too great to ignore. It had been two weeks since he'd walked out of my house and never came back. I hadn't seen him or heard from him in that time. And I hadn't gone looking for him because he'd made it clear what he wanted.

I couldn't deal with any of them at that moment. I turned and walked away, picking up my pace as I moved so as to avoid any of them stopping me. But Nitro was faster than me, and a moment later, his hand curled around my arm. "Tatum, stop," he commanded.

I closed my eyes and held my breath for a beat. On an exhale, I turned to face him. "What do you want, Nitro? I've gotta get to work."

It was a lie and he knew it. Ignoring what I said, he asked, "You good?"

Emotions I never knew existed exploded out of me in a violent burst. "I'm sick of you asking me that goddam question! Do you even *care* if I'm good?" I threw my words at him as if they were fire and would burn him. I had no clue where my anger had come from or why I was directing it at him, but I couldn't stop myself.

His nostrils flared and his eyes mirrored the anger I felt. He, however, managed to keep his in check. "I told you I don't play games and I don't do shit for any reason but how it appears, so when I ask you if you're good, I mean it."

I searched his eyes and knew right down to my bones that he meant every word he said. Nitro might have been many things but dishonest was not one of them. "I'm good."

His gaze dropped to my arm where Duvall had held me. "What's his game?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why did he come at me like that?"

"He's seen the surveillance of us leaving the casino."

His mind worked quickly, putting it together. "So he thinks I did that to you." And then he surprised me. "You seeing him now?"

"What? No. Why?" His question threw me, completely bewildering me.

"Vegas, a man doesn't get that worked up unless the woman means something to him. I've seen the way he looks at you and it's pretty fucking clear he wants you. I need to know what I'm dealing with here. So, are you seeing him?"

My mind was still trying to unscramble itself. "No, I'm not seeing him."

He nodded. "Okay." He took a step back as if he was going to leave, but then he stopped and ran his eyes over my body. Slowly. As if he was committing it to memory. "I'll look into this and let you know what I find. As far as I knew, that surveillance had been destroyed."

And then he headed into the club with King, leaving me standing there all kinds of confused. Seeing him, speaking to him, hell, just being in his presence, made me realise how much I'd missed him. I hadn't let a man into my life on a regular basis like I had with Nitro since my husband left me nearly two years ago. Sleeping together, spending nights together... we might not have shared anything from our lives with each other, but we'd shared our bodies in ways that meant something to me.

Shit.

I wanted him again.

My skin craved his touch.

My mind craved the escape his caress allowed.

And as much as I struggled admitting it, my soul craved the safety of his embrace.

Trouble was, he didn't seem interested in any of that. I'd only ever been someone he had to watch over for his club. And I was still that person now that Duvall had involved himself.

"Are you still dating him?"

I spun around to find Duvall staring at me, wild-eyed. "No. We're done." He didn't need to know that Nitro and I were never dating.

"Good."

He left me then. I didn't know where this would all end up. I should have cared. I should have chased after him to set him straight and convince him to drop it. But all I cared about was coping with the emptiness slaying me. The problem with that was I had no fucking clue how to make it go away and I knew that coping was a crock of shit. I could numb the pain and try to hide from it, but I could never fucking *cope* with it.

NITRO

"It Ain't Easy" by Blake Shelton

I rested my arms on the counter of the bar, scanning the club patrons. Not looking for anyone or anything in particular, just absently people watching. Eyeing a leggy blonde, my mind immediately went to Tatum. Hell, my mind didn't need a shove to go there. It lived there.

It had been three days since I'd run into her outside Billy's club. Three days. Not that I was counting. Fuck, who the hell was I kidding? The days added to the tally my mind kept. The tally screaming at me that the reason my dick was hard with a desperate need that no other woman could fill was because it had been nearly three weeks since I'd been with Tatum.

"Where the fuck are you, man?" Devil asked, drawing my attention back to him. When I stared blankly at him, he added, "You might be sitting on that stool next to me but you aren't here. You haven't been for weeks."

I took a swig of my rum. I'd even started drinking the same fucking drink as she did. "I've got shit going on."

He threw back some of his beer, a look of "don't give me that shit" on his face. "Brother, I know the look of a man in the middle of a pussy affair and you're wearing that look right now. She something special or just a root you can't get out of your head?"

My jaw clenched. I didn't like him referring to Tatum as a root. Trouble was I had no fucking clue what she was to me anymore. "You ever had a woman fuck with your mind, Devil?"

He chuckled. "Dude, they all do that."

"Not like this."

His smile morphed into a serious expression. "Fuck, you've never gone there with a chick before?"

"Nope. Don't need another person to take care of in my life."

"So, what, you just fuck 'em and leave?"

I drank some more rum. "They always know the score." I shrugged. "Some of them stick around for a bit."

"So this one's turned into something more?"

I leant my head back before stretching my neck side-to-side. Fuck, my shoulders were tight. Exhaling hard, I said, "I don't know what the fuck she's turned into. All I know is that I can't get her out of my damn head. And that I'm sitting here in a fucking bar spilling my shit to you in ways I never thought I ever would." *Fuck.*

He slapped me on the back and grinned at me. "Hate to break it to you, Nitro, but she's turned into something more. Looks like you've found someone else to take care of in your life after all." He paused for a beat. "My advice to you, brother, is to accept your fate for what it is and then lay the fuck down and let that pussy whip you. No use fighting love."

As I sat processing his words, a voice I hadn't heard in years cut through the noise of the club, causing ice to slither down my spine. "Rhys."

My head snapped up to find Joseph standing next to us, watching me with eyes I'd hoped to fuck never to see again in my lifetime. I pushed up off the stool and stood, invading his personal space. Gripping his shirt, I snarled, "What the fuck are you doing in Sydney?"

He didn't flinch. "Came to see you, my boy."

I clenched the material of his shirt before letting it go, shoving him away at the same time. "Yeah, well there's nothing to see here, so I suggest you crawl back to where you came from."

He watched me for a moment before nodding and saying, "Good."

I glared at him. "Good?"

The smile that danced across his lips pissed me the hell off. "Yes, good. I can do a lot with that anger of yours."

Oh no, he didn't. *No, he fucking didn't.* "The days of you doing anything with me are long fucking over, Joseph." Fuck, he always did have a way of pushing my buttons.

"We can do this a few different ways, Rhys. One of them entails you choosing to come back to me. The other—"

Fury punched through me. That he'd ever think I'd go back to him. I shoved my face in his. "You had your shot at me and you more than fucked it up. I never want to see you again. And if I do, I promise you it will be the last fucking time." I pressed my hands to his chest and pushed him away from me. "Now get the *fuck* out of here."

He contemplated that and then did the smartest thing he'd ever done—he left.

"Fuck!" I yelled as I watched him go.

Fucking hell.

"Who was that?" Devil asked.

Memories ripped my heart right open, bleeding the darkest, angriest blood I'd oozed in years.

I gritted my teeth and clenched and unclenched my fists over and over as my body filled with rage. Meeting Devil's eyes, I said, "My uncle."



Four hours later, I was three sheets to the wind, walking the cement path to Tatum's front door. My head was a messed-up shit fight and I couldn't, no matter how much I tried, even begin to pick through my thoughts. I tried to numb the choking pain but failed. The memories of what Joseph had done to our family played in my mind like a fucking movie and no alcohol could rid me of those. I'd spent nineteen years trying to forget. I thought I'd worked them out of me. But five minutes in his goddam presence and I was right back there living it all over again.

Motherfucker.

I reached the door and came to an abrupt stop. What the fuck made me think this was a good idea? My mind was already fucked up with Tatum. I didn't need to add to that.

"Fuck," I muttered.

I stood there for another minute going back and forth with myself before I made the final decision that this really *was* a bad idea.

Exiting her property, I told myself Devil was wrong—Tatum hadn't become someone special to me. Good sex was just that. And I could find that anywhere.

TATUM

“(Baby I’ve Got You) On My Mind” by Powderfinger

“Tell me how he makes you feel when you’re together.”

I looked at my therapist and contemplated her question. We’d been working together for weeks now and I’d finally brought Nitro up with her. I’d resisted doing that but after seeing him last week, I’d cracked. I was fairly sure I was spiralling into a chaotic mess of despair and defeat. Rock bottom would be one way to describe it. So, in my hopelessness, I decided to lay everything on the table with her. I decided to finally give her every piece of my soul and prayed that we could fix me.

“I hated him at first. Hated that he saved me when all I wanted was to be dead. Dead with Christopher. And he was so mean that I hated him even more. But then he saved me again and started showing me another side of him.” I wrapped my arms around my body and stared at her, remembering the night I slept next to him the first time. “He makes me feel safe. Which sounds ludicrous even to me, but it’s the truth.”

“Tatum, we can’t make ourselves feel something that’s not there, just like we can’t alter the way people make us feel. It’s not ludicrous to say that he makes you feel safe. But what you have to do now is decide what you want to do with that feeling. Do you want to spend more time with him? Get to know him better?”

“I don’t know.”

She watched me closely. The way she saw me, *really saw me*, made me feel uncomfortable. I wanted to turn away from her gaze. I didn’t want her to see me. But I knew I had to let her. If I had any hope of fixing myself, I had to allow her to help me.

"I think you do know," she said simply, guiding me. She never told me what to do. That didn't seem to be how she worked. I'd never spent time with a therapist before so I had no idea how they worked, but I'd expected more help making decisions.

I unwrapped my arms from around my body and curled my legs under me on the couch. God, why was this shit so hard? Blowing out a long breath, I said, "I want to sleep with him. But I don't know if I want more than that. And besides, he doesn't want more. Hell, he doesn't even want sex with me."

"Tell me, why do you have to know everything all at once? Do you think decisions through all the way from beginning to resolution for everything you do in your life?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"It's the way I'm wired. I can't help it."

She leant forward. "You're a survivor, Tatum. You're strong and capable. You can help anything you want in your life."

Fuck, she was pissing me off today. "Maybe I don't want to fucking help it. I like the way I live my life."

"If you like the way you live your life, you wouldn't be here. I challenge you to think some more about that this week. Consider the possibilities of not thinking everything through and discarding ideas because you *think* you know how it will end."

I shoved my fingers through my hair, feeling all kinds of agitated. My body was a bundle of nervous, angry energy and I didn't even know why. In desperation, I blurted out the thought I hadn't been able to let go of for weeks. "Why am I not getting better? I've been coming here for weeks and I feel worse than I did at the beginning. I just want to be fixed and it's not happening!"

She watched me for a moment. Again. Always silently watching. And then—"We've been digging deep. You've been dredging up memories, hurts, and deeply rooted pain, Tatum. We're challenging everything you've ever thought, and examining if your thought patterns are useful, whether they serve you or hurt you. This is a process and unfortunately you can't escape it. What you do need to do is trust it. Move through it rather than against it. And know that slowly it will lead you out of all this pain and uncertainty you're feeling. The other thing? Don't try to fight your feelings as they come

up. After years of avoiding them, you have to learn to live with them."

I left the session just as confused as when I'd entered it. But for the first time, I considered the possibility that maybe it was okay to be confused. Maybe she was right and I didn't need all the answers right away.



"You're watching TV?" Monroe's shock vibrated through the phone that night when I told her I was going to watch *Game of Thrones*.

I laughed as I held the phone to my ear while making myself a Milo at the kitchen counter. "Yeah, and it starts in fifteen minutes so I have to get off the phone soon."

"You never watch television. What the hell has gotten into you?"

"I've decided to try new things."

She remained silent for a moment. When she spoke again, her voice had softened. "I love that, babe."

I inhaled deeply, letting the love I heard from her settle into my bones. "I love *you*, Monroe. I don't tell you that often enough."

"Oh, geez, you *really* are trying new things, aren't you?"

I smiled. "That was where you were supposed to tell me that you love me, too."

"Pffft, I tell you that all the time." She spoke the truth. Monroe's side of the family inherited the touchy-feely genes while mine didn't.

"Yeah, well you can tell me again. I won't hold it against you."

"Fuck me, Tatum, this shrink you're seeing is worth her weight in gold. And for the record, I love you, too."

I stirred my drink. "Okay, now that's out of the way, tell me how you're going with your search for a pierced cock."

"Ugh. Let's not go there."

Laughing, I said, "You know what we need?"

"What?"

"A girls' night out. You can look for Mr. Pierced and I can look for Mr. Not Closed Off."

She turned silent again.

When she didn't speak, I said, "You still there, Roe?"

"Yeah," she said softly, her voice cracking. "This is nice."

"What?"

"Us, talking girls' nights outs and men and dating. It's been too long since we've done this."

I knew what she was saying. *Since I shut down on her and retreated from life.* "Yeah, it's nice."

A knock on my front door interrupted us and I ended the call after promising that we would definitely have a night out soon.

The new lightness I felt was both strange and wonderful. I'd come home from the therapy session and cried for an hour and then slept for two. When I woke, it was as if the tears and the sleep were therapy in themselves. I woke with a desire to cook dinner and watch television. I couldn't remember the last time I looked forward to such simple things.

I reached the front door and checked in the peephole to see who it was. My belly fluttered at the sight of Nitro standing on the other side. And in that moment, I knew the therapist was right. *Again.* I *did* know whether I wanted to see him again. The proof was in the way my body responded to him, the way my heart sped up when he was near.

I opened the door and smiled as our eyes met. "Nitro."

Heat flared in his gaze. He couldn't even hide it and I wasn't sure he was trying to. The way he looked at me made me think he'd come here for something other than club business. "We need to talk."

I moved aside. "Okay."

He stepped inside and I followed him into the house. We'd almost made it to the kitchen when he suddenly turned to me, snaked his arm around my waist and pushed me up against the wall. Pressing his body hard to mine, his fingers worked their way into my hair and his mouth found mine.

Every inch of my skin burned with desire. I thought I'd seen passion from Nitro. I thought he'd given every piece of himself when he'd fucked me. I hadn't seen anything yet. Nitro gave new meaning to intensity with this kiss. With the way his whole body commanded my attention and demanded I give him what he wanted.

When he ended the kiss, eyes full of hunger lingered on my mouth for a beat. He then shifted his gaze to meet mine. His hands remained in my hair, his body against mine. "I can't go another night without you, Vegas."

His raspy voice, full of raw need, washed over me. God, how I'd missed this voice. Missed this man.

I slid my hands up his body to take hold of his face. Pulling it down to mine, I took his passion and I raised it. I kissed him for what felt like forever. When we finally pulled apart, we were both breathless, panting for more. "Thank fuck," I said as I practically crawled up his body.

He held me tightly and walked us into my bedroom while I wrapped everything I had around him.

Legs.

Arms.

Hands.

Feet.

Hope.

NITRO

“It Goes Like This” by Thomas Rhett

I traced lazy circles over Tatum’s hip while she slept. It was still dark outside, but I couldn’t sleep. I’d woken up hard as hell for her and that need had only grown the more I watched and touched her.

I hadn’t meant to, but I passed out after I fucked her last night. The sex had been intense. Fuelled by all the fucked-up emotions inside of me. She’d thrown her shit at me, too. I’d felt it in the way she clung and clawed and marked me with her teeth. It had been off the charts and had completely wiped me so that I slept for seven straight hours afterwards. Sleeping that long was something I never did.

She stirred and rolled over. Still half asleep, she swung a leg over my body. Next came her arm, which landed across my chest, her hand snaking under me. She rested her head in the space between my shoulder and face. I thought she would fall back asleep, but she surprised me when her mouth kissed my skin, a small moan escaping.

Placing my hand on her ass, I murmured, “Morning, Vegas.”

She kissed her way from my chest, up my throat, to my mouth. Pulling my bottom lip between her teeth, she met my gaze and smiled. Her knee then dug into the mattress and she moved to sit on top of me.

My eyes dropped to her tits. I fucking loved her tits. Could spend hours with my mouth on them. That morning, though, she had other ideas.

Tilting my face back up, she demanded, “Tell me how this is going to go down between us.”

I gripped her hips and rocked up against her. "Fuck, I like this bossy side of you. It's making me harder than I already was."

She didn't smile. "I need to know, Nitro."

"As in you want a play-by-play of the next ten years or you want to know if I've just come for a quick fuck?"

She sat back and ran her hands through her hair. Again, my eyes were drawn to her tits. Couldn't help myself. "Fuck," she muttered. "She's fucking right. *Shit.*"

I watched in fascination as Tatum lost her shit. I didn't know what she was rambling about, but it was sexy as hell seeing her do it. When a pained look crossed her face, I pressed a finger to her lips, silencing her. "You know how hot you look when you do that?"

She scowled as she smacked my hand away. "I'm here having a mental breakdown and all you're thinking about is fucking me?"

I grinned, loving this. "This ain't anything new. I'm *always* thinking about fucking you."

She seemed to like that because her expression softened. But she kept up the hard-ass routine. "Yeah, well maybe you could think about something other than pussy for a minute."

"I could think about tits instead, or ass. Or tits *and* ass. Hell, I could even get on board thinking about your mouth wrapped around my cock."

She rolled her eyes, but I saw the amusement there. "Who knew you could be so playful, Nitro?"

I smacked her ass lightly. "Okay, tell me who is right."

"Huh?"

"Before... you were muttering something about some woman being right. What did you mean?"

She sighed. "My therapist. She says these things to me that I don't agree with at the time, but then I'm always proven wrong. It drives me fucking crazy."

My respect for Tatum only grew in that moment. "What did she say that was right this time?"

"She told me that perhaps I didn't always need to be looking into the future trying to figure out how situations would turn out to decide whether to pursue them. I argued with her, but just now when you asked me about seeing ten years down the track, it made me think that maybe she was right. Maybe I don't need to think that far ahead with you."

I already liked her shrink. "In answer to your question, this wasn't just about getting laid last night."

She stilled. "Okay," she said softly.

I decided brutal honesty was the best way forward. "I can't give you a play-by-play, though, Vegas."

Watching me quietly, she thought about that for a minute. And then she shifted so she was lying on top of me instead of sitting. Her lips lingered on mine for a beat before she smiled. "I can work with that."



"Billy's raised his price," King said later that day. He'd called me, Hyde, Kick and Devil into the office to discuss our gun supplies. We still hadn't worked out what Dragon had planned, but we knew he had stocked his supplies high.

"Jesus, he's already overpriced," Kick said. His recovery was going well but I knew he was sick of being cooped up in the clubhouse where King had been keeping him. They'd argued repeatedly over it, but King remained adamant. It didn't surprise me. Kick was King's golden boy, always coming through with whatever King needed. I'd seen the fear in King's eyes when we'd brought Kick in after being shot. He hadn't slept until he knew Kick would survive. And these days he was taking no chances. I figured Kick would be stuck in the clubhouse for weeks still.

"Well, you know my thoughts on Billy," I said.

"And you know that there aren't many other options," Hyde snapped.

"Maybe we need to look outside Sydney," I said, glaring at Hyde.

Devil cut in. "Well, whoever we get them from, we need to make sure they're not going to screw us over down the track and withhold supply like Sutherland has."

King nodded. "Agreed. And I want our stockpile doubled."

I whistled low. We already had a huge stockpile. It was a risk to double it. Heat from the cops had been circling us for weeks. They were busting their balls trying to clean up the city and had targeted Silver Hell and Black Deeds. Bronze had managed to keep us out of it but we were kidding ourselves if we thought that could last forev-

er. Carrying a large supply of guns could come back to bite us in the ass if they raided us. "You sure about that, King?"

His jaw clenched. "Yes. Put the feelers out, Nitro. Find us a new supplier or get Billy to lower his price."

I nodded. King was notorious for not changing his mind once made up.

"How much longer are we going to hold out with this truce?" Hyde asked. He'd been pushing King to rethink the whole thing. Dangerous, I thought. If we broke it, we risked the heat shining our way from the cops and we also risked Dragon being steps ahead of us and coming out guns blazing. It was better to hold off and figure out his plan first.

"As long as it takes," King snapped. "We rush this, Hyde, and we could lose everything." King wasn't known for his patience, and I could tell the strain this waiting had put on him. Reaching for his phone, he said, "I'm heading out for a bit. Call me if you need me."

"Where the hell does he go every day?" Devil asked after King left the office.

I wondered the same thing. It had been going on for weeks. King kept shit close to his chest, though, so none of us knew.

"Got no idea," I said. "Who wants to come with me to find us some guns?"

Kick lifted a brow. "You got a lead on someone?"

I smirked at him. "Sit down, fucker. You're not going anywhere."

He blew out a long breath. "Fuck, King is fuckin' killing me here. Hell, even Evie isn't giving me hell about taking it easy anymore."

Devil slapped him on the back, grinning like a fool. "Remind me to never take a bullet for the club. Doesn't seem like you get much for it except King locking you up and your woman locking her pussy up."

Kick had been vocal in his pain over not getting fucked for weeks after he was shot. He groaned. "This shit with King needs to fuckin' end. I'll get you what you need, Nitro."

"Not a fucking chance in hell am I going against King," I said.

Hyde took charge. "I'm with Nitro today. Kick stays here and Devil is on Dragon." He looked at me. "We good to go?"

Hyde was the last person I wanted to spend the day with. Shit hadn't settled between us since he spoke his mind about me not being committed to the club. But I nodded and followed him out to our

bikes. I just had to get through the day. work with Hyde to fix our supplier issue, and then get back to Tatum's sweet pussy.

TATUM

“Unpack Your Heart” by Phillip Phillips

“A man that studieth revenge keeps his own wounds green. Why that?” Nitro asked as his finger glided over the tattoo on my thigh. He’d just fucked me for two hours, and I was sleepy, but he hadn’t taken his hands off me since I’d returned from the bathroom ten minutes ago and his touch kept me awake.

I stared at the words from Francis Bacon that I’d chosen and swallowed hard. “It’s a warning.”

“For what?”

“That my desire for revenge isn’t good for my mental health.”

His eyes found mine. “Revenge for your brother’s murder?”

“Yeah, for that...” *and for so much more.*

He shifted so he was lying on his side with one leg over mine, his body propped up on his arm, his head resting against his hand. Running a finger along my collarbone, he said, “What else is running around in that pretty head of yours, Vegas? What other revenge do you want?”

Sharing personal stuff with each other hadn’t been part of our relationship before. He’d pretty much always shut down on me whenever I asked him something, and I hadn’t volunteered much either. But we’d taken a step forward, and although I had no play-by-play guiding me as to what this relationship could be, I sensed the change in him. He was interested. Wanted to know more. And while I felt more fear over sharing my heart than I did over doing things grown men would shrink from, I decided to take a chance on him. “I’ve spent hours plotting my ex-husband’s death. Almost every bad thing that’s happened to me in the last couple of years is a direct result of

the shit he put me through. It would be easy to kill him. And to get away with it."

I held my breath and diverted my eyes from his. I'd already said too much. Nitro would surely get up and walk out the door after that confession. I couldn't imagine anyone but Monroe choosing to stand by me once they knew the thoughts in my head and the things I'd done.

He tilted my chin so I looked back up at him. "What did he do to you?" There was no judgement in his tone, no repulsion in the way he looked at me.

Letting out the breath I held, I shook my head. "Let's not talk about this, Nitro. It's done and in the past and I'm trying to move on from it." My cheeks heated with the self-disgust I always felt when I thought about Randall. All the disgust I felt towards myself stemmed from him, because every shameful thing I'd done was for him.

He shifted on the bed again, this time to press harder against me and to drape his arm over my chest, almost as if he was trying to pin me down. "I have someone in my life who I want dead, too. The shit he did to my family and me... I want him deader than fucking dead. I want to do it slowly, make him hurt and beg for forgiveness. Forgiveness I'll never give."

His declaration came out harshly, his pain still sharp. I heard what he was telling me without saying it out loud. This was a safe place between the two of us.

"I met Randall when I was twenty, when I was a naïve uni student just trying to put myself through a law degree. He was seven years older than me and seemed so sophisticated with his own business, expensive car, flashy house. You name it, he had it. And he used all that shit to fool me. After growing up with nothing, I was determined to have things for myself, nice things. I wanted the big house, the cars, the holidays, everything. A year after we met, he proposed and I said yes. It wasn't until we'd been married for about five years that I opened my eyes to who I'd really married. But, God, us women are fucking dumb sometimes. I swore I could fix him, change him, make *us* better. If only *I* did better, he'd stop lying to me, stop treating me like a fool."

The pressure in my chest became hard to bear. It was like a heavy weight pressing down on me. I needed out from under Nitro's hold.

Pushing his arm away, I forced myself to a sitting position and drew my legs up so my knees were against my chest. I wrapped my arms around my legs and dropped my head to my knees, allowing my tears to fall.

Sobs racked my body, and I let them. I didn't try to stop any of it. I just let myself move through the emotions as my therapist had suggested. Anger, hurt, shame—I let it all hit me. Most of all, though, I stopped hiding from my self-hatred. I let it bleed out of me.

Lifting my head, I eyed Nitro through my tears. He watched me silently, his hand placed reassuringly on my back. Wiping at my tears and getting myself together, I continued, "Randall had an importing business and he did well with it, but he always wanted more. More sales, more income, bigger and flashier everything. Was always looking for the next big thing in business to give him the wealth he craved. He managed to get himself into debt and that's when he turned nasty and mean towards me. We fought all the time. Nothing I did was ever good enough. So I decided I had to help him somehow." I paused for a moment, willing the tears to hold off until I got this out. "That was when Billy came to me with an offer. I was working in the DPP, and he needed someone to help get him off some charges. I'd known him for about four years, and although I knew he was dirty, I liked him. He'd always been good to me. Before I started working with the DPP, I'd done some legal work for him so I knew what he was into. Anyway, he offered me good cash to help him. One case led to another, and it just spiralled out of control. I did whatever I needed to do to make his problems go away, including lying for him and forging signatures. I always told myself that once I had the money Randall needed to get himself out of shit our problems would go away and I could stop doing that work for Billy. Turned out that the day Randall had the ninety thousand he needed to clear all his debt was the day that *he* went away."

Nitro frowned. "He left you?"

I nodded. "Yeah," I said softly. "For his long-term mistress who I never knew about."

Nitro's jaw clenched and his shoulders tensed. "So that mother-fucker took the cash you'd sold your fucking soul for and did the fucking dirty on you?"

I gulped back a sob. "Yes," I whispered. "And then it all went to shit after that. My whole life... fucked. I lost everything."

"The DPP found out what you'd done," Nitro said, putting it all together.

"Yes. I was disbarred. My friends, who were all lawyers, walked away from me. I lost my home, my car, everything. The only people I had left were Chris, Monroe, Duvall and Billy."

"That's when you started working for Billy?"

I nodded. Taking a deep breath in an effort to stop more tears, I said, "I did this to myself. Everything I don't have now is my own fault. I was stupid to fall for someone like Randall. Stupid to think he would give me the things I was desperate for. And even dumber for wanting those things in the first place. I threw my career away for nothing."

"Fuck, Tatum," he started. "We do crazy shit for our family sometimes. Anything to make them happy. You weren't stupid to fall for someone. He's the asshole in all this."

More tears fell. I couldn't hold them in any longer. "He didn't even call when Chris died.... I don't know what I expected, but I thought no matter what had happened between us, he might care enough to check on me. I guess I know once and for all how much he actually cared about me."

"Why was Chris murdered?" he asked quietly.

"He was involved in some bad shit. Mostly car theft. He ran with a gang from the time he was fifteen and just got deeper and deeper into shit. I tried to get him out, but it was ingrained in him. He went off the rails when he was nineteen, mentally, and after that, he just never seemed to get his life together. Had delusions of being untouchable. He went into direct opposition with Silver Hell, selling stolen cars cheaply. They didn't like it because he was undercutting them. In the end, they solved their problem by killing him."

"Fuck," he muttered. "Are your parents still alive?"

I shook my head. "No. Dad passed away nine years ago, and Mum died from breast cancer last year. Just before Chris died."

His eyes filled with sorrow and he wiped my tears as they fell harder. His touch was so tender. Full of care. When my tears didn't subside, he pulled me into his arms and held me until I stopped crying. Nitro's embrace was everything I'd never had from a man in my life. My father had been so busy providing for our family that his time had been scarce. He'd also been preoccupied with desperately trying to figure out how to get my mother to love him as much as he

did her, which meant his emotional capacity was stretched thin when it came to his kids. And as far as my ex-husband was concerned, I couldn't recall a time he'd ever comforted me the way Nitro was. *My nightmare slayer.*



I stood in the doorway to my bedroom and leant against the doorjamb watching Nitro put on his boots. He'd woken me an hour earlier with a hard-on that needed taking care of, but we'd been interrupted when King had called asking him to meet in an hour. We'd taken care of that hard-on, but it had been faster than either of us had wanted because, with traffic, he'd be pushing it to meet King on time.

"Here," I said, pushing off from the doorjamb and shoving a thermos at him.

He stood and closed the distance between us. "Coffee?"

"Yeah, figured I didn't get time to cook you breakfast so I'd make coffee for your drive."

Taking the thermos, he said, "Since when do you cook me breakfast, woman?"

Woman.

That word and the way it rolled off his tongue hit every single nerve ending in my body. Before I knew it, my arms were looped around his neck and my body was pressed up against his. "There's a first time for everything. Maybe tomorrow if you're lucky."

A sexy smile made its way across his face and his hand curved over my ass. Slowly. The kind of slow that made my vagina roll over and beg for mercy. But there would be no mercy that morning. He had to get to work. "You a good cook, Vegas?"

I gripped the back of his neck. "You better believe it. You won't know whether you want me to open my legs or my cookbook."

Heat flared in his eyes and he moved his mouth to my ear. "Pussy always trumps food."

I unhooked my hands from around his neck and let him go. This was moving into dangerous territory. "You should leave before I try and stop you."

"Yeah," he said gruffly. Grabbing his keys, he made his way to the front door. As he reached for the handle, his phone rang. "What's up, Dustin?" he answered the call, pulling the door open.

I followed him outside to his ute, catching pieces of the conversation.

"No, I can't come home right now and help you. I've gotta get to work," he said. I picked up that Dustin was stressing over something and Nitro was attempting to calm him down.

I placed my hand on his forearm to draw his attention. When I had it, I said, "Is he okay? Can I help?"

Nitro stared at me for a beat, contemplating what I said before nodding. "Dustin, give me a sec." He moved the phone away from his mouth to say to me, "He's got a job interview this morning and is stressing. Have you got time to go and talk him down?"

I nodded. "Yes."

"Thanks." He ended his call with Dustin, promising I'd be there soon. Yanking the door to his ute open, he said, "Thanks for that. He's always a mess when he has an interview. Usually I'm there to calm him."

I loved how he was there for his family. Moving into him, my lips found his, lingering there not wanting to let him go. "I'll talk him through it."

He watched me for a moment, his arm resting on the top of the door. It seemed like he was mulling something over, but all he ended up saying was, "Appreciate it." And then he closed the door, kicked over the engine and reversed out of the driveway.

I kept my gaze on his ute until I couldn't see it anymore. Wrapping my arms around my body, I headed back inside. The fact he trusted me to help his brother didn't escape my attention. I wondered how many others he allowed into his life in that way?



"Right, tell me about this interview," I said to Dustin as I dumped my bag on Nitro's kitchen table a little while after he'd called for help.

He paced nervously and stared at me with a desperate look of fear. "What do you want to know?"

I smiled, trying to gain his trust. I'd never seen anyone so scared about a job interview before. "What's the job?"

"It's for a cleaning job at a school."

"And have you done that kind of work before?"

He twisted his hands together. "Yes."

"Great! So you've got experience. That will look good for you." I glanced at the table, looking for a resume. "Have you got a resume?"

His eyes widened. "Shit! Yes... no. Oh, fuck, Tatum...."

I moved to him and placed my hands on his shoulders. "Breathe, Dustin. Deep breath in, then out."

He nodded and did what I said, taking a deep breath. On an exhale, he said, "I don't know where it is."

"What time is the interview?"

"Eleven thirty."

It was only just after eight. "Okay, this is what we're gonna do. You're going to follow me to my work and we're going to type up a new resume for you. We'll print it there and then you can drive to your interview."

His breaths were coming faster, and I wasn't convinced he would get through this hiccup. But he nodded his agreement.

I brought out my stern voice. The one I often used on my girls when they were having a moment at work. "You've made it through the first hurdle, Dustin. Getting an interview is hard these days. So, pull up your panties and let's get this shit done, because you're going to kick ass at this interview. And I'm going to make sure you have the best resume to impress them with."

His eyes widened again, and I thought we might have a problem for sure, but he ended up grinning and moving into action.

As I followed him out of Nitro's house, I realised it was the second day in a row that I was going to work with a smile on my face.

NITRO

“The Story” by Brandi Carlile

I stared at Joseph as he entered King’s office. Bewildered, I turned to King. “You’ve gotta be fucking kidding! *He’s* who you wanna buy fucking guns off?”

King had called me in early to meet with him, Hyde, and a potential new supplier. The last person I’d expected to see walk through that door was my fucking uncle.

“You two know each other?” King asked, looking between us.

“He’s my fucking uncle, and I’ll be fucked if I work with him,” I thundered.

Joseph’s mouth spread out into a thin line as he regarded me with irritation. “My nephew always was overdramatic.”

I clenched my teeth, fists, and every fucking part of my body because it all strained to lash out and punch the motherfucker. Or choke the life out of him. His memories were clearly distorted. I’d never lived an overdramatic moment in my life. He made sure of that.

King’s face wrinkled with confusion. His gaze swung to me. “I didn’t know you had any other family.”

I turned to Joseph and shot a hate-filled glare his way. “As far as I’m concerned, I don’t.”

Before anyone could speak again, Joseph cut in. “This has got nothing to do with family. This is purely business, gentlemen. I have the weapons you need and, as discussed, I’m happy to lower my price for the first six months’ worth of shipments if we agree to a twelve-month term to begin with.”

Hyde whistled as scepticism filled his expression. "That's a sweet deal. What do you get out of it?"

"I'm looking to do more business in Sydney. You'd be my first client."

Hyde crossed his arms over his chest. "Yeah, but what do you really get out of it, because us being your first client isn't much to gain in exchange for six months of cheap guns."

Joseph's vein ticked in his temple. No one in the room besides me understood that tick, though. Probably didn't even see it either. He was pissed, and I guessed it was because Hyde had hit the nail on the fucking head. "You can bet your ass he's got an ulterior motive," I threw out.

All eyes came to me.

Joseph's features darkened, but he held his shit together. He always had been good at doing that. Except when I pushed him too far and he showed me just what us Lockwood's were capable of. "I do have an ulterior motive. I own Melbourne when it comes to guns and have done so for fifteen years. New players are coming into the market, and while I'd prefer not to have the competition, I can't stop it. So, I've chosen to expand to keep my business running. And I see Storm as a potential ally. This deal is my way of fostering that relationship."

I watched in disbelief as King and Hyde seemed to buy that crock of shit. But I held my tongue. Better to wait for him to leave to have this out with them.

"Okay, Joseph, leave it with us. We'll discuss this and get back to you soon," King said.

As Joseph left, he handed me a business card. "My phone number, son, for when you come to your senses."

I took the card, but only because he thrust it upon me before I registered what he said. He was delusional if he thought I'd use it.

Once he left the office, I turned to King and Hyde. "We can't use him."

King settled against the desk and crossed his feet in front of him. "Why not?"

"That bullshit about expanding in Sydney to save his business is a lie. If a deal with him seems too good to be true, it is."

"I take it you're not close to him?" King said.

I shook my head. "Haven't been for nineteen years and don't intend to be ever again."

"What happened?" Hyde asked.

This was a story I never wanted to revisit. However, I had to give them something, a piece of it at least, to make them understand how evil Joseph was. "You know much about him and his business?"

"I know that he's built a fucking empire from nothing," King said. "And that he's known to be a ruthless motherfucker."

"Yeah, well, that empire he built from nothing? It came from building an army of soldiers willing to do his dirty work at his beck and call. And those soldiers? He finds them on the street and in the gutters, cleans them up and then brainwashes them into robots who have no fucking clue what they're doing. He uses them to pimp drugs, women, guns.... You name it, he sells it. And if someone gets in the way of all that? His soldiers are trained to take care of problems."

King pushed off from the desk. "Nitro, I just want guns and I want them cheap, and I want to buy them from someone who won't fuck us over. I don't really give a fuck what Joseph's business is. So long as he has what we need, that's all that matters."

My shoulders tensed. "So you'll consider this?"

"Yeah, I will."

My vision blurred with red rage. The urge to punch shit took over my body and I knew I had to get out of King's office before I did something I'd regret. Jabbing my finger at him, I said, "I'm telling you both now, if you do this, you'll live to regret it."

I turned and ripped the door open.

The thing that pissed me off the most wasn't that Joseph had wormed his way into Storm or that he was in Sydney. It was that I'd taken my eye off the ball with him. I'd kept track of his movements for fucking years, always making sure I knew what he was up to. I hadn't checked up on him for a couple of months and now there he fucking was.

Motherfucker.



I entered my house in a foul mood that night. All I wanted was a cold beer and to zone the fuck out in front of the television for a few hours. I wasn't even sure if I'd make it over to see Tatum after that. It was probably safer to stay away with the mood I was in. However, my plans were turned on their head when I walked into the kitchen to grab a beer out of the fridge.

"Nitro." Tatum sat at the island bench and smiled at me while Dustin stood on the other side cooking.

He glanced up. "I'm making Tatum's favourite dinner."

I lifted a brow, confused as fuck as to what was going on here. Dustin never cooked. I wasn't even sure if he knew how to. He usually existed on takeaway or two-minute noodles. Continuing to the fridge, I reached in for the beer. "Are we celebrating something?"

Dustin ignored my question. "Do you know what Tatum's favourite meal is?"

I leant against the pantry. "Can't say I do." Jesus, I needed to shake this shitty mood; otherwise, I'd piss everyone off.

Dustin smiled triumphantly, as if he had the secrets of the world locked away in his head. "It's nachos, steak, mashed potato and porridge."

I just about spat my beer out. Shooting my attention to Tatum, I found her trying to hold back a laugh. My lips twitched and my mood shifted. "You don't say?" I said, not letting her eyes go.

She hopped off the stool and walked to where I stood. Sliding her hands around my waist, she planted a kiss on my lips. "Did you have a bad day, grumpy?"

I hooked my arm around her and dropped my hand to her ass. "Nothing that your favourite dinner can't fix," I murmured.

Laughter escaped her lips. "Good."

Dustin eyed us as he wiped his hands on a tea towel. "I've just gotta go grab my phone. Can you guys watch the potatoes?"

I nodded. "Yeah, buddy."

After he had left us, Tatum whispered, "Dustin asked me what my favourite things to eat were. He didn't tell me what he was planning so I just rattled off the things I like the most. Now he thinks that I eat them all together for dinner."

I chuckled, feeling some of the tension in my shoulders easing. "He has a soft spot for you so I'd expect to be eating that dinner of-

ten. I've gotta say, I've never seen him cook before. Is there an occasion?"

"If you're asking me why I'm here for dinner, the answer is because Dustin wanted to thank me for helping him ace his interview today."

The moment sat between us. Things were shifting fast in our relationship, and I had feelings rushing at me that were so foreign I didn't know what to do with them. I decided at that moment just to give her my honesty. My truth. And she could do with it whatever she chose.

I took a swig of my beer. "I like that you're here for dinner."

Her arms tightened around me. "I like it, too," she said softly and fuck if that didn't hit me right in the gut.

"We're here!" Renee's voice filtered into the kitchen, and I jerked my head up to see her and Marilyn join us.

"The whole fucking family, huh?" I said.

Tatum laughed and moved out of my embrace. "Yeah, Dustin said he wanted to cook for everyone."

"Hi Tatum," Renee said, hitting her with a smile. "This is my mum, Marilyn."

I watched my sister. She and Renee had moved back home just over two weeks ago, against my wishes, but we'd been arguing about it for weeks so I'd given in. She'd been seeing her shrink and doing the work, but she'd retreated. She hadn't returned to work after time off while she'd been in hospital receiving treatment, and I was concerned that the longer she stayed away, the harder it would be to go back.

She smiled at Tatum. "Hi," she said hesitantly.

Tatum returned her smile, magnified. I knew she was trying hard here because she didn't usually smile that brightly. "Hi, Marilyn. It's lovely to meet you."

Dustin returned to the kitchen and resumed cooking. Renee and Tatum discussed an assignment Renee was having hell with—a legal studies essay, which was right up Tatum's alley. Marilyn's shyness kicked in, but she joined in every now and then. And I watched my family begin to get to know the woman I'd let into my life. It was the oddest fucking night of my life and yet one of the best.



"Marilyn is so reserved," Tatum said later that night as she lay next to me, her fingers drawing patterns on my chest. "I couldn't work out whether she liked me or not."

I tightened my arm around her. "She liked you."

She pushed up so she was resting on her elbow. "Really? How could you tell?"

I took in Tatum's questions, her tone and the expression on her face. Smoothing her hair, I said, "You really want her to like you, don't you?"

She hesitated for a brief moment before nodding. "Yeah, I do."

"Why?"

Her eyes darted away from mine, and I saw the vulnerability in her that she didn't often show the world.

I tilted her chin so she looked at me again. "Don't hide from me, Vegas."

She watched me silently. Always thinking. Always trying to figure out if she could trust me with shit. I didn't blame her, though. Trust was one of the most sacred things you could give another person. "I like your family. Like, a lot. They're funny and kind, and they make me feel welcome. I always wanted a home filled with laughter and fun, but we never had that. Even when Chris and I were older, the two of us never had that. I was always running around after him, making sure he was still alive and okay. And he was looking out for me, too, but there wasn't a lot of fun times."

"What did you have growing up?" She'd not mentioned her parents much, so I wondered how bad it was.

She settled back against me, curled in close, arm draped over my chest. "My mum was an unhappy woman. She was bored and unfulfilled in her life and never really did fun stuff with us as kids. When she was nine, we came home from school one day and she was gone. No note, no nothing. She'd just packed a bag and disappeared. My father was devastated because she was the love of his life and he'd always gone above and beyond to try and make her happy. Nothing he did was ever good enough, though."

Jesus, even my early childhood had been better than hers. "But she came back?" I recalled that Tatum had mentioned her mother so

I figured she'd been in her life later on.

"Yeah, a year after she left, she returned. It was one of the happiest days of my childhood, but I quickly realised happiness doesn't always last. Our home only grew quieter and sadder as we all tiptoed around trying to keep Mum happy so she never left us again."

"Your parents stayed together?"

"Yep, until the day Dad died. And Mum was just as unhappy without him, so I hope she figured out it was her all along who'd failed, not him." She sounded so harsh towards her mother, but I couldn't blame her.

"You two weren't close?"

"I tried, I really did. But when someone doesn't want to do anything to help their own happiness, it's hard to be around them. That dark place they're in will eventually crush your joy. I was already running low on that so I decided I had to stay away as much as I could. I probably saw more of her last year while she was dying than I did for years." She twisted her head to look up at me. "Guilt makes you do shit like that."

"It doesn't sound like you had much to feel guilty over."

"Guilt is a woman's cross to bear, Nitro. We're suckers when it comes to feeling guilty over every damn thing. Hell, we'll even take everyone else's shit and feel guilty for that, too."

She laid her head back on my chest and we fell silent. And then I remembered her earlier question about how I knew that Marilyn liked her. "I know Lynny liked you because she asked you how we met. She never asks people stuff if she doesn't like them. She can't be bothered to engage if she doesn't see a point to it. And when she was leaving, she made a point to say goodbye to you. Again, if she wasn't interested in getting to know you, my sister wouldn't say goodbye. She doesn't use manners like most people do."

"What happened to her, Nitro?"

"As in just recently or are you asking why she's so withdrawn in general?"

She moved so she sat cross-legged next to me. "Both."

I sat up with my back to the headboard of the bed. Talking about Marilyn wasn't something I did, except with Renee, Dustin, and Marilyn's doctor. And as much as we annoyed the fuck out of each other sometimes, I'd go to my grave to protect her. But I'd come to the realisation that Marilyn needed more people in her corner, in her

life, and if Tatum wanted to get to know her better, she'd need help to do that because Marilyn wouldn't open up easily.

"Lynny was the kid who didn't make friends easily. She was withdrawn and sad a lot. Possibly depressed as a teen, but there was never a diagnosis, so I can't be sure. Our parents died in a car crash when I was twelve. Lynny was six and Dustin was nine. We went to live with our Uncle Joseph in Melbourne. He's not a good man and living with him was not good for her. Joseph didn't allow us to leave the house except to go to school. He treated us like slaves around his house." I took a breath. Dragging this shit up was something I hated to do. Hated to remember what he put us through. "Joseph was involved deeply in organised crime and is now one of the top dogs in Australia. He deals in guns, drugs, and prostitutes. Back then, though, he was building his business up. The day I turned thirteen, he started teaching me how to shoot a gun. By the time I turned fifteen, I knew how to shoot any gun given to me, kill with a knife, and torture someone to get information. Dustin was slow developmentally so Joseph had no interest in him. And Lynny was a girl so she was only good for stuff around the house. Even when she was young, like seven, he put her to work. Most of the time, though, she spent in her bedroom by herself."

Tatum stared at me in shock. "Oh my God, Nitro, that's awful."

"Yeah, and it fucked us all up. Joseph trained me as a soldier. It was regimented and brutal. Some of the shit he put me through.... It's deeply ingrained in me, Tatum. I'm violent because of him and no matter how hard I might want to change that, I can't. You need to know this about me because sometimes I can't switch it off."

Fuck, she needed to take this in. I didn't want to hurt her, but fuck knew what was down the track. I couldn't predict the future and I sure as hell couldn't always predict my own behaviour. The wiring in my brain had been screwed with, and my reactions to situations and people weren't always what I thought they would be. Sometimes the rage blinded me and I was helpless to react in any way but with violence.

Tatum pushed up so she was kneeling and then she straddled me. Bringing her hands to my face, she cupped my cheeks and kissed me. It was unlike any of our other kisses. There was no wild energy to it, just an intimacy that was new. When she ended the kiss, she said, "I know you have that violence and darkness in you, Nitro,

but I've seen so much more than that. You saved my life when you could have easily chosen a different path. Even when I begged you to end my life, you didn't. And yes, I've seen your inner struggle with your actions, but I feel safe with you. I know you get pissed off with me, but you always protect me. And that's more than I can say for most of the people who have been in my life."

I ran my hands over the bare skin of her back. "You don't know what you're saying, Vegas. You hardly know me."

"I've seen you when your club was at war. When you killed a man, when a bomb almost killed us, and when you came back from an ambush where you had to fight for your life and those of your fellow club members. War shows us who we are. It drags us to our deepest depths and reveals just what we would do to survive. Good and bad." She gripped my face harder. "You showed me that you're a fighter, and you're loyal and that you put others before yourself. I might not know all the little ins and outs that make you, you, like what your favourite colour is or what your dreams are in life or what your favourite dinner is, but I know your character, and that's something a lot of people don't ever truly find out about the people in their lives."

I stared at her. Fuck, she'd surprised me again. And shown me just how fucking deep and intelligent she was. Leaning forward, I held her close and moved us so she lay on the bed with me on top of her. Pressing my mouth to hers, I kissed her hard. Rough. I tore a moan from her lips. And when I finished, I rasped, "You're something fucking else, you know that?"

She smiled up at me, her lips swollen from our kiss. "Only because you told me."

That right there pissed me off. That no man had ever shown her how fucking amazing she was or made her believe in herself. I would make that shit my mission. I'd show Tatum what I saw when I looked at her, and I'd make her understand the truth in it.

TATUM

“Arms” by Christina Perri

Nitro moved behind me as I brushed my teeth after our shower together the next morning. Well, if you could call using my finger to spread toothpaste over my teeth. It was the first time I'd stayed at his house after we started sleeping together and it hadn't been planned, so I had no clothes or toiletries. He'd offered me his toothbrush, but I was funny about germs. He'd then made fun of me for doing all sorts of things with my mouth, yet not wanting to share a toothbrush. I'd told him that if he wanted to keep making fun of me, I'd happily stop doing those things with my mouth, at which point he immediately stopped making fun of me.

Sliding his arm around me and slipping his hand inside the towel I wore to find skin, he said, “You want a clean shirt to wear home?” While he waited for my reply, he dropped his mouth to my shoulder and kissed me.

I watched him in the mirror, my belly fluttering with sensations that were unfamiliar to me. Everything in that moment sparked a surge of happiness in me. The way he held me, touched me, spoke to me, and the question he asked. Such a simple question, but one that showed me where his mind was at in our relationship. This feeling of closeness was something I didn't want to admit to needing, because my failed attempt at it in the past made me unwilling to try for it again.

His eyes met mine in the mirror, and I smiled. “I want that black one with the skull on it.”

The skin around his eyes creased as a smile hit them. “Of course you do.”

I frowned, not sure what he meant.

His hand inside my towel grazed my breast as it swept across my stomach. "You love your skulls. Most of your clothes have one on them."

The flutters in my belly whooshed deep in my core. *He paid attention to my clothes?* I turned to face him. "You're a damn contradiction, Nitro. I swear I am constantly surprised by the things you say and do."

"That makes two of us," he said, his voice all husky.

We held each other. No talking, no caressing, just taking the other in, thinking. And then Dustin broke the moment.

"Nitro, we need milk! I thought you usually had some long life stuff in the cupboard, but I can't find it," he called out from the kitchen.

Nitro's chest shook with a chuckle and he briefly dropped his forehead to mine. "Fucking hell." Looking back at me, he muttered, "That would be because your favourite dinner includes porridge and he used it all. Fucking porridge with steak and nachos and shit."

I smacked him lightly on the arm. "Don't knock porridge for dinner, dude."

His eyes twinkled with amusement and heat all at once. "Vegas, I have a new appreciation for porridge."

"Nitro! Did you hear me?" Dustin yelled out.

Nitro let me go. With regret clear in his eyes. "You want a coffee?"

I nodded and tracked his movements as he left the bathroom. This was a good morning. And not just because I'd had hot sex with him. No, it had more to do with a feeling swirling around everything in this house and the people in it. A feeling I knew I could no longer deny loving.



I put my knife and fork down and looked at Duvall. He sat across from me in the new café I'd chosen for our lunch. I'd decided we needed a fresh start, and new surroundings felt fitting.

"I've started seeing Nitro," I said, waiting for him to lose his shit at me.

He put his cutlery down, too. Leaning his elbows on the table, he said, "Okay."

I frowned. "That's it? No lecture?" I'd expected an argument over it. Especially since Nitro still hadn't worked out how Duvall had seen that footage, which meant I hadn't talked to him about it in order to clear up the fact it hadn't been Nitro who beat me up that night.

Sighing, he said, "Tatum, you've always been a woman who does what she wants. You're independent and don't like being told what others think of your choices. I've told you what I think. That's all I can do."

Duvall was one of my closest friends. Well, he used to be. But he didn't know me very well, and that was my fault. He'd tried to get to know me, but I'd always held pieces of myself back. The pieces I was ashamed of. I wasn't sure I wanted one of my closest friends to not know me anymore. "I never told you the full truth about why my marriage ended."

Surprise flared on his face and he leant back in his seat. "So it wasn't just because your dickhead ex cheated on you?"

"No." Sucking in a long breath, I laid my heart out for him. "Randall had a lot of debt and just kept clocking up more. And he fought with me all the time over that and everything else in our life. In my wisdom, I decided the way to fix our marriage would be to help him solve his debt problem."

"So you took bribes off Billy," he said slowly, piecing it together.

"Yes, that's why I took those bribes."

"Fuck, Tatum," he swore. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You say that as if the reason why I did it makes it more understandable when it doesn't."

"It does."

I shook my head. "No," I said with force. "It doesn't. The fact is I gave up on everything I believed in to do what I did. I told myself at first that it would just be that once, but it quickly grew too easy to make good cash. As my marriage disintegrated, I became more desperate to fix it. Billy just had to look at me back then, and I was panting to help him."

He fell silent for a beat. "I understand it because he gave me what I needed, too. So don't think you're the only one who threw something away."

My heart cracked for what Duvall did for his family. The deal he signed with the devil was done from a much better place than the one I signed. "You did what you did for your sister, Duvall. You had no other choice." She had ALS and desperately needed money for care. I knew he'd gone to hell making the decision to allow Billy to pay for her medical bills, but I would have made the exact same choice.

He never talked about what he'd done, especially not since his sister died six months ago. He ignored what I said and asked, "So why did you take a damn job with him?"

I flattened my lips as I considered that question. "It would be easy to say the reason was because he was the only person offering me a job at the time. But it runs deeper than that, and I'm not sure even I fully understand my reasons."

"Try me."

"By the time I was disbarred, I'd changed. Everything that happened made me into a different person. It made me harder, but it also made me want to help people who stared at life from a place of no hope—"

"Fuck, you'd always wanted to help those people, Tatum."

I nodded. "Yeah," I murmured. "Billy originally asked me to help one of his strippers out of a legal mess caused by an abusive ex who played the system so well that he had the upper hand. Helping her led to him finding more work for me with the people who worked for him and here we are."

"Do you ever think of leaving and finding a job away from the filth?"

He didn't understand me, and I wasn't sure he ever would because we looked at life through different eyes. "Duvall, I don't judge the filth, as you call it. To me, it's just people trying to live their lives the best way they can at that moment. We all have parts of ourselves we wish were different, better maybe. The parts of us that have been fucked up by life and the people in it. Sure, some don't want to change their lives, and that's their choice, but I'm there for those who do. Sometimes along the way I have to do things I don't agree with or that I wouldn't choose to do, but I do them because in the end they help me achieve my goal. And these days, my motivation isn't greed." It was that greed, along with my blind trust in a man who had no respect for me that made me feel so ashamed. Back then,

he'd made me feel like I wasn't enough and that was why he'd cheated on me. Not feeling like I was enough had proven to be a hard feeling to recover from.

He drummed his fingers lightly on the table, listening to me but seemingly miles away in his thoughts. "So the end justifies the means, then?"

I leant forward and met his gaze. "Yes," I said softly, "sometimes it does."

He listened and he processed, but in the end he said, "We're going to have to agree to disagree on that one."

I smiled. "That's the beauty of friendship, right?"

"I guess it is."

It always had been that way for our friendship. We'd often argued over cases and the rights and wrongs of the world. And we'd always been able to forget all that shit when it came to our friendship. "Thank you for being a good friend."

He lifted a brow. "You call me not giving you hell for dating a biker, a good friend?"

How would I ever convince him of the truth? "He doesn't beat me. I can't get into it all, but what you saw on that footage wasn't even close to what you think."

"I believe you." When I gave him a confused look, he elaborated. "I looked into it more and found out about the murder at the casino that night. I put shit together, Tatum, and figured he must have been involved in it. And for you to have anything to do with him after that, I figure that dead biker deserved everything he got. Still doesn't make me happy that you've chosen to get involved with Storm."

I was stunned by what he said. "You're turning a blind eye?"

He drank some of his water. "I'm not a cop. I don't have a case on my desk to prosecute and as far as I know, the DPP aren't looking into it either. There's nothing to turn a blind eye to as far as I'm concerned."

I reached across the table and placed my hand on his arm. "And you don't believe the end justifies the means," I murmured.

"I believe in your happiness, Tatum. I don't want to see you hurting anymore, and if this is what makes you happy, I'll put my shit aside." His eyes bored into mine. "Tell me you're happy and I'll not say another word about you choosing a biker."

I took a deep breath. "I'm happy."

He flinched a little at my answer, and I realised that while Duvall said he wanted me to be happy, he didn't necessarily want Nitro to be the one to give me that. However, he gave me a tight smile and said, "Good."

I loved him for that. If you couldn't allow your friends to be happy in the way they chose, you couldn't call yourself a friend.



On my way home from work that afternoon, Billy called in a pissed-off mood. "I swear I'm going to close this damn club down, Tatum. It's a never-fucking-ending headache of staff fucking up and quitting on me."

I laughed as I steered the car around a corner. "You threaten this on a daily basis, Billy. I think it's time for an intervention. Maybe some Xanax mixed with some vodka and we could throw in some other shit too if you need it."

He wasn't amused. He never was, but I put up with him regardless of the fact he had no sense of humour. "This isn't helping."

"Okay, tell me what you need. I'll make it happen."

"I need a fucking new cleaner. And I need them tonight." He said it like he doubted my ability to produce the goods.

I smiled. "Done."

He took a moment to reply. "Why do you sound so fucking joyful today?"

"Because I am. Now, hang up so I can go get your cleaner."

He grumbled some more shit before finally ending the call. I pulled the car over so I could access the files I stored in my Dropbox on my phone. Dustin's résumé was stored in there and it had his phone number in it. Once I'd located what I needed, I dialled him.

"Hello?" He didn't know my number and sounded hesitant.

"Dustin, it's Tatum. I have a job for you."

"Huh?"

"A cleaning job. Do you still need a job?"

"Oh... yes, I do!" Excitement filled my ears.

"Are you free tonight? Because they need you right away."

"Yes!" Dustin's easy nature had to be his best trait.

I gave him all the information and called the club to talk with the woman who he'd work with that night, organising with her to hold his hand a little. As I drove home with the intent to relax in the bath for hours, I thought about how happy and grateful Dustin was for the opportunity I'd just found him. That was what made my job worth doing.

NITRO

“One Night Girl” by Blake Shelton

I banged on Tatum’s door, irritated as fuck at her. She took her sweet time answering me and it only gave that irritation time to grow.

Swinging the door open, she said, “Jesus, Nitro, why all the banging?”

I clenched my jaw. “You got Dustin a job with Billy?”

“Yes.”

“Why the fuck would you do that?”

She gripped the door as if she was about to slam it in my face. “If you’re going to come here and yell at me without giving me a chance to explain myself, you can leave right now and come back when you’ve calmed down.”

Fuck.

I shoved my fingers through my hair. I needed to rein this anger in, but fuck if I could. Billy being in the mix made sure of that. Taking a step inside, I said, “I’m not leaving. We’re discussing this.” Before she had a chance to argue, I entered her house and made my way to her living room.

She closed the door, loudly. When she met me in the living room, she demanded, “Right, seems as though you’ve decided you’re staying, tell me what you have against Billy.”

Fuck, just his name caused my anger to spike. “Marilyn works for a bank and Billy was a customer there. Had been for a couple of years and over that time he slowly gained her trust and eventually asked her out on a date. She said no, repeatedly, until the day he finally broke her down and got the answer he wanted. They started dating and it made her happier than ever. She smiled and laughed

more often and started living her life in a way I'd never seen. It lasted for six months until the night I received a call from Renee to tell me her mother had taken a bottle of pills and was unconscious on the bathroom floor."

I stopped to take a few short breaths. Remembering that time in our lives was difficult as fuck. I'd thought my sister was dead. It was why I'd been so angry the day I'd found her passed out on my couch recently. And why I'd pushed for her to be admitted to the hospital. I couldn't lose Lynny.

Tatum's battle stance softened as she listened to me. "What happened between them?"

"You ever see Billy date?"

She shook her head. "No, he keeps his women separate to work. Doesn't bring them to the clubs ever."

"Figures. Marilyn thought she was special to him, thought they were exclusive. Turned out Billy didn't do exclusive and was seeing another woman at the same time."

"Nitro, from what I know, Billy is up front about that when he dates. Women know where they stand with him."

My eyes widened. "Are you fucking defending that motherfucker?"

She reached for my arm, gripping it. "No," she said calmly. "I'm not saying what I think either way, but I would imagine that Marilyn would have been made aware of what their relationship really was."

I ripped my arm out of her grasp. "Fuck, Tatum, she tried to kill herself over him. She had a fucking breakdown after that. You're a woman—how the hell can you stand there and defend a man who treats women that way?"

"So, you're telling me that you've never used women before? Never dated casually or simply screwed random women as you pleased?"

"Don't fucking turn this around on me! I'm not the one we're talking about right now."

"That is true, but can't you see that you're being a hypocrite about this?"

I grabbed the back of my neck and rubbed it. Glaring at her, I said, "I'm standing here telling you that he ruined her and all you can say is that I'm a fucking hypocrite? Every woman I've ever slept with knew what the score was. I don't lie about that shit."

She'd been calm up until that point, but she was beginning to lose her cool. "No, you're not listening to me. I'm sorry that his actions hurt her and that she harmed herself. You have every right to feel hurt and angry for her too. But Billy didn't do anything wrong. You can't hold him responsible for her overdosing. That choice was completely hers." She moved close to me and placed her hand on my arm again. "Nitro, I get it. I totally get it. I wanted to blame everyone for all the bad shit that happened to me, but in the end, *I* chose how I reacted to what people did to me. Randall treated me so badly, but it was me who chose to ruin my life over him. He never made me do any of it. Just like Billy never made Marilyn take those pills and swallow them. At some point, we have to take ownership of our choices in life."

I stared at her in silence. I believed in owning your actions, but I'd never looked at Marilyn like that. I'd always felt the need to protect her. Something had fucked her up at a young age, I was sure of it. She always fobbed me off whenever I asked her. Told me I was wrong. But I wasn't convinced. As a result, I had always held others accountable when Marilyn was hurt. Looking at it from Tatum's point of view, it made me consider a different side to the argument.

Scrubbing a hand over my face, I said, "You're right, we do have to take ownership of our choices, but fuck, Tatum, I find it hard to force that kind of responsibility on Lynny."

She nodded. "I know," she said softly.

"That Silver Hell biker? You wanna know what he did to her?"

She closed her eyes and held her breath for a beat. I felt her pain right along with her. That fucking biker stole something from both of us. When she opened her eyes, she nodded. "Yes, but we need to sit for this."

When we were both sitting on her couch, I said, "Back at the beginning of the year, King took revenge on one of their bikers for shit he did to King's sister. Killed the asshole. When the club found out, they started a war against our club. We didn't realise for a while, though, because it wasn't in-your-face shit that they did to begin with. They eventually escalated it, hurting our families and killing club members."

"What did they do?"

"They started off with things we didn't realise came from them. Break-ins, assault, theft, shit like that. They targeted Dustin, causing

him to lose his job and the place where he lived. He'd been in share accommodation for ages and they got to the woman he rented the room from. Bribed her to report false rape charges to the police against Dustin. That all got sorted out by a cop friend, but he was left homeless and still hasn't found a permanent place to live."

"That's why he lives with you now," she said as she worked it out.

"Yeah. It was a low fucking act what they did to him, but what they did to Marilyn was worse."

Her lips flattened. "I hate them, and you haven't even told me what it was yet."

"Four of them held up the bank where she works. That in itself was bad enough, because her nerves are shot and that would have been a lot for her to cope with on its own. But while three of them robbed the bank, one of them dragged her out the back and raped her. He then randomly showed up every now and then when she did her groceries, taunting her and threatening to rape her again. After he did it three times, she stopped going out in public. She'd already stopped going to work, but after that, she completely shut down and stopped living her life."

Tears tracked Tatum's cheeks and her hand covered her mouth. And then the heaving sobs came. I pulled her into my arms and we held each other for a long time.

When she let me go, I said, "So you see why I protect the fuck out of her? Why I have trouble letting people like Billy off the hook for their careless actions?"

She nodded as she took hold of my face. "I do. And I'm so sorry for everything you've both been through."

"Yeah. Marilyn's had more shit happen to her than any person deserves in their lifetime."

"I'm sorry I organised that job for Dustin without running it by you first."

I wrapped my hand around her forearm. "No, I was a prick about that. I shouldn't have come over here throwing my weight around. There was nothing for you to run by me. I appreciate you looking out for him."

She pulled a pained face. "Yeah, but now he's working for the guy you hate."

"And I'll just have to suck that up. If Dustin wants that job, it's his decision."

A smile tugged at her lips. "Is this Nitro backing down?" Her playful tone cut through the tension and was a welcome break from the conversation we'd been having.

I pulled her onto my lap and held her tightly. "You fucking cause me to back down all over the damn place, Vegas."

She brushed a kiss across my lips. "I like that. I've never had that before."

"Trust me, it's a first for me, too," I growled, feeling every bit of the heat between us. How she managed to calm the anger out of me, I wasn't sure. All that lingered was the kind of passion that made me want to fuck her all night long.

I ran my hands down her back, to the bottom of her T-shirt so I could slip my hands under it and feel skin. I gripped her waist as her hands moved to my neck and our mouths found each other. The sexual energy between us had spiked from the anger that sat between us when I first arrived, and I growled deeply as she kissed me with a wild urgency. We might have still had moments of confusion with each other, but there was never any confusion as far as sex was concerned—we both desperately wanted each other.

She clawed at my hair as she crushed her body to mine and moaned. Tearing her mouth away as she ended the kiss, she begged, "Fuck, Nitro, I need you inside me right fucking now." Fumbling madly at the button on my jeans, she showed me just how desperate for me she was.

Hell, she was hot.

I let her fiddle with my pants; I needed that mouth of hers again. Catching her in another kiss, I forced my tongue inside as I moved my hands to the back of her head so I could hold her in place. I didn't want to be interrupted from what I was doing.

Kissing Tatum turned me on so damn much. Foreplay should always begin with her mouth as far as I was concerned. For a long fucking time.

She struggled against my hold, trying to end the kiss.

I chuckled as I let her go. Moving my hands to her back, I said, "You want my cock in that beautiful pussy of yours, Vegas? I don't think I've ever seen you so eager."

She had her hands in my pants and my cock sprung free. Biting her lip, she wrapped her hand around it and gave me a tug. I lifted my hips and thrust into her hand, suddenly on board with what she wanted.

Meeting my eyes, she said, "Now who's eager?"

Leaning forward so I could get close to her mouth again, I said, "I'm always eager. Fuck, I could live inside you and never leave again."

Her breathing hitched. "You wanna start that now?"

"As soon as I do this," I said before finally pressing my lips to hers again.

She didn't fight me on that kiss, and when I was done, I lifted her shirt over her head. Dropping it on the floor, I then flicked her bra undone and removed it. She slid off my lap and made fast work of taking her shorts and panties off, and I sucked in a breath at her naked body.

Tatum was fucking stunning. She was perfect with her soft curves that I loved sliding my hands over, and her strength that was an excellent match to my power when I fucked her. The thing I loved the most, though, was that when she stood naked in front of me, there was nothing in our way. Slowly, she was allowing me to strip back the invisible layers that guarded her soul at all other times. Sometimes she tried to run from me, but those times were becoming less and less. One day, she'd give it all to me.

I stood and yanked my jeans and briefs off before sitting back down, taking her with me. She straddled my lap and took hold of my face with both hands as she caught my mouth in another searing kiss. Ending it, breathless, she begged, "Can I please have this cock now?"

Jesus, I felt her demand deep in my gut. My hands went straight to her hips and I lifted her to position her over my dick. When I had her where I wanted her, I thrust up and inside her.

"Fuck," I rasped. Nothing was better than being inside my woman. *Fucking nothing.*

Her hands gripped my shoulders.

Fingers digging in.

Head back.

Neck exposed.

A sexy-as-fuck sound coming from her mouth.

I licked her throat as we fucked, inspiring her to claw at my skin, scratching me. Growling deeply, I sunk my teeth into her, marking her as mine.

"I love your fucking teeth," she cried out, her pussy squeezing around my dick. She fucked me madly, her body bouncing, her tits all over the place, hair everywhere.

"Jesus, I'm going to come," I said, pretty fucking sure I couldn't hold it back much longer.

"Me too," she panted, and on a roar, with one last hard slam into her, I came.

She orgasmed a moment later, right before she collapsed against me. When I caught my breath, I moved her hair off her face so I could find her eyes. "Did I wear you out, Vegas?"

Cracking one eye open, she said, "Nope. I'm ready to go again. You?"

Placing my arms around her, I chuckled. "You are so full of shit, but my dick will be ready for you to suck soon if you want."

She swatted me playfully. "You need to run me a bath and pour me a wine. Then we can discuss what I'm going to do with your cock."

Later that night, when she slept next to me, I traced circles over her hip and thought about how far we'd come. We still didn't have a play-by-play for this relationship, but I was slowly seeing a future I'd never imagined before. A future with Tatum by my side.



The next day, I decided to get to the bottom of why my uncle was in Sydney and why he wanted to sell discounted guns to Storm. No way did I buy any of the shit he'd fed King.

I called ahead and organised to meet at his hotel. He requested I come up to his room and against my better judgement, I did.

"Take a seat," he said when I entered his room. He gestured at one of the lounges in the large suite he had.

"I'll stand. This won't take long."

He watched me with the cold gaze I knew well. "As you will, then." Pouring a drink, he said, "It's good to see you've come to your senses, son."

I had to restrain myself from punching him. His reference to me as his fucking son was one I despised. "I haven't. And don't fucking call me that. I'm only here to find out the truth behind you showing up on Storm's doorstep peddling guns."

Looking at me over the rim of the glass as he drank the water he'd poured, he said, "I want you to run my Sydney operation. I trained you for that and I want what I put my time and money into all those years ago."

The way he said it sounded like he fully expected to get what he came for. There was a cold and calculated tone to what he said that iced my veins. I clenched my fists, remembering I'd been strong enough to escape him once before and that I would remain strong against him again. He didn't own me anymore. "There is nothing you can say or do that would ever make me say yes to that."

He regarded that statement and slowly placed his glass on the coffee table next to him. Looking back up at me, he said, "Oh, I will find a way, Rhys. I'm surprised at your lack of memory."

"What memory?" Fuck, I knew he was leading me down a path I didn't want to go, but the question fell out before I could stop it.

"Don't you remember how I always found ways to bend you? To force you to do what I wanted. That brain of yours is wired to respond to me after all the time I put into your training. Don't think for a minute that I won't get what I want again. I've been patient all these years you've been gone. I've been building the empire I always said I would and now we are ready for your return."

Bile rose in my throat, burning. I swallowed it down hard and clenched my fists again. The desire to knock him out was overwhelming, but I refused to give Joseph the satisfaction of knowing he'd affected me. "You're as psycho as I remember, believing your own bullshit."

As I took a step towards the door to leave, he said, "I'm a patient man, Rhys, but even I have my limits. If you don't come around soon, I will find a way to change your mind."

With one last glance at him, I exited the room. Stalking down the corridor to the lift, I focused on getting my breathing under control and my thoughts back on track. Joseph had messed with them to the point they weren't straight. Memories from the past flashed in and out, bringing up images of my training that made me want to vomit. By the time I hit the elevator, sweat had beaded on my forehead, and

my breathing was as far from being under control as it fucking could be.

I stepped into the elevator. Dizziness took over as the tiny space closed in on me, and I thought for sure I would pass out. My phone rang, but it sounded far away. Fumbling, I pulled it out of my pocket. "Yeah?"

Tatum's voice came through the line. "Nitro, are you okay? You sound off."

"Keep talking." I needed something to take my mind off what was happening.

"Huh?"

"Tell me anything, Vegas. I need the distraction." I focused my gaze on the numbers counting down the floors.

She paused for only a moment more. And then—"Something I detest doing more than almost anything else is grocery shopping. It's boring as fuck and a waste of time. Online shopping is where it's at these days. But, when you run out of things in the pantry that you love, when you thought you had a good supply... I detest that, too —"

The elevator reached the ground floor and I stepped out of it. Tatum's voice filtered in and out of my mind as I walked the distance to the hotel exit.

"—Milo. That is the absolute worst. I really don't wanna go shopping on my way home from work. I don't suppose you have any in your pantry?"

I walked through the exit and breathed in the fresh air. My lungs expanded, taking much-needed oxygen in. The feeling that I was going to faint passed and I relaxed a little.

"Nitro? Are you still there?"

I gripped the phone harder as I made my way to my bike. "Yeah. Sorry about that. What were you saying about me having some shit in my pantry?"

"Milo. Do you have any?"

"How the hell did you get onto the topic of Milo?"

"Well, you did tell me to talk about *anything*, and that was the thing I was thinking about at that moment," she grumbled. And then softly, "Are you okay now?"

"Yeah," I said gruffly. I hadn't been prepared for that reaction at all. I needed to be better prepared mentally the next time I saw

Joseph.

"Good," she said, and I waited for her to ask me what happened, but she didn't. Tatum knew how to push my buttons, but she also knew when to let shit be. And that was something I really fucking liked about her.



"Where are we at with the guns?" I asked King late that afternoon while we sat drinking together in the clubhouse bar.

He eyed me over his beer. "I want a decision by the end of this week. We'll take a vote at Church."

"Which way are you leaning?"

"With Joseph."

Not the answer I wanted to hear, but the one I figured I'd get. "I saw him this morning. He's a fucking psychopath, King. You don't want anything to do with him."

"What did he do to you to make you hate him so much?"

Showing weakness was something Joseph had taught me never to do. Sharing what he'd done to me with Tatum had been one thing, but blurting that shit out to my club president was a whole other matter. "He fucked my family up, King. In every way you can imagine. I'm loyal to this club, and have been for fifteen years, but that will be tested if we get into bed with Joseph."

His jaw clenched. "What are you telling me, Nitro? That you'd want out of the club?"

"I don't know. Storm is in my blood. It's my family now, and I would do anything to protect my family. The thing is, though, that when you invite outsiders into your home, you have to have a level of trust there that they won't fuck you over. Otherwise you've got nothing. I'm telling you that I will never trust Joseph, so if he's invited to work with our family, shit's gonna get fucked up for me."

King listened and then nodded. "I hear you, brother, and I will take that into consideration. But you've gotta understand that our family has been threatened, and I will do anything I need to do to make sure we don't go down. If it turns out that Joseph is the best decision for us, I won't hesitate to make it."

A commotion in the hallway drew our attention, and I turned to find Devil and Hyde entering the bar with the Silver Hell president in front of them. Dragon's gaze met King's and he made his way over to where we sat.

King shoved his chair back, furious. "What the fuck?" he demanded.

Dragon raised his hands at the same time that Hyde said, "He wants to talk to you about the shit that's been going down."

King's cold eyes met Dragon's. "Haven't we done all the talking we need to?"

"I've got new information that you're going to want to know," Dragon said, his body as tense as King's.

"You came alone?" King asked.

Dragon nodded and Hyde confirmed it for King.

Dragon had some fucking balls to come on his own. It made me wonder what the hell he was about to tell King. I figured it had to be something that guaranteed his safety.

King nodded at the table. "All right then, let's hear it."

Dragon pulled up a seat and started talking. "I recently learnt that we have a common enemy. Angelo Gambarro." He paused, waiting for King's reaction. King scowled and nodded for him to continue. "He's been out for your blood since you killed his uncle. As for us, he wants in on our territory. When he discovered that our clubs had issues, he started playing us against each other."

"As in he's responsible for some of the shit that's been happening?"

Dragon nodded. "Yeah. As in, he's responsible for that car bomb as well as some other stuff you think we did."

"Motherfucker," King swore.

"I don't know about you, but I fucking want him dead. And I think we have a better chance of bringing him down if we do it together."

King stared at Dragon as if that was the last thing he expected to come out of his mouth. "After everything we've been through, you really think that's a fucking possibility?"

"If there's one thing I hate the most, it's being played, King. You and me, our clubs, we're upfront about the shit that goes down between us, but this cunt fucking cheated his way to get what he wants. I'll be fucking damned if I let him achieve his goal."

Honour among thieves.

Before King could respond, Hyde threw out, "Fuck it, King, he's right."

"I agree," Devil said.

King turned to the room. "Anyone against this idea?"

Mass agreement filled the room. King eyed me. "Nitro?"

I nodded. "I'm with Dragon. I say bury him."

The shifting loyalties of the underbelly were well known. How long we'd align ourselves with Silver Hell was to be seen, but for now I'd happily pursue our common goal of seeing Gambarro go down.

King walked Dragon out and spent about ten minutes talking with him. When he returned, he shared some of the shit they'd discussed. He looked at me as he said, "Dragon's going to talk with Sutherland to organise for him to supply us with guns again."

I exhaled a long breath.

Thank fuck.

TATUM

“Breathe” by Faith Hill

I smiled at Monroe as I fumbled in my bag for my phone. “Fuck, where is it?” I muttered. I could hardly feel my fingers, which made it really fucking hard to find the phone.

“Hurry up, girl. I’ve got cock waiting for me.”

Our eyes met and we laughed in unison, both drunk from way too much alcohol. Our girls’ night out had started at my place and quickly moved to this club where we’d spent the night drinking and searching for a man for Monroe.

“Got it!” I yelled loudly when I located the phone.

Monroe motioned with her hands for me to hurry up. That was a struggle because my brain was so fuzzy I couldn’t remember the damn pattern lock on my phone.

“Ugh,” Monroe grumbled. “This is why you should get a bloody iPhone, babe.”

I playfully smacked her. It was an old argument of ours. I preferred Samsung, and she harassed me to swap across. “Shut up,” I muttered, continuing to swipe all over the place.

“Fuck, how many attempts do you get before it locks you out? I *cannot* miss out on this dick!”

“I know! You’ll never let me forget it if you do.”

She placed her hand over mine and stopped me from swiping. “Wait! Give me his number and we can call it from my phone.”

I grimaced. “I don’t know his number.”

I traced patterns again and almost screamed my relief when I finally unlocked the phone.

Her eyes lit up. “You got it?”

"Yes, now let me just find his number," I said, scrolling for Nitro's number.

A few moments later, he answered, concern in his voice. "Vegas. You okay?"

"Yeah."

"You still out with Monroe?"

I laughed as she started flapping her hands at me to speed shit along. Fuck, we were wasted. I could hardly hold myself up let alone get my brain to work faster.

"Tatum?" Nitro's voice sounded in my ear again, dragging my attention from Monroe.

"Shit, sorry." I couldn't stop laughing because Monroe was hilarious in her agony over missing out on cock. "What are you doing right now?"

"Watching TV. Why?"

"Well, Monroe's finally found herself a pierced dick and so she's going home with him. They're not going my way, so I have to either catch a cab or... I thought you could come pick me up. I could then show you my appreciation in ways you'd like."

"Really? What ways exactly are we talking here?"

I smiled, loving his playful tone. "Don't go getting too excited there, dude. I'm not talking knives here." That idea still freaked me out. Thankfully he hadn't brought it up again.

He chuckled. "You kill me, Vegas. I've got my hand on my dick and you turn it soft in one sentence."

"Do you not think I can get you hard again? Have I failed you yet?"

"There's a first time for everything. What you got for me if it's not knives?"

Monroe widened her eyes and mouthed something about hurrying the hell up. I nodded and said to Nitro, "Okay, dude, we need to hurry this along. Monroe's getting the shits with me. How about I blow you first and then I sit on your face and come all over it? After that, it's your choice. I'll do anything you want."

"Fuck, I think I might have to wash that filthy mouth of yours out."

"That'd be no fun. You'd hate it if I didn't talk dirty to you."

"True. Okay, I'll be there in about fifteen minutes. Make Monroe wait with you until I get there. I don't want you outside by

yourself."

I hung up and Monroe narrowed her eyes at me. Waving her hand at my face, she said, "What's that look?"

"What look?"

She pointed at my face. "The dreamy look."

I shoved my phone back in my bag and hit her with a smile. "He likes me."

She stared at me in surprise before bursting into laughter. "Of course he fucking likes you, Tatum! I mean, he only saved your life twice and spends every spare minute he has with you."

I thought about that. She was right. He did. "Damn."

She shook her head as if she was frustrated with me. "I swear, you're hard work sometimes. I know Randall screwed up your self-esteem, but have you taken a look in the mirror lately? You're fucking hot. And that heart of yours? It's so giving and caring, any guy would be dumb not to want it."

"He told me to make you wait with me because he didn't want me waiting on my own." My heart felt like it might burst at the knowledge he worried over me.

She grinned. "The biker came good." Monroe was still hesitant about me seeing Nitro, but I could see her softening towards him.

"Yeah," I murmured, my mind already thinking ahead to seeing him. Although he'd slept over my place the night before and I'd woken up with him that morning, it wasn't enough. I couldn't get enough of the man.



"Oh God.... Fuck!" I yelled as I came, throwing my head back.

Nitro held my ass while I rode his face. He gripped me harder when I screamed out, his tongue still working its magic on my pussy. When I tried to move off him, he didn't let me go. A growl came from him and I shuddered as another ripple of pleasure worked its way through me.

Placing my hand on his head, I said, "I can't take much more, Nitro. Your tongue is going to make my pussy explode from too much of a good thing."

His hold on me loosened and he finally allowed me to move. Settling myself on the bed next to him, I lay flat on my back and flung my arms out. The alcohol and the orgasm were working together to make me sleepy and I closed my eyes.

He rolled onto his side and cupped my breast. "I'm sure there was talk of sex after you sucked me off and sat on my face."

I cracked an eye open and looked at him. "Yeah, well you're just too good at what you do and now I'm exhausted."

He dropped a kiss on my breast before leaving the bed. I didn't have the energy to see what he was doing, but I figured he'd headed into the bathroom. When he returned five or so minutes later, I was almost asleep.

The bed dipped and he spooned me. It woke me up a little and I decided to use the bathroom before I passed out. Stumbling, I made my way there and did what I had to before walking back to the bedroom. On the way, my dress caught my eye. It was on the floor and I bent to pick it up, almost falling headfirst.

"Shit," I said, reaching out for the bed to stop my fall.

Nitro moved off the bed to help me. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I just wanted to pick up my dress so it doesn't get wrinkled," I said, draping the dress over the chair in his room. "Seems as though I have to wear it home tomorrow. You know, it'd be good if you had space for me to leave some clothes here for times like this. I'm going to have to go home in the morning and get ready for brunch with the girls. If I had shit here, I could have just gotten ready here." God, I was rambling in my drunken state. I stopped when I noticed Nitro staring at me, frozen to the spot. "What's wrong?" I asked.

He didn't reply at first, but then he said, "Nothing. Get your ass back in bed so I can fuck you again."

I stared at him, confused as hell, but that could have been the alcohol. He'd gone from concerned to bossy and demanding in under a minute, though, so I couldn't be sure it was just the alcohol. "Did I say something wrong?"

He scooped me up and dumped me on the bed. "We're done with talking." He positioned himself over me, his mouth on mine in a kiss that swept all thoughts from my mind. "And you're done with even contemplating sleep."

I might have been ready for sleep before, but Nitro soon had me panting for his cock. Who was I kidding? He always did.



"Call me when you're ready. I'll swing back and pick you up," Nitro said as he pulled up to the kerb.

I undid my seatbelt and turned to face him, ignoring the headache I had. I'd been expecting the mother of all hangovers, but the universe was looking after me and all I had was a sore head. My God, the man was gorgeous. He sat watching me with his hand resting on the steering wheel, his heavily tatted arm muscles on full display in a fitted black tee. His brown eyes watched me with heat, as if the last thing he wanted to do was let me leave the ute. As if *all* he wanted to do was throw me down onto the back seat and sink himself deep inside me.

"Thanks for driving me today," I said, right before I captured his lips in a long kiss. One that told him I wanted him to throw me onto that back seat too.

"Fuck, Tatum," he muttered when I let his mouth go. "You wanna kiss me like that, you just might not make it to brunch."

My heart beat rapidly as I let his desire soak in. It had been a long time since a man had wanted me as much as Nitro did. It felt so damn good. Reaching for the door handle, I said, "I'll cook you dinner tonight." A Saturday night in with Nitro was exactly what I needed.

I swung my legs out of his ute and as I closed the door behind me, the sound of his door closing caught my attention. Glancing up, I watched as he made his way around to my side of the car. His stride was determined, and butterflies whooshed in my stomach as our eyes met.

His hand went straight to my waist when he reached me, and he backed me up against the car. His grip was firm, his touch electric. Bending his face to mine, he bruised my lips with a kiss. A kiss that went on and on. By the time he let me go, I was breathless. Dazed.

"I can't wait until tonight," he rasped. "As soon as you're done here, you're mine."

With that, he left me to walk back around to the driver side, leaving me standing there in such a turned-on state I wasn't sure I would make it through brunch.

By the time I sat down across from Monroe and Posey, I had recovered enough to string a sentence together. Staring at both of them, I said, "Have you ever been so into a guy that you can't even think about anything except getting back to him?"

Monroe's lips curled up into a smile. "You've got it bad for Nitro, haven't you?"

I took a deep breath and then exhaled hard. "Yeah. I'm finding it hard to concentrate on work. My house is a mess because when I'm home, I'm either in bed with him or wasting time thinking about him.... God, I've even let my exercise go. This feels so overwhelming some days, like it's completely out of control. Tell me you've experienced this."

Monroe frowned. "You didn't have that with Randall?"

"No. I thought I did, but comparing it, I didn't. Not even in the beginning when it was all new and lacking the baggage we accumulated along the way."

"Why did you marry him, babe?" Monroe asked softly.

"God, I think I was just young and naïve. Dad had just passed away and Randall caught me in a vulnerable moment when I felt alone and lost. Chris was there for me, but he was busy with his shit, and I had started to feel like I didn't know where home was anymore. Marrying Randall felt like a new start and a new chance at happiness."

Posey watched me with a look that said she knew exactly what I meant. "He offered the easy path to what you thought you wanted," she murmured. "Except it turned out that nothing good in life ever comes easy and you should have known that."

I nodded. "Exactly."

"So this thing with Nitro, what is it?" Monroe asked.

"It's not just sex, but we haven't labelled it."

"What do you want it to be?" Monroe asked.

As I contemplated her question, I let my fears in, but I didn't let them control me. It scared the shit out of me to think about letting Nitro into my life more than I already had, but at the same time I felt it deep in my soul that I wanted to take that step. "I want him. He's moody and can be an ass, but he looks out for me. He's honest and

considers all the little details in life in such a way that shows me how deeply he's able to care for someone. I want a man who is all about the details."

"What exactly does that mean?"

I reached for the water on the table and poured myself a glass. "He listens and watches and pays attention to the things I say and do. And to the shit I've been through. And he takes it all into consideration and it shows in the way he treats me. He does the same with his family. His actions aren't always all about him. I'm not saying he gets it right all the time, but the fact he tries means something to me."

"It's hard to find a man like that," Posey said.

"Is your ex still being an ass?" Monroe asked her.

"No, he's leaving me alone. Whatever Billy's guy said to him worked."

"You should come out with us on our next girls' night," Monroe said. "The hangover is totally worth it."

"That's because she found pierced cock," I threw in. "And because Monroe hardly ever gets hangovers. Personally, I think that's her superpower."

Posey laughed and sat forward. "Tell me more!"

Monroe's eyes lit up. She loved talking about sex and dicks more than any woman I knew. "Well, I was *really* drunk so I might be wrong, but I'm not convinced that dude knows how to use what he's got to its full potential. The piercing felt good, but I don't remember fireworks. And damn it, I want fireworks."

"Okay tell me, what is fireworks to you?" Posey asked.

"I want to come out of my skin because the need the guy has for me is too much. I want to feel him everywhere, in my toes, my fingertips, in my mind, and deep in my belly. His touch, his breathing, his sounds, what he says, the way he moves... it should all consume me until every thought of mine is focused solely on him. And I want him to give me an orgasm I'm still feeling the next morning."

Posey and I sat staring at Monroe as she described everything she wanted. Posey, wide-eyed, me with a smile.

"What?" Monroe asked.

"That was the perfect description," I said.

"Jesus, you have that with Nitro, don't you, you lucky bitch?"

I laughed. "Let's order lunch before you start crying."

"Ugh. I hate you," she muttered. "I find a pierced cock and I *still* don't get fireworks. I bet you got fireworks last night."

"All night long, Roe."

She dropped her head to the table and banged it a couple of times in the kind of dramatic performance she was well known for. When she lifted her head, she said, "Right, girls' night is on every Friday night until I find fireworks." Looking at me, she added, "And I don't give two fucks if you're having a Milo Friday, you're still coming out to help me find my man."

Posey cut in. "What's Milo Friday?"

Monroe turned to her. "Oh, honey, you don't want to know." She then proceeded to fill Posey in on my love for Milo, omitting the full details of what had happened recently, but giving her enough information to understand why she didn't love Milo Fridays.

We ordered meals after that and spent the next two hours laughing and sharing stories from our week. Monroe had been right when she'd said we should invite Posey to brunch. I'd been hesitant because I never mixed my work life with my personal life, but this was fun. And fun was something I hadn't let into my life for far too long. It was exactly what I needed. *Friends*.

NITRO

“Love’s Poster Child” by Keith Urban

I slid my arm around Tatum’s waist and pulled her close while we made the short walk from my bike to the clubhouse entrance. Loud music filled the night air, along with laughter and lots of talking. The party was in full swing.

I’d picked Tatum up from brunch the day before and we’d spent the time since then either in her bed, her kitchen or on her couch. The invitation to come with me to the club get together had slipped out of my mouth before I realised it was happening. But there was no doubt in my mind, I wanted her there.

As we entered the clubhouse, she looked up at me. “Looks like things are going well with the club. Compared to the last time I was here.” We hardly ever discussed Storm when we were together. She never asked and it wasn’t in my nature to bring club business up with anyone who wasn’t a member.

“Yeah, things have improved.” A hell of a fucking lot, now that Joseph’s guns were out of the picture.

“Nitro!” Devil called out when he spotted us. He sat on one of the couches with a chick on his lap, a smile a mile wide on his face.

As I took a step in his direction, Tatum held back. “You go,” she said, “I’m going to say hi to Kree.”

I followed her gaze to see Kree approaching. Smacking her ass, I let her go and headed over to see Devil.

He jerked his chin at Tatum. “She the one who’s been fucking with your head?”

Glancing at Tatum, I nodded. “Yeah,” I said, distracted by the smile on her face. She was fucking beautiful when she smiled.

Devil motioned for the chick to move off his lap. She pouted and grumbled some shit I couldn't hear.

"Babe, I told you I'd be busy until later," he said to her as he stood.

"You're always busy," she snapped, snatching her bag up off the table.

Devil watched as she took a step away from him. "Where you going? I thought we were on for later?"

"I'm going to find someone who doesn't ignore me," she said, leaving.

Devil shook his head as he stared after her. "Fuck. Women."

"You gonna go after her, brother? What's that thing you told me about laying down and letting pussy whip you?"

He turned to me with a huge grin and slapped me on the back. "Nah, Nitro, I'm a lover, not a fighter. That one's got a temper on her. She's too fucking much for me to handle. I'd rather get a drink."

A few minutes later, we had beer and I sucked some back while I watched Tatum with Kree. Her gaze caught mine and I jerked my chin at her to get over here. She lifted a finger to indicate she'd be a minute. When her attention shifted back to Kree, I dropped my eyes to check out her ass. She'd worn those skintight jeans of hers I loved, and I struggled to drag my gaze from them.

"Nitro." King's voice sliced through the air and I looked around to find him standing next to Devil. "I see you brought the blonde with you."

I held his gaze. I knew what he was asking. King never missed a beat and always liked to know what members were up to in their private lives. The crazy fucker was the most paranoid person I knew and was always concerned that outsiders would come in with an agenda.

Nodding, I said, "Yeah. That a problem?"

He drank some of his whisky while silently contemplating that. Finally, he said, "If you don't think it will be, I trust that."

The noise in the room picked up and we all turned to see Kick and Evie enter, a huge smile on Kick's face as he held his wife close.

"That fucker ever stop smiling?" Devil asked.

"You'd be smiling like that too if King had finally let you back out into the real world," I said.

Devil grinned. "True."

King changed the subject. "Anyone know Kree's story?"

I drank some beer before answering him. "Nope. All I know is she's from Brisbane. Nash recommended her when Kick asked and to be honest, she was a good recommendation. Always on time, works hard and keeps to herself."

King watched her as she laughed with Tatum. "Yeah, but I wanna know everything there is to know about anyone working here. Find out and get back to me."

Tatum said goodbye to Kree and walked to where we stood as Kree exited the room. She met King's gaze and pushed her shoulders back, standing tall. She never backed down and I fucking loved that about her.

"Tatum Lee, I see you've decided to hang out with us again," King said, his voice dangerously low. I felt my protective streak kick in and knew that if he pushed this with her, I wouldn't be able to stop myself from stepping in for her. And I wasn't sure how that would go down with King.

Before she could answer him, Devil's eyes were drawn to the other side of the room and he whistled low. "Fuck me... I'm out of here." With that, he strode towards a brunette I'd never seen before.

Tatum held King's gaze. "This time it's completely my choice to be here, King."

"We're not gonna have a conflict of interests, are we?"

She frowned. "To do with what?"

"Your boss."

"Whatever happens between your club and Billy has nothing to do with me, so no, no conflict of interests."

He drank the rest of his whisky and reached across to place the empty glass on the counter. When he looked at her again, he said, "Good."

"Why did you take my back when my lawyer friend, Duvall, was giving me a hard time outside Billy's club?"

His nostrils flared as he remembered that encounter. "Tatum, if a person looks out for me or someone I care about, I look out for them. You were there for Evie when she needed someone. I won't forget that."

"King!" Kick motioned for King to come over. It looked like he and some of the guys were revved up about something and King left us to check it out.

Tatum's arms circled me as she moved close. Her mouth pressed to my throat and she kissed me there before lifting her face to me. Smiling, she said, "I'm glad you brought me. I needed to come back here and change the feelings I associate with this place."

Placing my hand on her ass, I said, "Is that working?"

"It will."

I held her gaze for a long few moments as unsaid words passed between us. "A lot's changed since then."

"Yeah, it has."

I dropped my face and placed my mouth close to her ear so she could hear what I said. So she couldn't mistake a word of it. "I want a lot more to change still, Vegas."

Her arms tightened around me. "Me too."



Five hours later, the party was in full swing, but I was ready to take Tatum home. Hell, I'd been ready to leave for four and a half fucking hours. But the club needed the time together to let our hair down after months of being tightly wound, so I stayed. The only member who seemed unable to relax was Hyde. He sat in the corner drinking all night, mostly alone, and mostly with a scowl on his face. That wasn't unusual behaviour for him, though. Jekyll and fucking Hyde. He was either up or down, happy or grumpy as fuck. There was no in-between for him.

Tatum had made an effort to meet all the boys and find something to talk with them all about. She and King had even had a drink together. Surprised the fuck out of me. I watched her as she laughed with Evie. Sucking back my beer, I realised how much I wanted to make her happy. The only people I'd truly cared about in that way were Marilyn, Dustin, and Renee. I'd do anything to ease their burdens and make them smile. And I'd do the same for Tatum.

I left my beer on the counter and strode over to where she stood. Sliding my arm around her waist, I said, "You good to go, Vegas?"

Evie smiled. "She's all yours, Nitro."

Tatum's eyes sparkled with the sexy glint she often gave me. "You got something good planned?"

Fuck if that didn't hit me fair in the dick. I gripped her harder. "Careful what you ask, because you might not like what it's in my head," I growled.

Her eyes widened in question. She knew what I referred to. I hadn't brought up my desire for knife play again after the first time I asked her, but every day we spent together was a day closer to me doing that. My need for it with her had only grown since we started sleeping together.

She turned to me and placed her hand on my chest, spreading heat there. "I'm good to go," she said, a little breathless and a whole lot turned on.

We said our goodbyes and I guided her outside, through the maze of bodies still partying hard. They'd last all night, some into tomorrow. I didn't miss those days. Not when I had Tatum to go home with.

The minute I had her alone outside, I dragged her up against a wall, my hands either side of her. "You know what I've been thinking about all night?" I asked as my lips grazed hers, my teeth nipping at them.

Her hands made their way into my hair. "What?"

I traced her lips with my finger, my erection straining against my jeans. "This lipstick staining my dick."

She pulled my hair and my breathing grew ragged. I fucking loved it when she was rough with me. Pulling my face down to hers, she bit my bottom lip and kissed me hard as fuck. It was as if she was laying claim to my mouth. When she came up for air, she said, "You wanna know what *I've* been thinking about?"

Fuck, I wanted to know every damn thought that ever crossed her mind. "Tell me," I demanded.

Rubbing my cock through my jeans, she said, "This. I can't get enough of it." Moving her face closer so our lips almost touched again, she added, "Of you. I can't get enough of you."

Just as I was about to lift her over my shoulder and carry her to my bike, a voice broke through the night, shattering the moment into pieces.

"Rhys."

I spun around to come face-to-face with Joseph. My body tensed. Soldier mode triggered like a fucking dog responding to his master. "What the hell are you doing here?"

His gaze shifted to Tatum and a smile snaked across his face. "You're being rude, son. Introduce me to your girl."

I moved in an attempt to block her from his sight. "Not fucking likely."

The smile on his lips morphed into displeasure. "I've warned you, Rhys, either you give me what I want or I'll find a way to make you."

His threat was loud and clear, and it fuelled anger in me I didn't recognise. Taking the step needed to get in his face, I grabbed his shirt and yanked on it. "I hear you, Joseph, but what you fail to understand is that I'm not the boy who used to cower in front of you. I'm not the boy who you beat until he passed out. And I'm sure as fuck not a man who doesn't protect what's his. You wanna come at me? You fucking come, but be prepared to die trying."

With that, I shoved him away from me, took hold of Tatum and dragged her as far away from that piece of filth and evil as fast as I could.

No fucking way would he win against me. Not anymore.

TATUM

“Home” by Phillip Phillips

I rifled through Nitro’s drawers looking for a T-shirt. Anxiety riddled me because I was running late for work. He’d woken me just after five to have sex and then we’d both fallen back asleep. When I’d woken up again, it was nearly eight. It was not a good day to be late for work. Billy had me scheduled in for a meeting with his lawyer to go over the game plan for a case coming up, and I had less than an hour to get home, get dressed and get to that meeting.

“Nitro!” I called out. “Where are all your damn shirts?”

“In my drawer,” he yelled from the bathroom, his tone irritated.

I slammed the drawer shut. “Don’t you take that tone with me,” I snapped, bending over to snatch up my panties that lay on the floor. If only I’d insisted on him taking me home last night instead of giving in to his demand for me to stay at his house. He’d been on edge after the run-in with his uncle, and I’d sensed his need to protect, so I agreed to stay over.

As I stood, he appeared in the doorway, a shitty look on his face. Jerking his chin at the wardrobe, he said, “Did you check in there?” *Still with the tone.*

Taking a deep breath, I said, “I know you’re angry about your uncle and all, but don’t bring that mood to me. All I asked was where your shirts were.”

He scrubbed his hand over his face and blew out a long breath. Without saying another word, he walked to the wardrobe, rummaged around in it and found me a shirt. Passing it to me, he said, “Here.” And then—“You almost ready?”

I decided it really would be best if I just ignored him that day. At least until he got his head together. Throwing the shirt on, I nodded and grabbed my stuff off the bed. "Yeah."

We were almost out the front door when Renee ran in, breathless. "Sorry, I'm late!"

Nitro halted and I almost ran into him. "What for?" he asked.

She gave him a confused look. "Ah, for my driving lesson. The one you promised to give me before school this morning."

"Fuck," he muttered. "I can't do it this morning. I'm sorry, I forgot."

"Shit," I apologised, joining their conversation. "Sorry, Renee, it's my fault. I need him to drive me home so I can get to work on time."

She waved me off, but her disappointment with Nitro remained. "Can you do it after school, then?"

"I wish I could, but I've got club stuff on all day." I could hear, clear as day, his regret, but Renee wasn't taking it in.

"How am I supposed to clock up the hours you want me to if no one will take me driving? Mum can't do it and she can't afford to pay for lessons, so you're pretty much it," she said, staring at him with a hard expression.

"I can take you," I offered. "I can finish work early today."

Nitro moved so he could look at both of us. "No. I'll figure something out." His voice was firm, leaving no room for me to misunderstand that he didn't want me driving with his niece.

His words were like a slap in the face. "You don't trust me to take Renee driving?"

He grimaced. "Fuck, Tatum, it's not that—"

"Well, what is it?"

"It's—" he started, but Renee cut him off.

"He doesn't trust anyone else on the road, Tatum. It's not you. But I would like to say that at some point, you're gonna have to let me out there, Nitro, so it may as well be with someone you *do* trust."

Trust.

As we stood watching each other, my breathing slowed. If anyone understood how hard it was to give trust to someone, it was me. And yet, I desperately wanted Nitro to give me his. I wouldn't hold it against him if he wasn't ready yet, but I realised how much I wanted it.

He rubbed the back of his neck as time ticked on. It felt like minutes had passed when in reality it was only moments. Finally, he said, "Okay, you take her today." His words came out haltingly, but he did give me his consent, and that meant everything.



"So, you and Nitro, where's that heading?" Renee asked later that day as we sat in traffic. We'd been driving for almost half an hour and she'd avoided all talk of my relationship with her uncle in that time. I'd been waiting for it, though.

"I honestly don't know," I admitted.

She glanced at me quickly before turning her eyes back to the road. "Really? You don't know what you want?"

I loved her bluntness. "If you'd asked me at first what I wanted, I would have told you I didn't want a relationship. Now, I want that, but what I don't know is what Nitro wants. So who knows where it will all end up."

She grinned. "I can tell you that I've never seen him date a woman. You coming for dinner and meeting us all was huge." She waved her hand in the air. "Well, I know we'd already met, but it was different at dinner. And he smiled a lot that night. He never smiles."

"So what you're telling me is that I've got half a shot."

Her grin turned into a laugh and she looked at me again. "You really have no idea, do you? I think you've probably got *less* than half a shot of getting *rid* of him."

Her words settled in deep. They felt good. *This* felt good. I liked Renee and I liked spending time with Nitro's family. "What was it like growing up with him for an uncle?" I imagined Nitro to have been completely overprotective and overbearing, but I wondered what it felt like for her.

She was silent for a beat, thinking. "Nitro was the best dad I ever had," she said simply, but those words told me everything.

I smiled. "Have you ever met your biological father?"

"No. Mum was so young when she fell pregnant. They were both kids. Nitro took on that role from the beginning. I mean, he practically raised Mum, too."

I frowned. "I thought they lived with their uncle?"

"They did until Nitro got them out. Mum was only thirteen then. Nitro was almost eighteen. He got them a place to live and put food on the table. He also made sure Mum and Dustin finished school."

I fell silent, lost in my thoughts. Nitro was the kind of man you thought you knew when you met him. He gave the impression of being unemotional and very cold. But truth be told, he wasn't that person at all. Underneath the layers of moody and bossy and distant, was a man who cared very much.

"You know, Mum would be dead by now if it weren't for Nitro. And I wouldn't care about living as much as I do unless he'd taught me that. He always said that it didn't matter how much I wanted to give up, I couldn't. That even if I felt like no one cared whether I existed, there was always someone out there who needed me. He made me believe I was born for a reason." She paused for a beat, and took a deep breath before adding, "I had a lot of shitty thoughts about my birth, that I was a mistake and probably not even wanted, but Nitro took the time to help me see otherwise." Her voice cracked a little, and I saw a vulnerable side to her I hadn't seen before.

I touched her arm gently. It felt weird to do it, because the only person I was touchy feely with was Monroe. But I couldn't deny the urge. "He's right."

She smiled and nodded. However, the moment was broken when the car behind rear-ended us.

"Oh my, God, Nitro is going to kill me!" Renee yelled in a panic. She was driving his ute and although he hadn't said anything to either of us, I knew she was focused on returning it to him with no scratches. She wanted to prove to him that she could be trusted on the roads and with his car.

"Pull over to the kerb and I'll get out and speak to them," I said, craning my neck to see who had hit us. The car behind, however, had heavily tinted windows so I couldn't get a look at them.

After she pulled over, I exited the car and made my way to the back to inspect the damage. Before I had the chance, though, a deep voice called out my name. Looking towards the car behind us, I saw Nitro's uncle leave it and head my way.

What the fuck?

I stared in confusion.

Why is he here?

All the things Nitro had told me about this man rushed at me. And when he stood in front of me, I felt the evil rolling off him. He oozed it. In the way he watched me, in the twisted smile he gave and in the way he held himself, towering over me as if he could crush me. But I stood straight and didn't show my feelings. Something I was good at.

"Joseph," I greeted him.

"I see that Rhys has told you about me."

I ignored what he said and cut straight to the chase. "What do you want? Because I'm taking it that you hitting us was no accident."

He pulled a business card from his shirt pocket. Handing it to me, he said, "Give that to Nitro. I'll have his car fixed."

The last thing I wanted was to take that card, but I figured this would go a lot faster and smoother if I did. "Was there a particular reason you wanted us to pull over and talk to you?" No way was I pretending this was anything but what it clearly was.

His face darkened. "Just pass that card along to Nitro." He turned to leave me but glanced back for a moment. "I see what he sees in you and I have to say that you'd make an excellent addition to my organisation, too. Tell him that also."

I stared after him for a long while, and it wasn't until I could no longer see his car that I realised I was shaking. I had no doubt that Joseph really was pure evil. It bled from him like blood. And it scared the absolute fuck out of me.

NITRO

“My Own Prison” by Creed

Rage burned in my gut and blinded my vision. Joseph approaching Tatum and Renee pushed me over the edge, to the point where I could no longer control my impulse to lash out. I wanted to kill him. However, he'd trained me so well that I could control that urge. Killing took careful preparation and planning, but I'd settle for hurting him. His death would come later.

I banged on his hotel room door and waited for him to answer it. I'd called ahead, so he knew I was coming. The bastard never saw my fist coming, though. He thought he'd indoctrinated me enough that I would never turn on him. He should have been smarter.

My punch knocked him onto his ass. I stepped inside the room, the door closing behind me, and reached down to grab hold of his shirt. Pulling him up, I punched him hard again. He didn't fall, just stumbled back a few feet.

We stared at each other. My breaths came hard and fast. His were calm. As if he'd expected the confrontation. Fuck, had he planned my reaction and I hadn't seen that coming?

“This is the Rhys I've been waiting for,” he said, fucking with my mind again.

Jesus.

I needed to figure out his game or else he was going to win.

“Leave Tatum out of this!” I roared. “If you go near her again, I will fucking kill you.” When he didn't say anything, but just stood there with a smile on his face, I added, “I will fucking rip your heart out of your chest if you fuck with her.”

He looked down and straightened his shirt, smoothing it as if that was all he cared about. Lifting his face back up slowly, he met my gaze. The smile had been replaced with the cold glare I knew so well. "Now I know for sure where your loyalties lie. I clearly taught you nothing," he spat harshly.

I knew going to him would reveal as much, but I couldn't stop myself. And I would deal with the consequences of that. I'd make sure Tatum and my family were safe at all times. I would never allow him to get close to them again.

"You taught me more than I care to understand, Joseph. But I'm a good soldier thanks to you, and I will have your blood on my hands one day."

He lifted a brow casually, as if he didn't believe a word I said. "Is that a threat, son?"

I took three determined strides in his direction and punched him again. "No, it's a fucking promise."

He stumbled backwards, raising his hand to cover his face where I'd punched him. The motherfucker *still* didn't retaliate.

As I was trying to process the fact he was taking everything I gave him, the door opened and clicked shut as someone entered. Joseph's eyes sparked with pleasure as he looked beyond me. Turning, I was confronted with a face I knew well. A face that caused a strong physical reaction in me. The kind of reaction that years of conditioning produced.

Terror sliced through my gut and bile forced its way up. Doubling over, I struggled for breath.

"Rhys, it's been a long time."

His voice was like acid washing over me.

It burnt.

The heat was too much.

I squeezed my eyes shut.

Panting.

He can't touch me again.

They can't hurt us anymore.

I pushed some short, sharp breaths out, trying desperately to get my shit under control.

My skin was on fucking fire.

I covered my ears, trying to dull the roar there and dropped to my knees, unable to hold myself up any longer.

And then the first kick came.

My uncle's right-hand man, William, kicked me repeatedly, like he had done so many times. My whole body blazed with pain as his boot connected with my gut, my legs, my arms and my head.

When he decided I'd had enough of his boot, he yanked me up and punched me. The force of his punch landed me on my ass, and I took a blow to my head when the back of it hit the edge of the coffee table. Something in that punch woke my fighter side, though. I'd never stood up to William when I was younger, but fuck if I wouldn't now.

Shutting down my conditioned response to him, I pushed my way up off the floor. Raising my fists and roaring out my anger, I lunged at him. He blocked my punch, but I didn't give up. I would never give up again.

I fought like the soldier they'd trained me to be. I landed punch after punch on him, but he also got some in. My body didn't feel the pain, though. I was running on pure adrenalin and rage. There was no time for feeling anything.

I didn't stop until he lay sprawled on the carpet in front of me. Unconscious. Staring up at Joseph, I fought for my breaths, but I managed to spit out, "Fuck you."

He stepped over William and came to me, our faces close. "That will be the last time you speak to me that way."

His declaration was like an ominous message. One that meant nothing to me because I'd already made the decision to kill him. However, as I raised my hands to choke the life out of him, a loud knock on the door sounded.

"Ah, that will be my guests," he said and moved around me to let them in.

My mind failed in its efforts to keep up, and I missed my chance to end his life when five men entered the room. I could take on Joseph, but I couldn't take on that many at once.

I met Joseph's gaze. "This isn't done," I said and then exited the room before he could reply.

I managed to make it out of the hotel. My bloody appearance drew a lot of attention, but no one bothered me. The only thing that bothered me were my memories of William and Joseph and what they'd put me through all those years ago.

William may have hurt my body and drew blood, but those fucking memories hacked at me, ripping open old wounds I thought had healed. Wounds I was beginning to think may never heal.

TATUM

“Dust to Dust” by The Civil Wars

I'd just put silverside on to cook when Nitro turned up at my place, bloody and beaten. I'd seen him like that before, but I flinched as he stood on my doorstep looking at me through eyes full of pain. It wasn't the wounds or the blood that caused my reaction; it was the torment radiating from him.

Pulling the door wide open, I let him in and watched as he walked to the kitchen. While he held himself like the warrior I knew him to be, there was something completely off about him.

Facing me, he said, “Are you good?”

It was such a simple question, but those three words were all Nitro ever wanted to know. He always wanted to make sure I was okay. They may have been plain words, but they held depth. And I knew they were words he reserved only for those he cared about.

I nodded, cupping his face. He was asking if Joseph had shaken me up. When I'd called to tell him what had happened, he'd been furious. But he'd also been concerned about Joseph scaring Renee and me. “Yeah, but you're not. Let me clean you up.” Memories of the last time I cleaned him up surfaced. It wasn't that long ago, but everything had changed since then.

After I'd gathered what I needed, I sat him down at my kitchen table and stood in between his legs while I gently began the task of carefully cleaning blood from his face. Darkness had fallen outside and the only sound I could hear in the quiet of the night was Nitro's laboured breathing. I didn't initiate conversation, figuring he'd talk if he wanted. But I also figured he probably wouldn't.

He surprised me when he did speak. His words came out so quietly that I almost didn't hear them. "Ever had anyone in your life who scared the absolute fuck out of you, Vegas?" His hand gripped the back of my thigh. I not only heard his agony, but I also felt it in the way his hand clung to me.

"Yes." It was almost a whisper. I didn't want to remember this. But I knew that for Nitro, I would if he needed me to.

His fingers dug in to my leg harder. "Who?"

My eyes closed for a moment and I swallowed hard as my heart threatened to crash through my chest. "We used to have these neighbours when I was thirteen who had a son a couple of years older than me. He liked me, but I wasn't interested in him. For two years, he tried to get me to go out with him. At first he was harmless, but then he turned nasty. He started stalking me, always turning up where I was and letting me know he was watching. My parents were too distracted with their marriage that they didn't notice what was going on. And I didn't want to burden them by telling them."

"Even back then you didn't like asking for help," he murmured.

I held his chin and tipped his face up to me so I could wash the blood off his neck. "Yes, even back then," I said as our eyes locked. "So when I had just turned fifteen, he upped his game. He started confronting me more and touching me when he did. He'd whisper shit in my ear and tell me the things he wanted to do to me. The guy was seventeen then, and I'm pretty sure he already had psychopathic tendencies. The shit he wanted to do to me was violent. I told my parents who spoke to his parents. Of course, they didn't believe it. Dad took it to the police, but there wasn't anything they could do without proof."

"What happened?" Nitro asked through gritted teeth.

I stared at him, not wanting to go on. He moved his hands to my waist and held me there, his touch reassuring. Protective. It said, "I've got you."

Taking a deep breath, I shared one of my greatest regrets. "The threats went on for weeks, until the point where I was scared out of my wits. I wasn't eating, hardly slept, and spent my days too frightened to leave the house. This was during the school holidays and Chris was away during those weeks. When he came home and found out what had been happening, he beat the guy up and tried to protect me. A few weeks passed and I didn't see him anywhere. We

thought he'd backed off. And then there was a party at the end of the summer holidays. I went with my friends and told Chris I'd be fine because it was a party and the guy usually only approached me when I was alone. We all drank a fair bit that night and my friends all got trashed. And that's when the guy took his shot."

"He attacked you?" It was like Nitro was holding his breath while he waited for my reply.

I shook my head as a single tear slid down my face. "No. I was walking down the road to go home when he pulled up in his car. He trailed me for ages, not saying much, just staring at me like a crazy guy. I called Chris to come and get me, and in that time, the guy tried to actually run me down with his car. I ran into the bush to get away from him and he came after me. But that was when Chris arrived, so he didn't get to me before Chris started punching him. They fought for ages, until Chris had beaten him so badly that he didn't walk for over a week."

I'd stopped washing Nitro's face as I told him the story. He stood and pulled me into his arms when I finished. I hesitated to embrace him, though, because I didn't want to hurt him.

Pulling back a little, he found my eyes. "Put your arms around me, Tatum," he said gruffly.

"I don't want to hurt you."

He gave me a look that told me just to do it, so I did, and he held me tighter. We stayed like that for a long time until finally he let me go and said, "What happened to the guy after that?"

"His parents agreed with mine to keep quiet and not go to the police with what happened. They didn't want Chris to be charged with assault. Their family ended up moving away after that, and we never saw or heard from that guy again." I dropped my eyes as I thought about what that assault did to Chris. When I found his gaze again, I said, "The thing was, though, that one of the local gangs took notice of Chris after that. They saw him as a fighter and wanted him on their crew because of his fighting ability. And from then on, he was always tied up with crime and violence and drugs."

"Fuck," Nitro swore, his hands cradling my head. "You can't blame yourself for that shit. He made his choices, and you couldn't control them."

"I should have called the police that night, instead of Chris. If it wasn't for that, he would never have caught the eye of that gang and

his whole life would have been different." I was lost in my memories and thoughts. I'd lived with this regret for years and it had been stirred when Chris was murdered. It almost suffocated me some days. I was convinced it would never let me out of its grip.

Nitro's jaw clenched. "Regret is a bitch, Vegas. A motherfucking bitch." He spat his words out as if he couldn't get rid of them fast enough. Like they twisted in his gut and he needed them out to ease that pain.

"Who scares you?" I whispered, my heart beating wildly again. Nitro wasn't a man who I thought would scare easily, if at all. When he'd thrown that question out there, I knew it was because someone did.

His chest rose and fell hard and fast. "My uncle had this man who did most of his training for him. Joseph would find the soldiers and then William would beat them into submission. He was ex-army and specialised in torture. He programmed us to respond to him with fear." He stared at me while he talked, almost vacantly, and I could see how much his memories consumed him. How much they still owned him.

And then it hit me.

"Did you see William today?"

His heavy breaths filled the silence. He nodded. "I thought I was done with all that. Thought they had no control over me anymore. Turns out I was wrong about all of it."

He let me go and I quickly reached for him, managing to hook my hand around his neck, stopping him from moving away from me. "But you fought back today?" His wounds told me that much.

"Yeah, but that doesn't count for fucking much if simply being in William's presence causes me to lose my shit." His face contorted. "I couldn't breathe, couldn't think straight. I almost fucking threw up." His voice was ragged, and I read all the things he wasn't saying in between what he was saying. My strong man cracked that day and he couldn't make sense of it.

I knew there was nothing I could say that would make this any better. No words would ease his torment. So I simply held my hand out to him and when he took it, I led him to my bedroom.

Lifting his shirt over his head, I pressed my mouth to his chest. He'd taken punches all over his body from what I could see, so my kisses were a whisper across his skin in an effort not to hurt him fur-

ther. Though there was no wild abandon, my passion simmered deep.

Moving down his body, I undid the button on his jeans and lowered the zip. He hissed as I removed his pants. A moment later, he pulled me back up so our faces were close.

Running his finger down between my breasts, he said, "This looks good on you."

I glanced down at his shirt I wore. "Yeah, it does. I'm keeping it."

"Yeah, you should." He took it off and threw it on the floor. "But you shouldn't wear it often," he added while he flicked my bra undone and removed it, too. His mouth closed over my breast and he sucked my nipple between his lips.

I loved the sight of Nitro's head bent so he could suck and lick my breasts. Running my fingers through his hair, I moaned as he worked his way across to my other nipple. His tender touch was in stark contrast to his fury that I craved. But this other side of him was a side I could love just as much.

He growled deeply as his arms circled my body and he lifted me.

"Wait," I said, concerned. "I don't want you to hurt yourself any more than you already are."

"Wrap your legs around me, because I'm going to fuck you, even if it kills me."

I did what he said because one look at his determined expression told me he meant every word. Once my legs were around him, he walked me to the bed and placed me on it. He then slid his hands up my legs, hooked his fingers into my panties and pulled them off.

"Fuck, you're beautiful," he rasped as he straddled me. His attention was completely on my body, and his gaze lingered on every inch of me. His hands and mouth moved over my skin slowly, as if he was making art on me. He seemed spellbound and in turn, I was too, because this wasn't the Nitro I knew. And it stunned me that he could be like this, especially after the violent beating he'd taken.

Fucking Nitro was usually like diving into a raging ocean. The beautiful frenzy of it both exhausted and calmed me. I'd never experienced anything like it in my life. Sex had become more than just a physical act with him. Even though it could be furious and brutal, I knew we both used it as a way of dealing with our darkness. It soothed us. If only for that time we were joined as one, we breathed a little easier.

But the way he caressed me was a whole other thing. I'd never been touched like I was priceless and precious before, and that was how Nitro was touching me. It soothed me in a way I'd never imagined possible.

He surrounded me with care.

He wrapped me in devotion.

He breathed life into me.

When Nitro finally entered me, he'd found his fury again, and he fucked me with that rough energy I hungered for. We were a storm and serenity all rolled into one. But it was the storm we both needed the most.

NITRO

“The Pretender” by The Foo Fighters

I watched King as he entered the room. He'd called Church unexpectedly, and that always meant he had something to tell us. Something was going down, and I was on edge.

His eyes met mine before he spoke. I didn't like what I saw there.

Apprehension.

Regret.

Determination.

Tearing his gaze from mine, he looked around the room. His body was rigid as fuck and when he finally announced his news, I understood why.

“We're not buying guns off Sutherland. We'll be proceeding with the deal Joseph Lockwood brought to us.”

It was a fucking kick in the gut. The tension I'd been carrying for months finally threatened to snap and I shoved my chair back and stood.

“Why?” I thundered, unable to hold my anger back.

King turned to me. There was no anger there, no glare, nothing. Just a shitload of unspoken apologies. “I don't trust Dragon. We might be in bed with him over this Gambarro shit, but I don't want to rely on Sutherland if Dragon's in his ear. Fuck knows what could happen down the track after we're finished with Gambarro. Better to build a relationship with another supplier now.”

I pointed my finger at the bruises on my face and body. “Jesus Christ, King, you've seen what he's capable of. I'd rather get in bed with Billy if our only other option is Joseph.”

He ran his hand over his face as he shook his head. "With the amount of guns and ammo we need, that option is off the table. Billy would bleed us dry with what he charges." He didn't acknowledge the beating I'd taken, but then our world was full of violence, so I shouldn't have been surprised. Still, it cut that he didn't care.

"Fuck!" I spun around and punched the wall, letting my anger flow out of me.

Hyde spoke up. "I'm on board with using Joseph."

Of course he fucking was. And so, it turned out, was everyone else. The mighty dollar guaranteed that. With the tens of thousands of dollars we'd save buying from Joseph, they all jumped in quickly with their support for the decision.

Then King twisted the knife in further. "The deal is going down today. And Nitro?"

I stared at him. "What?"

"Joseph had one stipulation for this deal to go ahead."

"What?" Tension punched through every part of my body in anticipation of what his requirement could be. Joseph would surely use this as some way to drag me back to him.

King held my gaze in the way he did when he wanted no argument. "He wants you there."

My mind raced with what his reasoning for this was. There had to be a trap. There always was with Joseph.

"Nitro?"

My head snapped up. There were so many questions that King was asking me. Was I on board? Would I do what he asked? *Were my loyalties with the club?* I nodded. "Yes."

He returned my nod. "We leave in an hour."



Joseph's car pulled into the warehouse and parked next to the truck that had already arrived. He exited the black SUV and walked our way, his gaze not leaving mine.

King stepped forward, meeting him. They exchanged words, but I couldn't hear what was said. My ears roared as my demons circled so even if I'd been closer, I probably wouldn't have made out what they were saying. I'd spent the last hour going over and over what

Joseph's goal could be with having me there. I'd come up fucking short, and that only meant my vigilance was extreme.

King raised his arm and motioned for me to join them. I closed the distance without hesitation. If Joseph wanted me there, he wouldn't see any of my uneasiness. However, just as I almost reached them, William circled around from the back of the truck and came my way.

Fuck.

Sweat broke out on my forehead and my throat turned dry. The nightmares of my childhood screamed to life when I realised he wore the exact outfit he'd worn years ago while drilling obedience into me. Black cargo pants, black tee and black combat boots. The fucking bastard knew it would be a trigger for me, but I was getting better at fighting those goddam triggers. My physical reactions weren't so controlled, but I worked overtime trying to shut them down.

"William," I greeted him, holding my body up straight.

Disappointment flashed across his face for a second before he scrubbed it away and gave me a tight smile. "Rhys, we meet again."

"We do." Our faces were a mess of violent bruising and swelling, and if his body felt anything like mine, it was in some pain. But there we were, years after I thought I'd never see him again.

"Can we get this done?" King asked with a scowl. He'd pulled me aside after Church and told me he'd do his best to push the delivery through fast so I didn't have to be around Joseph for long.

I'd seen King's reluctance to take this deal and in between the words of what he said to me, I'd understood his reasons. I didn't like them, or necessarily agree with them, but I got why he took this path.

Joseph motioned for William to take care of business with King while he walked my way. Eyeing my bruises, he said, "Your father would be proud of you, Rhys. He never did see eye-to-eye with me about your potential."

He made no sense to me. "What the fuck does that mean?"

His lips curled into an evil smile. "My brother had such noble dreams for your future. He wanted you to have what he never did. Told me once that you were smart enough to be a doctor or a lawyer or even a scientist. You did love science after all. I was the one who saw you for who you really were. Smart as a whip and able to make

decisions on your feet. I knew that with the right training you could lead an army. The fact you're still fighting me on your destiny, he'd be proud of that." He paused for a moment and his evil fucking smile grew. "It's a good thing I didn't allow him to be around to help you fight me."

My breathing slowed. "You what?"

He watched me closely with a look of triumph. "Did you think that car crash was an accident all those years ago, son?"

The car crash when I was twelve.

The one that killed both my parents.

The deaths that forced us to live with Joseph.

Motherfucker.

Every emotion I'd ever buried roared in my head. In my body. Through every fucking part of me. He'd taken my parents from me and he'd taken my life, too. Every good thing I ever had died that day. Joseph had extinguished all the light in my life and filled it with darkness instead.

I will kill him.

My loyalty to King and the club shattered. Once we left this warehouse, I would make a fucking plan and I would rip the life from Joseph's body.

King blurred into focus as Joseph shifted away. Coming to me, he said, "We're done, Nitro. Time to go."

I blinked.

Forcing out a harsh breath, I snapped back to attention. Turning, I stalked to the van we'd come in. I didn't give Joseph another glance, didn't want to look at him more than I had to. The next time I saw him would be the last.



I glanced at my phone, looking for a text from Tatum. I'd sent her one twenty minutes earlier and hadn't heard back. Unusual for her. She never took more than ten minutes to reply.

"You gonna finish that beer or just stare at your phone all afternoon?" Devil asked.

My hand squeezed around the phone and I looked up at him. After I drank what was left in my bottle, I said, "Just waiting on a

message.”

He chuckled. “Well, that’s fucking obvious. You whipped bastard.”

I stared at the empty bottle in my hand. If whipped was feeling anxious when you didn’t hear from the woman you shared your bed with each night, then yeah, I was fucking whipped. If it was worrying about her when she wasn’t with you, and thinking about her all the fucking time, then I was absolutely, 100 percent whipped. Something I never thought I’d be. And something that scared the shit out of me. Not because I didn’t want to feel that way about her, but because being with me could be dangerous for her. To hold that responsibility in my hands was more than I thought I could handle at times.

I took a deep breath and met Devil’s gaze again. “Yeah, you could be on to something there, brother.”

He grew serious. “I like Tatum. Not that it matters what I think, but a chick like that, who doesn’t take your shit and who stands by you regardless, that’s a chick worth having in your life.”

“You ever had that before?”

“Yeah, but I always fuck it up. One day I might get that shit right.” He jerked his chin at the bar. “You want another beer?”

I nodded, and he left me alone while he headed to the bar. Staring at my phone again, I decided to call Tatum, but as I swiped to dial her number, the phone rang. It wasn’t a number I knew.

When I answered it, a man’s voice sounded. “Is that Rhys Lockwood?”

My gut tightened. No one called me that anymore. Except for Joseph, but this wasn’t my uncle on the line and sounded too formal to be anyone he would associate with. “Speaking.”

“Rhys, it’s Matt Logan here, Marilyn’s psychologist.”

I dropped my head into my hand as fear filled me. “Is she okay?” He never phoned me. This couldn’t be good.

“To be honest, I’m not convinced she is. I just had a phone call from her and she was in such a state that I called an ambulance to her house. This phone call to you is highly unusual, I never do this, but I feel it’s crucial I pass some information on to you.” He took a breath before continuing, “Marilyn saw the man who raped her today.”

The man who raped her? I fucking killed that man. There was no way she could have seen him.

"Doc, that's not possible. That guy is dead."

"I'm not referring to the recent rape. I'm referring to the ones from when she was a child."

The room spun.

I gripped the phone so tightly it should have shattered into pieces.

My mind ran in a million different directions.

This couldn't be happening.

"You're telling me that my sister was raped when she was a child?"

Silence.

And then—"I thought you knew."

I was on my feet before I realised it and walking out of the clubhouse. I could hardly process what he was telling me. My need for violence was extreme. I wanted to punch and kick and thrash and scream this injustice out of me.

Not my Lynny.

It was where her darkness came from, and I'd never known. She'd kept this shit wrapped up tight and it had almost killed her. I should have been there for her. More. I should have done more.

"Rhys, are you still on the line?"

"Yeah, I'm here." The words came out a strangled mess. "Who did this to her?"

Deep in my gut I knew. I fucking knew.

"It was your uncle," he said quietly, his words full of regret. "I'm sorry you're hearing this from me. I honestly thought she'd told you."

I clenched my fists as I made my way to my bike. "What happened today? Did he hurt her?" I would fucking drag his death out for this. I would make him hurt so fucking much for every ounce of pain he'd caused Marilyn.

"No, he didn't approach her. She saw him outside her house. Apparently, he was sitting in a car looking at the house for a while and then drove off. I thought it appropriate you know this information so you could take steps to avoid him coming near her again."

I'd fucking take steps. Joseph would *never* set foot near Marilyn again.

I needed to get off the phone and deal with this. "Thanks, Doc. I've got this covered."

I ended the call and started my bike. Screaming out of the parking lot, I almost collided with Kick who was entering. Narrowly missing him, I sped towards Marilyn's house. The ambulance might get there before me, but in case not, I wanted to check on her.

The ride home passed in a blur and as I pulled around the corner of her street, I watched an ambulance drive away.

My phone had vibrated with a call on the way there so I took a moment to stop and check who it had been. I was still waiting to hear back from Tatum.

There was one missed call from Devil. No message. I'd call him later. All I wanted to do was head to Joseph and deal with him. I didn't want to involve Devil or any Storm members in that. I needed to put the past to rest by myself. And I also didn't want to waste time waiting for help.

My phone rang before I pulled back out into the traffic. I placed it to my ear without checking caller ID. "Yeah?"

"Rhys."

I froze.

Joseph.

A dark cloud circled over me as my gut twisted.

When I didn't speak, he said, "I have something of yours."

My world crashed down around me.

I dry-heaved.

Every good thing I had in my life, he ruined.

Tatum.

"Do not lay a finger on her, Joseph."

"Oh, my boy, I've already laid every finger I have on her."

I clutched my stomach and dry-heaved again as the ticking of a time bomb blasted in my head.

Joseph continued, "You can have her back, Rhys, so long as you give me what I want. It's a fair exchange. But the longer you take to come to me, the more I'm tempted to sample her and find out what it is she has that you've traded everything for."

I didn't think he could wreck me more than he already had. I was wrong. The thought of him touching Tatum delivered me into a new state of madness. Complete and utter madness.

"Text me where you are. I'll be there."

I jabbed at the phone to end the call and slammed my hand down on my bike. "Fuck!" I roared, letting it all out.

This was unbearable.

It was every fear I'd ever had come to life.

To be the reason her life was in danger was a living hell.

And to even think about losing her spiralled me into a dark abyss full of violence and brutality.

He would pay dearly for this. And for everything else he'd ever done to my family and me.

TATUM

“Russian Roulette” by Rihanna

Pain radiated down my cheek where Joseph gripped it, his fingers digging into my skin. Hard. If there was one thing this asshole knew, it was how to inflict agony.

“He says he’s on his way, but we shall see,” he said, his crazy eyes boring into me. “We shall find out if he really cares for you or not.”

I wanted to spit in his face and claw out his motherfucking eyes. I also wanted to cut his balls off and shove them down his throat to shut him the hell up. This man never stopped talking. He loved the sound of his own voice.

I didn’t doubt Nitro.

I knew he’d come.

It was just a matter of time, and I was good at getting through shit, so I could handle myself until he arrived. I refused to allow Joseph to scare me. Nitro would come and he would kill him. Just like he’d done to that goddam biker months ago.

He won’t fail me.

“I’ve done my research on you, Tatum. You were a lawyer and a good one from what I can work out. How the fuck did you end up with a biker?”

Go to hell, asshole.

I’m not telling you a thing.

He squeezed my face. “Tell me!”

I struggled under his hold, trying to shake my face from his grip. It worked, but only for a moment. He didn’t squeeze me again, but

he did slap me so hard that the force of it knocked me over. Me and the chair I was tied to.

My head hit the cement with a thud and I saw stars. My ears rang and more pain tore through my body. It especially hurt in my shoulder, which had slammed into the concrete.

Joseph's men moved me back into a sitting position. He had five men in the room with us and I'd heard more outside. I wasn't sure where he'd brought me. All I knew was that the room I was in was fairly large and seemed like an industrial warehouse with a cement floor and high roof. It was warm, too. No air conditioning.

Joseph crouched in front of me and placed his hands on my legs. They were tied together, as were my hands. I wanted to shove his hands off me, but I couldn't, so instead I took a deep breath and reminded myself that Nitro was on the way.

"You and Rhys are a perfect match. Both as stubborn as the other. I'm only going to ask you this once more, Tatum, and if you don't answer me, we're going to have a problem. How did you meet him?"

I didn't conceal the hate I had for him. "Why the fuck do you care?"

He jerked up and nodded at someone behind me. Hands landed on my shoulders, pulling me back against the chair. A second later, Joseph's fist slammed into my face. He punched me so hard I struggled for breath. It was like I was drowning and couldn't work my way back up for air, all while excruciating pain consumed me.

I counted to twenty before I finally managed to draw a long breath of air into my lungs. It had been short bursts of air up until that point, which hardly felt like life-sustaining oxygen.

As I wheezed and fought for air, the door opened and two men entered. I tried to focus on them to see who they were, but everyone had blurred and I couldn't make out a damn thing.

And then I heard his voice.

"Vegas."

His boots thudded on the cement and I knew he was coming my way, but then they stopped.

"Fucking let me go!" His voice ricocheted around the room, and I finally zeroed in on him to see that two of Joseph's men had restrained him, holding him back from me.

"All in good time, son," Joseph said. His back was to me and he'd moved towards Nitro.

"I told you not to fucking hurt her," Nitro snarled.

"When will you ever learn that I don't listen to you? It's you who needs to listen to me," Joseph said. I hated hearing him talk to Nitro like that. Hated knowing the power he still held over him.

My sight returned to full capacity and I stared at Nitro, taking in his eyes. They were dead. Oh, there was life there, but the way he looked at Joseph was as if he wasn't even looking at another human being. I was certain he'd come to kill and that he'd switched off the human side of himself to do it.

He struggled and fought to escape the men holding him back. When that didn't work, he kicked out at Joseph, landing a hard kick to his groin.

Joseph grunted loudly and boomed, "You wanna fight, Rhys? Let's see what happens when you do that."

He spun around, stalked back to me and grabbed my neck. Yanking me to a standing position, with the chair hanging off me, he snarled, "This face won't be recognisable if you keep that shit up."

My breaths turned choppy as I stared at him up close. I believed every word he said. Joseph didn't seem to make empty threats.

"Stop!" Nitro yelled.

Joseph didn't loosen his grip on me, but he turned to face Nitro. "Are you coming to your senses?"

Nitro nodded but didn't say anything.

Joseph let me go and pushed me back to a sitting position. He then strode back to Nitro and punched him hard in the gut. I cringed as Nitro bent forward, winded.

And then the punches kept coming.

Joseph was savage. It was as if he was on auto-pilot. Nitro was his punching bag, and he worked out his anger on him.

I couldn't watch. It was brutal and bloodthirsty. I couldn't even imagine doing what he was doing to my worst enemy. As much as I might want to hurt someone, I wouldn't have the stomach for it.

It lasted longer than I cared to think about. It felt like an eternity.

Joseph was breathless when he finally ordered, "Take him away."

I didn't know what he planned, but the two guys holding Nitro up took him out of the room. Joseph faced me and for the first time since I'd arrived in that shithole a few hours prior, fear filled me. I

believed Nitro would get us out of there, but I didn't want to think about what we'd have to go through first.

He came to me and ran his finger slowly down my face. "I'll be back," he said.

They were his last words before he left me alone in the room. As the door clicked shut behind him, I exhaled. I attempted to give myself a pep talk, but no matter how hard I tried, it didn't work. Because this wasn't just about me. I could pep talk the fuck out of shit if it only involved me. But Nitro's life was at stake, too, and that drove more fear into me than I knew what to do with.

I couldn't lose him.



Joseph left me alone for hours. It was dark by the time he came back. There was one tiny window in the room and night had fallen a long time before he returned.

"Dinner," he said as he dumped a tray of food on the floor in front of me. I didn't look at it, but rather kept my eyes on him. "You need to use the toilet?"

I couldn't figure out why he cared. But I took the opportunity he presented and nodded. "Yes," I croaked. My face was in a world of pain and I found it hard to talk.

He placed a hand on the back of my chair and motioned with his other hand for me to stand. My hands were tied behind my back and as I stood, he held the chair in place so my hands could slide up.

He then said, "Come."

I soon realised he meant for me to shuffle my way to the toilet because he didn't undo the rope he'd tied around my ankles.

The toilet wasn't far from the room, but it took me ages to get there. Joseph became frustrated with me and curled one hand around my throat and the other around my waist so he could pull me along. My bare feet dragged along the cement most of the way after that, and they were a bloody mess of cuts and scratches at the end of the journey.

He kicked open the toilet door and pushed me inside. I stared at him, wondering how the fuck I was supposed to use the toilet if I couldn't undo my pants. He met my gaze and his eyes glinted with

an evil smile. Before I knew what was happening, he flicked the button on my pants and slid the zip down. He then gripped my pants and yanked them down.

He hissed as his eyes landed on my lacy panties. "Rhys is a lucky man. I bet he spends most of his spare time inside this cunt," he said as he slid a finger inside my panties.

I froze.

Oh, God, no.

This could not be happening.

I squeezed my legs together. "Don't fucking touch me." My heart beat so damn fast I thought it might explode, but I was proud as fuck that my voice held no trace of my fear.

"You're a feisty one," he murmured, but he let his hand linger near my vagina.

The sound of shoes on the cement in the hallway signalled someone approaching. "Joseph! We need you."

His eyes met mine. "It's your lucky day." With that, he pulled my panties down so I could use the toilet. "Be there in a minute," he yelled back, not taking his eyes off me.

I hated every fucking minute of this. But I never stopped telling myself that Nitro would get us out of here.

I had to believe that.

I finished using the toilet, and he pulled my pants back up and returned me to the room that sadly was mine. He undid the rope around my wrists and I ate the dinner of chicken and salad that he'd given me while one of his men watched. When I finished, my hands were secured together again. The guy left the room and I sat staring at the door, willing it to open. Willing Nitro to burst through and tell me everyone was dead and we could leave.

That never happened.



I didn't see Joseph for another day and a half. His men delivered one meal to me in that time and took me to the toilet twice. Other than that, I saw nothing and heard nothing. I had no idea what was going on outside of the room I was in. If I thought I'd lived through hell before, that had nothing on this. This kind of hell could send a per-

son mad. The not knowing was the worst, but equally as bad was the silence and time alone. It did crazy shit to my mind.

My relief when Joseph finally showed his face again, was short-lived. He entered the room and then Nitro was shoved in after him. I almost vomited when I saw Nitro. He'd been so badly beaten that his face was swollen and he could hardly open his eyes. Dried blood coated his face and where there was no blood, there were bruises and cuts. His body was in so much pain that he walked with a hunch and grunted with each step he took. The pain in my face from being punched felt like nothing compared to the hurt blaring from him.

Joseph eyed me. "Rhys is more stubborn than I thought. He still refuses to join my army, so I figured I'd give him some reasons."

Moving behind me, he wrapped his hand around my throat and squeezed hard until I couldn't draw breath. I couldn't move my legs and I couldn't move my hands because they were still tied together. All I could do was sit there and struggle for air. I gasped and frantically tried to suck air in through my nose, but he realised that and blocked that passage, too.

Nitro screamed for him to stop, but soon I couldn't even hear that. All I could hear was the blood roaring in my ears as death beckoned. My head and body thrashed as I fought and finally Joseph let me go, sending me to the floor in an almighty crash. I fell headfirst, smashing my face into the concrete. Pain splintered through my head and radiated to every part of my body.

"Let her go!" Nitro roared, his voice making its way to me as I lay gasping for air.

"Not until you agree to my terms, son," Joseph said right before he kicked me in the stomach.

He then ordered two of his men to haul me up and he beat me in the same manner that he'd beaten Nitro the last time I saw him.

Time stood still.

I heard Nitro yelling that he would do whatever Joseph wanted, but I couldn't push my way through the haze of pain circling me.

Bone crunching.

Blood spilling.

My soul breaking.

I wasn't sure I would survive this.

I wasn't sure I wanted to.

The pain was too great and death seemed easier.

Eventually the punches stopped coming.
I lay curled up in a ball on the cement.
Boots sounded next to me, until they were a distant noise I could hardly hear. The door clicked shut.
And then came silence.
Beautiful silence.
I was alone.
Floating.
Drifting.
Dreaming of heaven.
Arms embraced me.
Pulled me into a lap.
Warm breath whispered across my skin.
A hand gently smoothed my hair.
“I’m so sorry, Vegas.” Nitro’s grief-stricken voice broke through the haze, and I blinked my eyes open.
He stared down at me. His eyes were filled with tears. And pain. So much pain. I didn’t want there to be any more of that for either of us. We’d had enough. Done our time. Paid the price for our sins.
He rocked me for what felt like hours. It could have been. Or it may have only been minutes. It didn’t matter how long it was. The only thing that mattered was that those final moments together were filled with so much care. The kind of care a person searches their whole life for. In those moments, Nitro loved me.

NITRO

“State Of My Head” by Shinedown

“Send her home.”

Joseph narrowed his eyes at me. “And then?”

“And then I will do what you want.”

He watched me closely for a few moments. “You will give up Storm.”

I winced as I shifted my weight onto one foot. My leg screamed with pain and I needed to take most of the load off it, but it only brought more pain to the other one. Joseph’s beatings over the last two days had been severe. Worse than any I’d ever received. I could barely see him through swollen eyes, and bruises covered every inch of me.

My chest squeezed at the thought of what Joseph had done to Tatum earlier. He’d beaten her so badly that I thought he would go too far and kill her. It surprised me that he’d left me alone with her when he was finished. In hindsight, though, I realised he used it as another way to break me.

If watching her go down hadn’t been enough, sitting with her had shattered me. Holding Tatum in my arms and knowing that everything I saw and heard was because she’d chosen to be with me had torn a chunk out of my heart. I’d realised just how much she meant to me and that I would do anything to keep her safe. Agreeing to return to Joseph had been a small price to pay in return for her life.

“I will give up Storm,” I agreed.

“Very well,” he said and took the few steps to the door of the room where he kept me locked up.

"Joseph," I called after him. When he faced me, I said, "If you ever lay your hand on her again or hurt her in any way emotionally or physically, I will leave you and I will never come back. I will fight you to my death if I have to, but I won't allow Tatum to be hurt again."

He smiled that evil fucking smile of his that I wanted to wipe off his face. "It seems we have found your reason, Rhys."

"My reason?"

"Your reason to stay with me. I won't touch her unless you leave, and you won't leave unless I touch her."

I allowed him to believe that because it guaranteed Tatum's safety. "Come and get me once she's gone. We have shit to discuss."

He raised a brow. "Now this is more like the soldier I raised, son."

"Don't fucking call me that."

"And there's the man you've become. We just need to find a way to merge the two sides of you."

He slipped out the door, and I doubled over in agony. Clutching my stomach, I pushed out a few sharp breaths. My entire body was alive with this pain. I was aware, though, that it wasn't just physical pain. My soul was bleeding. It was oozing the blackest shit it had ever known. Joseph would not get away with any of this. I would die to ensure it.



Joseph returned sooner than I thought he would. "William has taken her home," he announced as he entered the room.

"Was she in a state fit enough to call someone for help?" She needed a doctor to check her out.

"Yes."

Thank fuck.

"Right, so you need to bring me up to speed on your business." *And get me out of this fucking room.* It was bare except for one chair. I'd spent my time in there pacing and plotting revenge. The few hours of sleep I'd managed had been on the cold cement floor, which had been agonising as hell.

He closed the distance between us in two determined strides, his face clouding over with annoyance. "You don't tell me what to do. That's the first thing you must relearn."

I stared into his dark eyes. "So tell me then, how is this going to go down? Because I thought you wanted me back to run your new Sydney operations."

"You're testing my patience, son."

I clenched my jaw. He called me that to push me and I refused to show him what it did to me. I needed to lock my emotions down again.

When I didn't say anything, he spoke again. "We've got a meeting with a new client tonight. Eric Bones. I want you there with William and me so you can begin building a relationship with him."

I already knew Eric Bones. He was a Storm ally and if I was in that meeting, news would travel fast.

"Joseph, I have to leave the club first. If they hear word of this before I tell King, there will be hell to pay."

"You think I give a fuck about a motorcycle club, Rhys? I could crush them in the blink of an eye."

"No, you couldn't." He had no fucking idea.

He grabbed my shirt and yanked me to him so our faces were close. "You forget what resources I have. With the knowledge you have of Storm's business and King's way of thinking, we can bring that club down together." He let go and shoved me backwards. "We start work on that tonight."

I stared at him while he walked to the door. My next question was one I didn't want to know the answer to. "What do you have planned?"

He looked back at me, his eyes glinting with menace. "Eric Bones is desperate for cash. I've agreed to sell guns to him cheaply in exchange for his loyalty. He's also going to flood the market with cheap coke from me, undercutting the club. And you're going to help by giving him details of Storm's trade so he can use that information against them. Tonight."

He exited the room without another word, and I stood in shock at what he wanted me to do. Joseph was a smart motherfucker. Forcing me to disregard my club loyalty achieved two things for him. One, it showed I was serious about returning to him. And two, it ensured

my ties to Storm were cut. Because no way would the club take me back if I betrayed them like this.



Eric Bones inspected me. Every bruise and cut on my face were noted, as was the way I grimaced each time I moved. Finally, he met my eyes. "You've left Storm?"

Joseph and William sat either side of me, their bodies rigid while they waited for my answer. William had spent the drive to the meeting point trying to drill his special brand of fear into me. I'd anticipated that, though, so I had done my best to prepare my mind for it. And I'd succeeded. So far.

"Yes."

His eyes widened and he whistled. "Fuck. Never thought I'd see the day, Nitro." Jerking his chin at my face, he said, "They do that to you?"

My mouth flattened into a hard line. I needed to get this shit over with as fast as possible. Sitting there discussing my club was not fucking helpful.

Before I could reply, Joseph stepped in. "No, I did that to him." Leaning his arms on the table, he added, "This is what happens when I'm not happy."

Eric's brows lifted and I took in his nervousness. I hoped to hell he was reconsidering his involvement with Joseph. With a shaky laugh, he said, "Remind me never to piss you off."

"You will do well to remember this," Joseph said. "Now, can we get down to business?"

Eric tapped his fingers on the table, jittery. "Umm, yeah, about that..."

"Yes?" Joseph's voice was low. Dangerous.

William leant forward. "You haven't changed your mind, have you, Eric? That wouldn't make Joseph very happy." There was no mistaking his threat. William had a presence that shrieked danger.

Eric stared at him. The fear rolled off him as he assessed William who had been silent up until that point. Swallowing hard, he said, "I just need a little more time to get some shit worked out."

"This happens today or not at all," Joseph said.

Eric's indecision was blatantly obvious in the way he said he wanted in on the deal while his body language said the complete opposite.

Raking his fingers through his hair, he said, "Man, honestly, I just need a few more days and then we're sweet. I don't have the cash for the guns yet."

Joseph fumed next to me. I watched as he splayed his hand out on the table in the way he did when his urge was actually to punch someone. It was one of his control mechanisms.

Silence filled the air for a minute while Joseph considered what Eric had said. Finally, he stood. "Three days, Eric. If you're not ready then, you're dead."

As William and I stood to leave with Joseph, I took in Eric's expression. He looked like he was about to shit his pants.

Greed was a dirty fucking thing. It made you do shit you thought you'd never do. I'd watched countless men fall after a relationship with it. I hoped that Eric gave up on this deal, but something told me that the threat of death wasn't something a man like him would be willing to risk. Men like him would rather sleep with the devil than give everything up for some peace.

I wasn't like Eric Bones.

I'd choose death over the devil every time.



I slept on the cement floor again that night. Not that I got many hours of actual sleep in. Probably two at the most. My body hurt too damn much on the floor. On top of that, I couldn't shut my mind off. I spent most of the night worrying about Tatum. I wasn't a praying man, but I prayed like fuck that she'd received the medical attention she needed. I also prayed that Marilyn was okay and that Renee and Dustin were dealing with it all.

When the sun rose, I paced the room while I waited for Joseph to arrive. He hadn't said anything to me when we'd returned from the meeting with Eric Bones. He'd been furious with Bones, and because I knew Joseph's evil mind well, I knew some of that fury stemmed from the fact my hand hadn't been forced to declare my loyalty to him over Storm. I'd been given a reprieve, and all I could hope was

that three days was enough time to show Joseph where my true loyalty lay.

He didn't show his face that morning, but William did. He turned up wearing his cargo pants, black tee, and combat boots, which told me what kind of day it was going to be.

Throwing clean clothes at me, he fired his orders. "You've got five minutes for a shower and then I want you waiting outside dressed in these. You and me are gonna spend the day together getting reacquainted."

I followed him to the shower and did what he'd said. The day was going to be tough enough as it was, I didn't need to start arguing with him early on.

When I was done, he led me to a Jeep that was parked in the large open area of the warehouse and indicated for me to get in the back. He joined me there while another man slid into the driver seat. We were then driven about an hour away to what I guessed was Joseph's base camp for soldier training. William blindfolded me at the beginning of the journey so I had no sense of where they'd taken me. When the blindfold was removed, we were parked in the middle of the bush.

"Out," William barked.

He then proceeded to put me through my paces. Their land was dense with trees, but they'd cleared a section that held the shit I knew was designed to break a man. Trenches of muddy water, pits of mud, steel cages over deep troughs of water that could drown a man, dangling wires designed to shock, and a bath of ice were some of William's favourite things. He could spend hours doing this part of his training. Brutalisation was designed to start the process of ripping a man's sense of self-worth from him. It was just one aspect of what William did. And he did it well.

I spent the next five hours following his orders. I ran his fucking obstacle course and didn't back down from any of it, even though my body was in excruciating pain the whole time. Hell, it had already been in a world full of hurt before I started. William's goal was clearly to kick that up a notch, and he succeeded.

At the end of the five hours, he came to me and grabbed me around the throat. "You think you can beat me, soldier?" I knew from the way he spat his words out that he was pissed at me.

I held his gaze triumphantly. What he didn't realise was that the day was exactly what I'd needed. My conditioned response to him was still there, but my mind was in a whole new place. They didn't understand that by hurting Tatum they'd splintered my mind and screwed with the wiring they'd put in place years ago. So while I still felt that stirring of fear when I looked at William, I was able to mentally withstand it. The five hours spent with him doing his training, and surviving those hours mentally strong as fuck at the end, only solidified my ability to ignore the fear he tried to draw out.

"I know I fucking can. I might have agreed to work with Joseph again, but it'll be a cold fucking day in hell before I fall at your feet," I gritted out. "Your power over me is dead."

His lips curled up into a snarl. "We'll see about that."

He dragged me to the ice bath and forced me into it. I wanted to fight him off and force *him* into it, but I knew I had to be smart. If I had any chance at saving myself and my family, I needed to wait for the perfect moment to kill both him and Joseph together.

I immediately began hyperventilating, drawing in very fast and deep breaths as the cold water surrounded me. William watched with smug satisfaction as I fought for air. My body was going into shock. I knew the process because he'd subjected me to it many times. I just had to get through these first few minutes, get my breathing under control and then last until he pulled me out of the water.

Easier said than fucking done.

"You think this is going to be a walk in the fucking park, Rhys?"

My teeth chattered as I stared up at him, still struggling for breath. I couldn't reply, but then, he wasn't looking for a reply. He was simply trying to strike fear.

Crouching, he said, "It's been a good nineteen years since I've had the pleasure of training you. My program has evolved and this is just the beginning, soldier."

I sucked air in as deep as I could. And I went to battle with my mind. He would never break me again. *Never*. As my muscles grew weak the longer he left me in there, and the pain in my body increased, I attempted to focus on Tatum. I imagined her smile, her eyes, her laugh, her fight. God, how I loved her fight. I'd never met a woman with the spirit she had. My thoughts drifted to the future. I wanted one with her. I knew that. When I escaped this hell, I would

make it happen. I'd give her everything she'd never had before. Starting off with space in my fucking wardrobe.

"Almost five minutes, Rhys. You ready to fall at my feet again?"

I blinked slowly as I processed his words. Five minutes was a long time to be in icy water. Almost too long. I knew that. Hypothermia could kill me if I didn't get out soon. And yet I refused to give in to William.

I waited it out. And eventually he was the one to crack. But not before my muscles became so weak I couldn't walk when he dragged me from the bath. My coordination took a hit, too. After he had pulled me out, he left me on the ground and organised for the Jeep to be brought over. He and the driver managed to get me into the back seat. William yanked my clothes off and wrapped me in a light blanket he had stashed in the back as the driver sped all the way back to the warehouse.

I drifted in and out of consciousness.

So cold.

So fucking cold.

TATUM

“XO” by Beyonce

I lay on my hospital bed, drugged up on heavy-duty painkillers the doctor had me taking for all the injuries Joseph had inflicted on me and watched as Monroe walked into the room.

Meeting my eyes with a small smile, she said, “She’s safe.”

I closed my eyes and exhaled, ignoring the pain in my face as I did that. Opening them again, I asked, “Dustin?”

She nodded. “He’s safe, too. And Renee assured me her mother is okay in the hospital. Renee has moved into Nitro’s house to be with Dustin until Nitro comes home.”

I stared at her in silence while tears filled my eyes and fear clogged my throat. “What if he doesn’t come home?” I whispered. My throat was scratchy and sore, which made it difficult to talk.

I’d been in hospital for two days after being treated for multiple injuries including fractured ribs and a collapsed lung. Monroe hadn’t left my side until today when I’d been conscious enough to ask her to check on Nitro’s family. I was relieved to know they were safe.

Monroe took hold of my hand. Gently, because it hurt, too. Every inch of me did. “Your guy is tough, babe. He’s going to get through whatever he has to and then he’s going to come home. King was here yesterday, and the club is looking for him. They’ll find him. You can’t keep much hidden from bikers.”

She was right. But a lot could have happened in two days. The longer he was gone, the more concerned I grew. I just prayed that when they did find him, he was alive. My heart hurt worse than my

entire body when I thought about him not making it out of that hellhole.

My phone rang and Monroe released my hand so she could answer it. After working out it was Billy, she held it up to my ear.

"Hey," I croaked.

"Fuck, Tatum," he said, pausing for a moment. I was fairly sure I heard devastation in his voice. "Thank fuck you're awake." His voice broke then. "When I saw you lying in that hospital bed last night with all those tubes in you and those fucking bruises and all that swelling...." He cleared his throat. "This shit has to stop. I swear to fucking God if anyone touches you again I will personally kill them."

A torrent of emotions flooded me, his agony my undoing. Tears streamed down my cheeks, which was a bloody nightmare because it fucking hurt to wipe them from my face. So I let them fall and just waited for them to dry. "I'm done with being beaten up, too, Billy." A little humour always helped. Especially with men who didn't know what to do with their emotions.

"Yeah," he said gruffly and then he added quietly, "Any news on Nitro?"

"No," I whispered, unable to speak any louder. I knew if I did, the tears would flow harder than they already were.

"Okay," he said. "You rest. I've been in touch with King and will help them find the motherfucking cunt who did this to you."

"Thanks, Billy." I jerked my head at Monroe to let her know I was done. Thank God Billy didn't have it in him to talk about shit, because I couldn't have handled any more. It hurt both my body and my soul to discuss this entire situation.

Monroe placed my phone down and picked up hers. Swiping it, she brought the Internet up as she settled into the seat next to the bed. Giving me a cheeky grin, she said, "Right, because you're going to be in here for days according to the doctor, and we need things to keep us occupied, we're going to surf this new singles site I found that has a lot of pierced cock on it." Her eyes lit up. "And when I say a lot, I mean a fuckload."

If I could have smiled without it hurting, I would have. Monroe knew me so well. She understood that I just didn't have it in me to acknowledge my feelings. She knew when to push me and when to

distract me. And it seemed her preferred way for the next few days was going to be with pierced cock.

"Okay, hit me. Show me what they've got," I whispered.

She grinned. "I knew I could count on you to help a sister out."

We'd been scrolling for a good fifteen minutes when King entered my room. I met his gaze and was taken aback at what I saw there. So much anguish. Something I never imagined King feeling.

"Tatum," he greeted me, coming towards the bed.

"Have you found him?" Monroe said as she shot out of the chair.

He shook his head. "No, not yet. But I've got half of fucking Sydney on it so it's just a matter of time."

Disappointment filled me. I'd hoped he had come with good news.

He moved closer to me. "I just wanted to see how you were doing," he said, surprising me even more. His gaze travelled over me and he hissed at what he saw. "I should have listened to him," he murmured.

"What about?" I said.

He let out a long breath as regret settled into every line on his face. "Nitro warned me about getting into bed with Joseph. I was so screwed up in the head over this fucking war we're in that I thought I knew best." Scrubbing his face, he added, "It's just another example of when I didn't know best. And now we all have to deal with the consequences."

This was a whole new side to King that I never imagined existed. The regret and anguish he expressed were real, and he seemed to feel it deeply.

Ignoring the pain it caused, I reached my hand out for his and when he gave it to me, I gently squeezed it. "We all fuck up in life, King. It's what we do after that counts."

He regarded me for a few moments, holding my hand in silence. When he placed it gently back on the bed, he said, "It's a bitter pill to swallow, though. It's a mistake I won't make again."

Monroe asked him a few questions, but I couldn't keep up with them. Tiredness took over and as much as I tried to keep my eyes open, I couldn't. The last thing I heard King say was, "As soon as we find him, Tatum will know."

Sleep claimed me then, and I drifted into a web of nightmares where I never saw Nitro again.

NITRO

"The Unforgiven" by Metallica

It had been three days since I'd seen Tatum. I'd dreamt of her during the fitful bouts of sleep I'd had in those days. Mostly I had nightmares about her not surviving Joseph's torture. In reality, I knew she would most likely have been okay once she'd sought medical treatment. But my mind liked to fuck with me and make me deal with my darkest fears. Never seeing her again was a nightmare that wouldn't let up.

Joseph still had me locked away in the tiny room where I'd been for days. The four walls closed in on me a little more each day, but still I managed to keep my shit together, even when I'd ended up with hypothermia the day before. Joseph had been furious with William over that. He'd abandoned his harsh treatment of me for the day and given me excellent medical care, which meant I was okay. Exhausted, but at least I was still alive.

The day passed slowly. William didn't show his face, but Joseph spent some time with me. He'd surprised me by talking about his plans for the Sydney arm of his operation. Sitting with him for those hours, listening to everything he'd said and pretending to be interested in it made me feel sick. But I'd got through it by telling myself that my chance to end all this would come soon enough. I just had to be patient.

He'd left me alone for hours in the afternoon. Stir crazy and me spent that time together. I was close to climbing the walls by the time he returned later that night.

Jerking his chin towards the door, he said, "Come. We have that meeting with Eric Bones and I want you there again."

I followed him down the long hallway and out into the open-plan area of the warehouse. There were fewer men there than I'd assumed. William was nowhere to be seen, and I wondered where he was. In total, there were only six men. They were unloading a semi-trailer full of large wooden boxes, stacking them onto pallets.

We cut through the area and exited the building into the dark night. The outside wasn't lit up and it took my eyes a moment to adjust, but when they did, I could see we were alone.

Joseph headed towards the Jeep parked at the end of the building. He insisted I walk ahead of him. Again, I wondered where William was.

"William not coming with us?" I asked.

"No." His reply was short and begged no more discussion, so I left it alone. I was intrigued as hell, though. Those two seemed as united as they had nineteen years ago, but maybe appearances were misleading.

We reached the Jeep, and as Joseph unlocked it, the sound of someone running our way drew our attention.

"Joseph, wait up!" William called out, and I heard the hiss of disapproval that left Joseph's mouth.

"I told you that Rhys and I would do this alone," he snapped.

William came to a halt when he reached us. Ignoring me, he said, "You need me."

"Not tonight I don't."

I watched as William exploded in front of me. For a man whose emotions were always so contained, this told me there was something very wrong between them.

"I have been with you from the very beginning, Joseph. Loyal to a fucking fault. No way am I going to sit back and watch while your asshole nephew worms his way into my spot. *No fucking way!*"

Rage contorted Joseph's face and he made the mistake I'd been waiting days for. He turned his back on me to roar something at William. I didn't take in what he said because I was too focused on the gun holstered at his waist. His shirt covered it, but I made out the shape.

There was no time for thinking; I had to react. Reaching out, I pulled his gun from the holster at the same time as I hooked my arm around his neck and squeezed him hard. His fingers curled around

my arm, trying to pry it away, but I tightened my grip, determined not to let go, even if every movement hurt my aching body.

My intent had been to shoot William first, before he could react, but the fucker's reflexes were faster than I thought they would be. I pointed the gun at him while he aimed his at me.

"Put the fucking gun down, Rhys, or I *will* shoot you!" he bellowed.

Adrenaline surged through me. It blocked out enough of the pain I was in so I could focus on what I had to do. "You let me kill him and his business is yours, William." It was a lie. I would never allow William to walk away from this alive.

Joseph tried to fight me off, his body jerking in my hold. "He's lying, William!" he yelled.

"Am I? Tell me, William, what have you received in return for your decades of loyalty to this man? Besides him fucking your wife, that is." I had no idea if that was true, but I didn't doubt it could be.

When William froze, I knew I'd hit gold.

"Lies!" Joseph roared. "It's a goddam lie and you know it."

I watched William closely, waiting for his attention to be distracted enough for me to shoot him. However, his army training was too ingrained and he didn't take his eyes off me for one second.

"I'm not sure I believe you, Joseph," he said. "I know for a fact that you've slept with—"

A shot rang out in the night air and a bullet cut William off. He stopped talking and fell to the ground at the same time as a voice yelled out, "Nitro, we've got you covered, brother."

King.

Joseph continued to struggle in my hold, and since I didn't have William to contend with, I turned and shoved Joseph up against the car. Our eyes locked and in his I saw his huge ego. He didn't believe it was the end for him.

Pointing my gun at his head, I said, "You think your men are going to come out here and save your ass, don't you?"

"Of course they are, Rhys. I don't know why you thought you would get away with this."

The sound of heavy footsteps filled my ears and then King spoke. "You underestimated my club, Joseph."

Multiple gunshots sounded from inside the warehouse, and I knew Joseph's men wouldn't be an issue. His eyes widened at the

realisation.

"That's what happens when you believe in your own importance a little too much," I said.

He managed to catch me by surprise when he shoved hard against me. I stumbled backwards, my heart hammering in my chest.

The moment had come.

The one that should have happened nineteen years ago.

My regret over not putting him in the ground then would never ease. Not since I knew the full extent of what he'd done to my family.

As I stumbled backwards, time slowed, and a movie reel of memories played in my mind. All the evil he'd perpetrated. My eyes met his and I screamed my hatred at him silently. Pointing the gun at his temple as he came at me, I shot him.

The reel of memories stopped.

My breathing slowed.

My body stilled.

King's hand on my arm snapped me back to attention. He didn't speak. He just nodded at me. Then he said, "I'll give you a few minutes, but we need to get out of here soon."

I looked down at Joseph and breathed through my rushing emotions. So many fucking emotions. They flooded my entire body and I didn't know what to do with them. After two decades of shutting them down, it was like a sucker punch.

"Fuck," I roared as my body jerked in agony. "You fucking asshole! You screwed us up and I never fucking knew just how much."

I bent at the waist and placed my hands on my knees. Sucking air down in long gasps, I attempted to gather my thoughts. My head was a clusterfuck and I had no idea how long it would take me to sort through it. All I knew was that everything had changed. Every-fucking-thing.

Straightening, I lifted the gun again and pumped more bullets into Joseph's head.

I then took one last deep breath.

Joseph was the past.

My future stretched ahead of me and never again would I allow anyone to hurt those I loved.

TATUM

“Halo” by Beyonce

“Mum!”

Where was she?

I ran to her bedroom to find her.

She wasn’t there.

I searched the whole house.

She was nowhere.

Tears fell down my cheeks as my body crumpled against the wall.

My heart raced in my chest.

She was always home. She never left us alone after school.

Chris entered the room and I knew from his face and the way his shoulders hunched over a little that he didn’t have anything good to tell me.

“Mum’s gone,” he said, waving a piece of paper in the air, his eyes sad. “And she’s never coming back.”

“Vegas, I’ve got you.” Nitro’s voice cut into my nightmare, and I blinked my eyes open.

My heart beat faster as I stared up at him. I wasn’t sure if he was really there or part of my dream. The sunlight filtered through the curtain, though, slanting rays of sunshine across his bruised face.

It was him.

He really was standing in front of me.

My nightmare slayer.

He stopped me when I tried to sit up. Shaking his head, he said, “Don’t move, it’ll hurt too much.”

My mind raced with a million questions and my body felt like it would burst from the happiness rushing through it. “How? When did you get here? Is he dea—”

He placed a finger to my lips, silencing me. "It's early still. Go back to sleep. We'll talk later."

Like fuck.

I'd been waiting for him to come home for days. There was no way I could sleep even if I wanted to.

"I'm not sleeping, so you should just start talking now." Thank goodness my throat wasn't as sore anymore. It'd be easier to argue with him if necessary.

His lips twitched. "There's my girl," he rumbled quietly. Sitting on the chair that had been Monroe's for days, he said, "He's dead." It was as if the words had been ripped from the darkest part of his soul. I felt every sliver of his torment.

Overwhelming relief hit me like a tonne of bricks. My tears fell uncontrollably, and Nitro reached out to wipe them away. I stopped him and said, "It hurts to touch my face."

He moved his hand away, and I caught the clench of his fist as he did. His eyes travelled the length of my body before he looked back at my face. "I'm so sorry, Tatum."

The raw agony I heard in his voice and the devastation I saw in his eyes only made me cry harder. I reached for him, grasping for any contact. It hurt so much to do, but I didn't care. I needed his skin. His touch. When I found his hand, I linked my fingers through his. The instant calm I felt was what I'd been searching for. "You have nothing to be sorry for. If it wasn't for you, I might not be here now."

"If it wasn't for me, you would never have ended up like this."

I stared at him, letting my gaze trace his face. This man had been to hell and back for me and his family, and yet he had no care for himself. All he worried about was us.

"We're going to have to agree to disagree on this one, champ. These bruises and all this shit you see... it will disappear and heal. But my life? You gave me that, in ways you might never understand, and for that, I will be eternally grateful."

His gaze dropped to my lips and lingered there for a long time. "I want to kiss you," he murmured, deep in thought. He found my eyes again. "I won't, but I need you to know how fucking much I want to right now."

My tears that had almost dried up began flowing again. I was beginning to think they might never stop. Usually I hated crying in

front of others, but with Nitro, I let them fall and didn't think twice. He was my safe place.

Moving closer to the bed, he gave my hand a gentle squeeze. The way he looked at me made me think he was about to say something that would make me cry more, but in the end, he said, "Did you just call me champ?"

It was such an out-of-the-blue question that I couldn't help but laugh. "Yeah, I did."

His lips curled into a smile, but he didn't say anything.

"Is that okay?" I asked.

"You can call me anything you fucking want, Vegas. Gotta say, though, I'm not sure about you using it when I make you come."

I grinned. "Let's test it out. See what you think."

He chuckled. And then he did something that made my cold, dark heart melt. He stood and gently placed a kiss on my forehead. A lingering kiss. It was as if he'd wrapped every tender emotion he could find in that kiss and given them to me.

"I never want to lose you." His eyes met mine and there was a fierce determination there that hadn't been there a moment ago. "You're mine, Tatum."

I pulled his face down to my level. Our lips didn't meet, but our souls did. "You're mine, too."



I fell asleep, waking again at lunchtime. Monroe sat next to me instead of Nitro and I frantically searched the room for him. I needed him to be there.

Monroe touched my hand. "He's stepped out for a minute, babe. He'll be back soon."

I took a deep breath. "Fuck, Roe, for a minute there I thought I'd dreamt him being here this morning. My heart can't take much more of this."

"Vegas."

My gaze immediately flicked to the door to find Nitro standing there watching me. He'd clearly heard what I said and seemed affected by it. I regretted that, but it was the truth—my heart really couldn't take too much more. I'd gone from keeping everyone out to

cracking myself wide open for him. And it hurt so damn much to think of him not being there.

"I'm just waiting for a call from King. You good until then?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

He shifted his gaze to Monroe, and they had a moment before he turned and left.

She turned to face me, her eyes wide. "Jesus, sister, that man has gone all territorial over you. I've never seen anything like it in my life."

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"He turned up late last night, and I mean *late*. Like, it was really fucking clear he wasn't waiting for this morning to come and see you. The nurse tried to send him away, but he refused to leave. He made a song and dance about it and they eventually gave in. I was almost asleep when he woke me up and told me to go home. Told me he had this now, which I'm guessing means he has *you* now. I argued with him for a while, but honestly, I don't know how you do it, he just doesn't fucking give in."

I smiled. "You feel my pain. He's a bossy fucker sometimes." I couldn't deny it, though; I loved the fact he wanted to be here that badly.

"*Sometimes?*"

Laughing, I conceded, "Okay, maybe more than sometimes."

She leant back in her seat and crossed her legs while angling her body towards me. "I got here just after nine this morning, and he did leave for just over an hour to go home and shower. Other than that, he's been here the whole time watching over you like a hawk." She dropped her voice. "I've gotta tell you, it's kinda hot. I think I might add bossy to my list of required things for my man."

"So you want a bossy guy who knows when to back off and when to take charge, who picks up after himself and has a pierced dick?"

She shook her head at me like I was clueless. "Babe, when you get out of here, you and I need to sit down so I can show you my list. There are a *lot* more things on it than just that."

I shifted and cried out as a shot of pain hit. It caused me to suck in a breath and close my eyes while I panted through it. When I opened my eyes again, Nitro stood in front of me, concern all over his face.

"The nurse is on her way," he said. "What else do you need?"

"Nothing, I'm good."

He pursed his lips. "You're in a hospital, in a shitload of pain. There's gotta be something I can get for you to help take your mind off it."

I lifted a brow. "You're in a shitload of pain, too, Nitro. How about you sit your ass down and just be with me? That would help me take my mind off it."

He gave me the look that told me I'd amused him. "We're not talking about me. We're discussing you. Give me something here, Vegas."

"Oh dear Lord," Monroe said. "You two are too much for me. I might head into work and see what I've missed over the last few days if you're cool with that, babe."

I nodded. "Yes, you should go. But bring me more Milo tonight, okay?"

"Fuck," Nitro muttered. "I ask you what you want and you give me nothing. I can get you fucking Milo." He stared at me with frustration, and I had to contain my laughter.

Monroe grinned. "She has a way of annoying the fuck out of us, right? Never wants to be a burden, blah, blah, blah. Good luck, you're gonna need it. But I'm telling you now, big fella, you bring her Milo, and I'll make you hurt. The Milo is our thing."

With that, she grabbed her bag and exited the room while I laughed and Nitro stared after her with an expression I couldn't quite read.

When he turned back to me, he jerked his head in the direction she'd left. "You two definitely have the same genes."

"Does that mean you like her?" Randall had hated Monroe. He couldn't stand her "tell it like it is" manner and it had been awful trying to bring them together.

"I don't think we're gonna have a problem, but she's dreaming if she thinks I'm not getting you Milo."

"You didn't really answer my question," I said softly, realising how important it was to me that he got on with her. They were my two people; I needed them to like each other.

"Vegas, anyone who's important to you is important to me. But in answer to your question, yes, I like her. I imagine she'll frustrate

the hell out of me the same as you do, but I respect a woman who doesn't take shit, and Monroe strikes me as that kind of woman."

He had me at "anyone who's important to you is important to me." That was what family did for each other. And it was exactly what I needed to hear. Family was everything.

NITRO

“Broken” by Seether

The sound of my boots on the hospital lino was the only noise to be heard as I made the long trek to Marilyn’s room. I’d spent the day with Tatum and only left once I knew she was safe with Monroe. I’d ignored the filthy glare Monroe gave me when she spied the Milo tin in the room. And I made no apologies to her. No fucking way was I not getting Tatum what she wanted. I almost laughed, though, when she placed a Milo tin next to mine. I liked the fact she stood her ground.

I rounded a corner and a few moments later entered Marilyn’s room. She sat in the chair in the corner with her eyes closed, but they fluttered open when she heard me.

She shot out of the chair and came to me, flinging her arms around me. “Oh my God! I thought I’d never see you again!” She sobbed into my chest as I ignored the bolt of pain her hug inspired and wrapped my arms around her.

Smoothing her hair, I waited for her to let me go. I’d hold her for as long as she needed, though.

When she stopped sobbing and moved out of my embrace, she looked up at me with a questioning expression. I knew what she was asking, and I nodded. “He can’t hurt you ever again, Lynny. I made sure of it.”

Her hand flew to her face and she burst into tears again. I pulled her back to me, and we held each other for an eternity. We’d been through so much shit together. We were always there for each other to the best of our abilities and always would be.

With my arms tight around her and my hand cradling her head, I said, "You should have told me what he did to you."

Stiffening, she tried to pull away.

"No," I said as I held her tighter. "Don't do that. You have nothing to be ashamed about or to hide from. *He* did that shit to you. You did nothing wrong. *You* don't hide away. Ever."

Her hands gripped my shirt and she buried her head in my chest while she cried.

"You hear me, Lynny? This isn't on you. I'll do everything in my power to help you believe that." I took a step back and forced her to look up at me. Her tear-stained face shattered me all over again. "Promise me you'll let me help."

She nodded. "I promise."

I stayed with her for a good couple of hours, watching television together and talking a little about her sessions with her psychologist. It was the first time she'd ever confided any of that type of stuff with me, and I felt like it was a whole new start for us and for our family. If we could find a way to move out of the darkness that had always consumed us, it really would be a new beginning.



King met me in the corridor outside Tatum's room when I arrived back there after visiting Marilyn. We hadn't spoken a great deal since the night before. He'd driven me to the hospital in almost complete silence and dropped me off, telling me he'd be back when he could. I'd gotten the impression he was overwhelmed by the whole situation, which was odd for King.

His eyes held an apology as he looked at me. Stepping closer, he jerked his chin towards Tatum. "She seems to be doing better."

"Yeah. She told me you've been checking in on her. I appreciate that."

He scrubbed his face. "Fuck, it's the least I can fucking do, Nitro. This shit is on me. He used our delivery time as his opportunity to kidnap Tatum. She'd be okay if I hadn't agreed to that deal."

"No, this shit is on Joseph. It wouldn't have changed the course of any of this if Storm hadn't taken that deal. He's been coming for me for years. I just didn't realise it." I recalled Tatum telling me that

we can't hold people responsible for our choices in life. I wouldn't hold King responsible for Joseph's actions.

"Thank fuck for Eric Bones. He was the one who helped me find you. Said something about a deal he was supposed to make with Joseph and that he'd changed his mind about getting into bed with him."

I frowned. "How did Eric know where the warehouse was?"

"Turns out he's more switched on than we ever gave him credit for. He had some of his guys follow Joseph after he met with him a few days ago. Told me you were leaving Storm and thought it was strange, which was another trigger for him to think twice about the deal. He came to check that with me, thank fuck."

Monroe stepped out of the room, taking in King before looking at me. "Tatum's asleep so I'm going to head home. Are you staying?"

"Yeah. I'm not leaving this hospital until she does, except for when you're here."

"I've decided that even though you pissed me off with the Milo thing, I like you. You're exactly what Tatum needs in her life."

King interrupted. "The Milo thing?"

She turned to him. "Oh, you have no idea, dude." Pointing her thumb at me, she said, "This guy's trying to go all hero and shit on my girl, which is fine and all, but I draw the line at him taking over my responsibilities. Maybe you could help a girl out and have a quiet word with him. Tell him to back the fuck off with the Milo."

With that, she slung her handbag over her shoulder, gave me one last pointed look and left us.

King watched her go until he couldn't see her anymore. "Fuck, she's enough to get a man's dick to stand up and beg for more."

"You got a thing for redheads, brother?"

His eyes lit up. "That, and a mouth that tells it like it is." He whistled. "And those curves are something fucking else."

"You got a pierced dick, King? From what I've heard, that's what she's looking for."

His mouth stretched across his face in a smile that told me more about King than I ever needed to know. Lifting his chin at me, he said, "You get back to your woman. I'm heading to the clubhouse for a bit. I'll swing by again in the morning."

"Where are we at with Gambarro?"

"We're working with Dragon keeping tabs on what Gamarro's up to. I'm not sure about shit where Silver Hell's concerned. We might be working with them, but no way in hell do I trust those motherfuckers. We'll see what happens, but I've told the boys to stay alert and be ready for anything. Who knows when they could turn on us?"

"I agree."

He was quiet for a moment. "I should have listened to you, Nitro. Should have trusted you when you warned me about Joseph. I won't make that mistake again," he said solemnly.

I nodded and watched him leave. Joseph took a lot from me, but we all learned some lessons in the process. I'd always respected King and been loyal to him, but his loyalty to me was more than I'd ever had from anyone outside of my family. And it only strengthened mine in return.



Tatum eyed my house as I pulled the ute into the driveway. "Does this mean you're *not* taking me home?"

I smiled at her while she watched me with eyes that twinkled her happiness. The doctor had allowed her to finally leave the hospital that morning, and I'd told her I would take her home. "You got a problem with staying here, Vegas?"

She shrugged casually. "No problem, except you've got no furniture and no room for any of my clothes."

I leant over and caught her lips in a kiss. Thank fuck I could do that again since her pain wasn't as bad. I needed those lips like I fucking needed air. "You should get your ass out of this car and see for yourself. I bought some damn furniture."

Her eyes widened. "You did? When?"

I shook my head at her. "Fuck, always with the twenty questions."

"You're lucky you've got bruises and shit on you or else I'd smack you right now."

"My bruises are nothing, Tatum."

She cupped my cheek, looking at the marks on my face. "You keep saying that, but I know he would have hurt you worse than

me. Why do you keep shutting down on me when I bring it up?"

"Because I won't give that motherfucker any more opportunities to hurt us. Yeah, he hurt me, but it was nothing compared to the pain of watching him hurt you. I won't talk about him with you again. That part of our lives together is done."

"Our lives together... I like the sound of that," she said softly, almost as if she wasn't sure what it meant or didn't fully believe it.

"Make no mistake, I intend to spend the rest of my life with you, Vegas."

Her hand moved to curl around my neck. "Look at you all bossy and shit. Do I even get a say in that?"

I'd heard of men thinking they owned women and I'd never bought into that bullshit, but sitting there, with my woman in front of me asking if she got a say in me spending my life with her caused some part of my brain to fire weirdly. As far as I was concerned, she was mine. No other man would ever touch her again; I'd make fucking sure of it. Jesus, if I could have laid her out on the back seat and shown her who she belonged to, I fucking would have. Instead, I showed her with my mouth, and when I was finished, I growled, "You always get a say, but if you think I'm ever going to listen to anything but a yes, you're kidding yourself. I'll fucking follow you to the ends of the earth if I have to. You were made for me and I was made for you."

She beamed at me. Fucking beamed. And then she made my whole fucking life when she said, "I was. Now shut up and show me where I can put my clothes. And it better not be just a drawer. I'm gonna be needing a wardrobe for the shit I'm moving in."

TATUM

"Gone, Gone, Gone" by Phillip Phillips

Six weeks later

"Oh God!" Posey exclaimed as she doubled over with laughter. "I can't believe you said that to him, Monroe."

Monroe lifted her mimosa to her lips and drank some before saying, "It was true, though. Look, if a guy's gonna get his wang out after boasting about how big it is, it better be big. His wasn't. So I told him."

"I have to agree with Roe," I said. "Don't brag about shit you have no right bragging about."

Posey wiped her tears from her eyes and drank some of her wine. "You know, Friday afternoon drinks is the highlight of my week. Thank you for letting me join in."

Monroe lifted a brow. "Even if it's Milo Friday?"

I smacked her arm. "Shut the fuck up. I told you why it had to be Milo Friday this week."

"I just hope that Nitro doesn't think it's gonna be Milo Friday every damn week."

"This has nothing to do with h—"

"I don't know anything about Milo Friday," Nitro said, joining us at his kitchen table. His eyes met mine and although he wasn't smiling, they held affection.

"Really?" Monroe asked, perking up as if there was some juicy gossip to be had.

I sighed. "Okay so maybe I left some details out," I admitted, not wanting to be having this conversation in front of Nitro. Damn Monroe and her bullshit detector.

"Spill, sister," she demanded.

Nitro settled in with his arms folded across his chest. He knew I reserved every Friday night for the girls and had been surprised when I said it wasn't on this week and that he should keep the night free to hang out with me.

"Can we discuss this later?" I begged, widening my eyes at her so she'd get the idea that I *really* didn't want to talk about it.

She ignored me and shook her head. "Nope."

"Yeah, start talking, Vegas. I'm interested, too."

I looked at him again. God, I loved it when he called me Vegas. It had irritated the hell out of me when we'd first met, but not anymore. Nitro didn't do nicknames with anyone and he certainly didn't do terms of endearment unless you counted *kiddo*, which he called Renee. I'd come to realise how special Vegas was, and my cold heart treasured it. Not that my heart could be classified as cold anymore. It was warm as fuck these days, thanks to him.

"Okay, but you have to promise me you'll pretend like you didn't know," I said to him.

He frowned. "About what?"

I hopped off my stool and walked to him. Sliding my arms around his waist, I said, "Dustin's cooking you dinner tonight as a surprise thank you for helping him find his own place and moving him in. He didn't want you to know about it, so I promised him I would get you there without telling you why. That's why I couldn't do drinks tonight. It's the only night off he has this week."

His hand landed on my ass. When he spoke, his voice was all gravelly. "You amaze me."

"Why?"

"The way you love my family. It means a lot to me."

"Family's everything," I said softly.

"Yeah, they are." He dropped his mouth to mine and kissed me. "I'm gonna make it worth your while later to have missed Friday drinks."

I loved it when Nitro made me dirty promises like that. He never failed to deliver. "What are you gonna do?"

Monroe cleared her voice behind us. "Okay, you two, round that shit up. No one needs to hear about sex when they aren't getting any."

Nitro smacked my ass and grinned. Placing his mouth to my ear, he murmured, "Pussy on my tongue is a good way to start, I think."

Pushing him away, I said, "Stop teasing me. Go and have a shower and calm yourself down. And get ready to go out."

He kept grinning as he backed away holding his hands up in defence. "I don't wanna get started without you."

Monroe groaned. "Stop talking, Nitro, and keep fucking walking."

The sound of him laughing as he walked down the hallway filled the house. He'd started doing that a lot more often lately. It had to be one of my favourite sounds ever.

"Posey, you wanna come get a drink with me? I can't handle Milo Friday any longer," Monroe said as I turned back to join them. She may have been grumbling, but the smile she gave me was full of love.

I blew her a kiss. "I love you, too, Roe."

"Yeah, I know, sister. I love you, too. But you need to get your ass in that shower with your man. I'm not the kind of woman to ever get in the way of that." And by *that*, I knew she meant so much more than sex. Monroe might have referred almost everything she said back to sex, but she was as deep as they came when it had to do with relationships. She loved love. And she loved me being with Nitro.

I said my goodbyes, walking them out to Monroe's car and then made my way inside to the bathroom. The shower was already running and steam greeted me when I opened the door. Nitro liked his showers as hot as possible, and I had trouble seeing. But I could hear him.

The sound of him jerking off shot heat straight to my core. When he finally came into view, the first thing I saw was his back muscle flexing. He rested one forearm against the shower wall and his head hung forward while he pumped his cock with his hand.

I stood watching silently, turned-on as hell. My eyes greedily lapped up every inch of his powerful naked body. His tight ass that I loved to grip onto while he fucked me; those muscular arms that I loved around me; his strong legs that often held us up while he

slammed into me against the wall. I could watch Nitro getting himself off for hours.

"Vegas..." he growled. "Get your lips around my dick."

My clothes were already half off and once I was naked, I stepped into the shower with him. I slid an arm around his waist as I moved to position myself between him and the wall.

His eyes met mine.

His hand continued to work his cock.

My whole body sang with desire.

"Fuck." He groaned as water streamed over us. "I've been thinking about you all fucking day."

Catching him around the neck, I pulled his face down to mine so I could kiss him. "Are you close to coming?"

He nodded, and I could tell by the way his body tensed that he was. "Yeah," he forced out, his breathing ragged.

"Well, champ, I'm not wrapping my lips around you. If your dick's that hard, I want it inside me."

Amusement flashed in his eyes and he pressed his mouth to mine again, demanding another kiss. When he was done, he muttered, "Champ...."

I grinned as I looped my arms around his neck. He let his dick go so he could take hold of my ass and lift me. Wrapping my legs around him, I closed my eyes as he thrust inside me. "Fuck," I cried and held on tight while he gave me what we both craved.

His fury.

And when we were done, he reminded me why I loved him. He pulled out and took hold of my face with both his hands. After he kissed me for a long time, he said, "I love you."

He gave me his unconditional love.

Loving Nitro was easy because there was nothing required in return. When he loved, he simply loved.

NITRO

“I’m In” by Keith Urban

“I got my licence!” Renee squealed as she flashed it at us. Her whole face lit up with happiness, and it hit me fair in the gut. It was about damn time our family had as much happiness as we’d had recently. It’d been almost two months since Joseph’s death and instead of waking each day wondering what bad shit would happen, I woke only thinking of the good in my life.

Tatum grinned from where she sat on the couch next to me. We’d both finished work early and had spent the afternoon in bed and then in front of the television. She’d brought some work home and was finishing it off when Renee came barging through the front door.

“Fantastic!” Tatum said. “First go, too. Must be all those hours you did with me that helped you.”

After I insisted she clock up more than the required 120 hours, Renee had worked her ass off and finished up with more than 150 hours, a lot of which had been done with Tatum.

I stood and moved to her. Pulling her into a hug, I said, “I’m proud of you, kiddo. Gotta say, though, there was no doubt in my mind that you’d pass.”

Tears misted her eyes and she swallowed hard. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“What for? Showing you how to drive? That wasn’t hard. You’ve got nothing to thank me for.”

She shook her head. “No, for being my dad. I know that sounds weird because my mum’s your sister and all, but as far as I’m concerned, you’re my dad. You did all the hours, lost all the sleep, cared

for me when I was sick, gave up your house for us, paid for a lot of shit. You did all the things a dad does, so you're mine."

I took all that in and let it settle deep in my bones. I'd never wanted to be a dad. Never. It wasn't in my life plan, and Tatum had told me it wasn't in hers either, so there would be no kids for me. But this... this was everything. I pressed a kiss to her forehead and then pulled back to meet her gaze again. "I got the better end of the deal. I got you."

Tears slid down her face, but she smiled up at me and gave me her trademark wit. "True. Your life would have no meaning without me."

I grinned at her. "What time's your mum coming over? I need to get Tatum's ass moving and in that kitchen if it's gonna be soon."

"I thought you were cooking tonight," Tatum called out.

I turned my grin towards her. "You wore me out this afternoon, Vegas. A man needs to recuperate before he can spend hours cooking."

She rolled her eyes. "If Dustin can manage to make every single thing I love to eat for one meal, you can surely manage to cook a damn roast."

I placed my hand over my heart. "You wound me, woman."

A knock on the door interrupted us and I headed down the hallway to answer it. I was surprised to find Billy fucking Jones on the other side.

"Billy," I greeted him. We'd kept a civil distance to each other since Tatum had moved in, and while I'd come around a little in my opinion of him, we were far from friends.

He seemed as uncomfortable to be there as I was to have him there. Holding a folder out to me, he said, "These are for Tatum. They're documents she needs for the case she's working on."

I took the folder from him. "I'll pass them on."

"Thanks."

Silence descended on us. It was awkward as fuck while I waited for him to leave. I considered calling out to Tatum to let her know he was there, but I was a greedy asshole and didn't want to share the time I had with her.

He turned to leave, but stopped and glanced back at me. "She's a lot happier now."

I nodded, not really wanting to have this conversation with him.

"Because of you, I mean. She was never happy before you." He paused. "Don't fuck that up."

I clenched my jaw. I didn't need Billy Jones coming to my house and telling me not to fuck something up that I never would. I gripped the door, ready to close it. The only thing stopping me from slamming it in his face was Tatum.

He didn't wait for my response before leaving. Not that there would have been a response. At this point, the best I could manage was to simply keep the peace and not punch the fuck out of him. I knew Tatum hoped for more, but she never pushed me, and I appreciated the hell out of that. Who knew what the future held. I doubted Billy and me would ever be friendly, but Tatum had a way of getting me to do shit I never thought I would.

"Nitro!" Renee called out. I closed the door and headed back inside. "Mum's on her way now, so you should start cooking."

I passed Billy's folder to Tatum. "Billy dropped this off."

She smiled as she took it. "Thanks." She didn't appear surprised that he'd come or that I hadn't called her out to see him.

I narrowed my eyes at her. "Did you know he was coming over?"

She shrugged. "I figured he might."

"Fuck," I muttered under my breath. "You'll be the death of me, Vegas."

She waved me away with a laugh. "Go cook. I'm hungry."

Fifteen minutes later I slid a roast into the oven and thought about how my life had changed. Only for her would I be in a kitchen cooking a damn roast when I'd rather be on the couch with her tits pressed against me. She'd fast become the woman I spent my time trying to make happy; the woman I worried incessantly over; the one I planned my future around and the woman I wanted by my side until the day I died.



"You've been holding out on me, Nitro," Tatum said over dinner that night. "Who knew you could cook so well? Roast is one of my favourites so I think you're gonna be cooking it a lot more from now on."

Dustin frowned. "I never knew roast was one of your favourites. I'll make it next time I cook for you."

Tatum gave him a smile, but it wasn't the kind of smile I saw women give him all the time. The type of smile that said they felt sorry for him or that they thought it was a shame that a good-looking guy like him didn't have the intelligence they were looking for. Tatum's smile was genuine and it said she appreciated his thoughtfulness and that she loved him for it.

I loved *her* for that smile.

"Thank you, Dustin. But honestly, roast can be so expensive. I don't expect you to cook it for me."

His face lit up as he thought that over. "I could substitute the steak for roast every now and then. That would work."

I grinned at him. "Great idea, man."

He had the family over for dinner once a week since he'd moved out. Every Thursday night was Dustin's night. Unless he had to work, but generally he had Thursdays and Fridays off. He didn't cook Tatum's favourites every week, but rather he alternated between everyone's favourites. I had to hand it to Billy—he'd given Dustin a stable job that seemed to be doing wonders for his confidence.

"Roast is one of my favourites, too," Marilyn said. "But I prefer pork over lamb."

Dustin's eyes widened. "I never knew that!"

That was because Marilyn had kept so much about herself locked away inside for years. We hadn't known the real Marilyn. She'd been attending her psychologist appointments religiously and working hard at turning her life around. She'd even finally gone back to work five weeks prior and managed to find a way to get through her days there regardless of the anxiety she experienced. I was so fucking proud of her.

"Pork crackling!" Tatum said, smiling at Marilyn. Turning to Dustin, she asked, "Tell me you know how to make good crackling. I will love you forever if you do."

"I can google that," he said, and I had to chuckle at his enthusiasm. But then, that was Dustin. Always trying to make others happy. I guessed he took that upon himself when everyone in his family had been so damn unhappy.

I stretched one arm across the back of Tatum's chair and reached for my beer with the other arm. Whispering in her ear while everyone else was talking and laughing, I said, "Marry me."

Her head snapped around and she looked at me with shock. "What?"

I grinned. "I said, marry me."

She stared in silence for a beat. And then my woman let loose on my ass. "That's a shitty proposal, Nitro. If you want me to commit to you, you're going to have to do about a hundred times better than that for a proposal."

My grin grew, and I kissed her before she could push me away. "I was just testing the waters, Vegas."

She narrowed her eyes at me. "You are so full of shit it isn't funny."

"And that right there is why I'm gonna marry your ass one day. Your fight gets me so fucking hard." I said it loud enough so that only she could hear.

"God, you are so romantic sometimes," she grumbled.

I kissed her again. "You wouldn't know what to do with romance."

"Maybe you should try it one day and we'll see just how much further it gets you with me."

"You're telling me it'll get me laid faster or more often?"

She smacked me, but I saw the laughter in her eyes. "I'm telling you that it might just blow your mind. Men have no fucking clue what the smallest romantic gesture is capable of achieving."

I kept my gaze on her while I sucked back some beer. If she wanted romance, I'd fucking give it to her. But not because I wanted to get laid or because I wanted my ring on her finger. I'd give it to her because it would make her happy and that was all I cared about. A smile on Tatum's face was like the sun shining on you when all you'd had was rain for weeks. And when she laughed... that shit was everything I lived for these days.



Tatum handed Devil a glass of Coke and said, "You wanna stay for dinner?"

Devil and I had been out in my shed for hours working on my bike. We were almost finished when Tatum arrived home from a day out shopping with Monroe.

"What you cooking, gorgeous?"

"I'm not cooking tonight. Nitro is."

He grinned at me. "I like your style, brother. Keeping your woman happy by cooking. Smart move."

Tatum knew that Devil and I always gave each other shit and clearly she decided she wanted in on that when she leant across and said to him, "It's not his cooking that keeps me happy. It's all in the way he uses that tongue of his when he l—"

Devil held up his hand and cut her off. "Nope, don't need to know any more. But fuck, Tatum, you sure you don't have a sister? I need a chick with a dirty mouth like yours."

She laughed, but before she could reply, King entered my backyard and came our way. He had a woman with him. I squinted to get a better look at her and stood there stunned when I realised who it was.

"Is that Jen?" Devil asked just as I worked it out.

"Yeah, brother, that's Jen."

"Fuck, I never saw that coming."

King had his arm around her as if they were together, which surprised me because they'd been apart for six years. The year after he'd become president had been turbulent for them, and she'd walked away to be with another man. It had shattered him.

"King," I greeted him and then glanced at Jen and lifted my chin at her. "Jen."

"Hey, Nitro," she said, her voice shaky. She clung to King like she never wanted to let go.

Tension rolled off King's body while he eyed Tatum. "Can you do me a favour, Tatum?"

"Sure." She clearly sensed the tension too.

He let go of Jen and said, "Can you take Jen inside and make her some tea. Peppermint if you've got it by any chance. I need a minute with the boys."

Tatum gave Jen a smile. "I'm not sure if we've got peppermint, but I'll check."

"Thank you," Jen said softly. Something was very wrong with her. Jen wasn't a soft woman. Hell, I recalled screaming matches be-

tween her and King that had lasted days.

Once they'd left us, King scrubbed his face and swore. "You got a beer, Nitro?"

"Yeah." I grabbed one out of the fridge in the shed and came back to him. "What the fuck is going on, King? Because from what I can see, something bad is going down here."

He drank over half the bottle in one go and then took a deep breath. "Only Kick knows this, but the guy Jen left me for used to beat her. Pretty badly. She finally left him and we found her a safe house in Broken Hill. Through Brian. Something got her spooked there so she left and moved in with a friend in Goulburn. The bastard tracked her down a few months ago, and she called me at midnight one night, scared out of her mind. I've been spending time with her the last couple of months trying to make sure she was safe. She refused to move back to Sydney, which pissed me off, but I couldn't force her to come back. Then last night I got a call that he's threatened her again, so I put my fucking foot down. She's moving in with me until I can find this motherfucker and fix the problem."

"So you want us to help with that?" Devil said.

"Yeah, but as well as that, Dragon just gave word that he's ready to start the attacks on Gambarro."

The last couple of months had been quiet on the Gambarro front. He'd been dealing with a police investigation into shit that involved his businesses and it had kept him busy, which worked out for Silver Hell and us. It had given us the time we needed to prepare ourselves to take him and his organisation down.

"We're ready for this, King," I said.

"Yeah, but not when I need to give my attention to Jen. I told Dragon I wanted to wait, but he's not listening. He wants this shit to start on Monday."

Two days.

"So what's the plan?" I asked. "And what did Hyde say?"

"I can't get hold of Hyde. That's another problem we have."

In my opinion, that was the worst news out of all this. Hyde had been off the radar a lot lately. Devil and I had been covering for him.

When neither Devil nor I said anything, King narrowed his eyes at us. "What the fuck is going on with Hyde and why the fuck don't I know about it?"

"I honestly don't know, brother," I said. "There have been a few times where we've needed him and haven't been able to reach him. Nothing major, though, so we didn't want to bother you with it."

"Fuck, Nitro, I'm your fucking president. How the hell am I supposed to run a fucking club if I don't know everything?"

I raised my hand in a defensive gesture. "It won't happen again."

King shoved his fingers through his hair while he scowled at us. Finally, he blew out a harsh breath. "Okay, I'm gonna take Jen home and get her sorted. Then I'm calling Church for tomorrow. And Nitro?" His eyes bored into mine. "Get ready to step up if I can't find Hyde."



King's words played on my mind all afternoon and night. Tatum had picked up on my uneasiness and asked me a couple of times about it. I'd changed the subject each time and managed to divert her attention with sex. She was smart enough, though, to know something was going on. After she showered that night she came to me again.

"I don't expect you to give up club business, but can you at least tell me if everything's okay? Because it feels like it isn't and I need to be prepared for shit, Nitro. I mean, I can suit up with the best of them. Maybe I can help you. Who knows? But I refuse to be the woman who scurries away to the corner and remains oblivious to problems."

I sat on the couch and took in the sight of my woman standing before me offering to go to battle with me. *And* with the family I'd chosen for myself—my club. It was the most beautiful fucking sight I'd ever seen. Tatum was love and loyalty and family all rolled into one.

Standing, I went to her. "It fucking terrifies me, Vegas," I murmured as I curled my hand around her neck.

She placed her hand on mine around her neck. "What terrifies you?"

"Losing you."

"You're not going to lose me."

She had no idea of what was to come. She'd only witnessed the war we'd had with Silver Hell. The one we had planned for Gambarro would likely guarantee more death and destruction. It was the gamble we took when we joined Storm. We agreed to lay down our lives for our brothers if needed. And I would if I had to.

The thing I struggled with was inviting death into my home, into my blood family.

"Storm is about to go to war with Angelo Gambarro."

Her eyes widened, but only for a moment. She tried to hide her emotions, but I saw them. And she was right to be scared. But still, my woman stayed strong for me. "When?"

"In two days. We've been planning it for months. It's a huge operation and one that could put your life at risk."

She took a moment and then she said, "Right, so you tell me what I have to do, and I'll do it. Whatever you need. Even if that's just being there for you at night to massage your tired muscles and love you enough to get you through the next day, I'm your girl. But if you need me to do more, you tell me that too."

Fuck me, she was something else. I pulled her to me and kissed her as if it was our last kiss ever. We needed to take what we could from each other in case the unthinkable happened. When I ended the kiss, I said, "I love you, Tatum. You're the woman I never thought existed. And you're the woman I'm going to marry one day even if it takes me all my life to get that proposal right."

She ran her hand gently down my face. "I love you more. And I'm pretty sure if you'd tacked a 'will you marry me?' onto the end of that, I would have said yes. Screw romance. All I need is your arms around me, and your heart beating next to mine and I'm a happy girl."

"Will you marry me?" My breathing slowed while I waited for her answer. One word and she'd make me the happiest man alive.

She smiled up at me and ran her hand down from my face to my chest. Placing it over my heart, she said, "This is mine and always will be." Standing on her toes, she kissed me and then she whispered the only word I wanted to hear. "Yes."

It didn't matter what life threw at me any more. With Tatum by my side, and my family in a happy place, I had everything I ever needed. She was wrong about romance, though. I was determined as

fuck to crack that sucker and make her the happiest woman on earth.

EPILOGUE - TATUM

"If I Could Fly" by One Direction

I poured myself a rum and Coke and downed half of it straight away. Placing the glass on the kitchen counter, I took a deep breath.

I can do this.

I want to do this.

I trust him.

The front door opened and closed, and then Nitro's boots thudded on the wood floor as he made his way to the kitchen where I waited for him.

He'd been at the clubhouse all day where I presumed they discussed their plan for the next day. I took in his body as he watched me. He was so tense. I didn't blame him. The club had a lot to deal with.

His eyes dropped to the bottle of rum on the counter.

"You want me to make you a drink?" I asked.

He nodded. "Thanks. I'm just gonna take a shower."

When I was alone again, I thought about everything we'd discussed the night before. I'd meant every word I said about being there for him however he needed. It was what you did for family. I'd been doing it for those I loved all my life, but this, with Nitro, felt different. He was the man I'd waited all my life to find, and I would lay my life down for him if he needed me to. I'd go to hell and back for him.

I took our drinks into the living room and curled up on the couch with my feet tucked under me. Sipping my rum slowly, I waited for Nitro to return.

"You good?"

I turned to find him standing next to the couch, freshly showered and dressed only in a pair of grey sweatpants. Water dripped from his messy, just-washed hair. His beard, which I loved, needed a trim, but as far as I was concerned, it was still hot as hell.

I nodded and patted the couch next to me. "Yeah. Come, sit."

When he sat next to me, he ran his finger down my face and said, "You seem off, Vegas. What's happening in this pretty mind?"

Before I could answer, something behind me caught his attention. And then he noticed everything I'd done to the house. "Fuck," he murmured. "Did a rainbow explode in here?"

I wiggled so I could move closer to him. Crawling into his lap, I said, "Do you like it? Or do we need to get rid of some of it?"

His hands gripped my waist as he continued to look around the room. When he'd finished, he said, "I like it."

I'd spent the day decorating the house. Nitro had added some furniture when I'd been in hospital, but we still needed more. And we needed some colour in the place. I'd brought rugs, candles, pillows, artwork and a few other decorations. I'd also printed some photos of our families and us and hung them on the walls.

I smiled and the tension that had worked its way into my shoulders eased. Reaching up, I detangled his hair with my fingers. "I worked something out about us today."

His arms moved around my body and he hugged me. "Yeah? What's that?"

After I'd finished combing his hair, I threaded my fingers into the back of it and left them there. "Well, I got to thinking about the fact that neither of us has had a home for a long time. We've had houses, but a house isn't a home. I mean, you didn't even have much furniture, let alone anything else. And when I asked you once about it, you told me you gave all your furniture to Marilyn when she moved out."

He smiled and it reached his eyes. I loved that I made him feel that. "You've got a good memory."

"I do. I'm a lawyer. Remember? You can't get anything by me, champ."

His chuckle rippled through my soul and it felt so damn good. "Duly noted."

"A home is love, Nitro, and I think you must have felt alone after Marilyn and Renee left. Is that why you didn't replace your furni-

ture? Were you waiting for them to come back?" I held my breath a little while I waited for his answer. I wondered if he'd dig deep for me or brush it off.

"No," he said, and I thought that might be all I'd get out of him, but he surprised me when he kept going. "I wasn't waiting for them to come back. I didn't want that for them. I wanted Marilyn to stand on her own two feet. But I had no reason to fill my place with shit once they left."

My heart broke for him and what he'd been through in his life. I could only hope that my love would help bandage his soul back together and bring him the happiness he deserved.

"You have a reason now."

"Yeah, I do."

I traced patterns on the skin at the nape of his neck. "Everyone needs a home, and you're mine. It's not this house. It's not a building. It's wherever you are. That's my home."

His arms tightened around me and our bodies pressed together. "I fucking love you, woman. Especially when you get all deep on me. I'm so damn hard for you right now. And for the record, my home is wherever you are. With or without furniture. I don't give a shit if we sleep on the dirt, so long as I've got you with me."

"For the record, there will be no sleeping on dirt. Well, *you* could sleep on the dirt and I will just lie on top of you, but this body ain't touching dirt."

He pushed up off the couch, taking me with him, and walked me into the bedroom. It seemed to be one of his favourite things to do—always carrying me to the bedroom. Not that I complained. Depositing me on the floor, he reached for my T-shirt. "Now that we've got that sorted, can I please fuck my woman?"

I let him remove my shirt and then I placed my hand on his arm to stop him. Stepping close, I said, "So long as you use your knife on me."

His breathing slowed, right along with his movements. His eyes met mine, searching. "You sure about that, Vegas? I didn't think you were into the knife."

My heart beat faster in my chest and I took a breath. "I realised something else about you today." At his questioning look, I continued. "The knife is all about trust, right?"

He nodded slowly. "Yeah."

"And you're not going to cut me, are you?"

"Not unless you want me to."

I bit my lip. "Well, I think it could be hot for you to cut my clothes off."

A growl came from deep in his chest. "Fuck," he swore, his face a mask of desire.

"I trust you, Nitro."

He moved to his bedside table and removed his knife. A moment later, he stood in front of me. "Don't move. I need you to not make any sudden movements. If you need to, let me know first."

I nodded, more turned on than I'd been, maybe ever.

He placed the tip of the knife against the skin between my breasts. The cold metal and the fear I felt sent a shiver through me. I wasn't scared of Nitro. I trusted him completely. But there was still an erotic element of fear to all of this.

I wore skimpy denim shorts, and he flicked the button open and pulled the zip down. While he held the knife to my chest, he slid his other hand into my panties. He ran the blade down my body at the same time that he ran his fingers through my pussy.

I was so damn wet for him that he easily pushed two fingers inside me. He fingered me for a few moments, his eyes never leaving mine. "You want me to keep this up or do you want my tongue now?"

"I want all of the above."

He kissed me while his fingers reached deeper inside. Ending the kiss, he dragged my bottom lip between his teeth before saying, "So fucking greedy."

A second later, my shorts were thrown across the room. He traced over my panties with his knife, transfixed by what he was doing. Every single nerve ending of mine blazed with lust. I was way past ready for him to slice them off.

Turning me so my back faced him, he then ran the knife over my ass. When he was done, he pulled the knife away and hooked an arm around me across my chest, holding me against him. His erection ground into me and his teeth sunk into my neck. He bit me and I moaned.

"I want you to lie on the bed," he said against my ear.

I crawled onto the bed, making sure to treat him to an eyeful of my ass along the way. I'd barely positioned myself on my back when

he straddled me. The knife drew my attention as he glided the tip of it over my stomach. I couldn't help it, I sucked my tummy in. It was a combination of nerves and excitement. I wanted him to use the knife on me, but it scared me all at the same time.

His eyes met mine. "I can put the knife away, Tatum." The care I heard caused my heart to flutter. How Nitro had changed from when I met him. But even back then, if I'd known him better I would have realised that, in his own way, he'd been caring for me from that very first moment.

"No, I want this. I want *us* to have this."

He took his time thinking about that and then he brought the knife to my bra. Taking hold of the fabric with his left hand, he sliced through the centre. "We'll start slow. I'll work you up to more as we go."

My core clenched at what *more* might be. As I watched him cut the straps of my bra, I suddenly had visions of rough, angry sex with that knife. Oh God, Nitro's fury combined with his knife would be hot. I needed that in my life.

His mouth dropped to my breasts and after spending some time with each one, he kissed his way slowly down to my pussy. I loved it when he did that because I was blessed with the vision of his strong shoulders, his muscular arms and his powerful back. *Him concentrating on giving me pleasure.* There would never be a better sight in the world than my man focused completely on me.

He slowly sliced my panties into pieces, his attention dividing between watching what he was doing and watching my face. It was as if in between each cut he checked to make sure I was still okay. But that was Nitro all over—always making sure I was good.

When he had me completely naked, he ran his blade over me one last time, starting at my throat and going down to my thighs. He then placed the knife on the bedside table and moved over me, caging me in with his arms either side of my body on the mattress.

I smiled up at him as I placed my hands against his chest. "Thank you," I whispered.

A frown flickered across his face. "What for?"

"For going so slow. I know it takes a lot for you to slow this down. I promise I'll be up for fast and rough soon."

"Fuck, Vegas, I'll take sex with you any way I can get it. You don't understand, do you?"

“Understand what?”

His eyes searched my face. “That as much as I can’t get enough of your pussy, that’s not the reason I’m here in this bed with you.” He kissed me then. His tongue demanded I open up to him and kiss him with everything I had. It was the longest kiss we’d ever shared, and I was breathless by the time he ended it. “I’m here with you now, and every other time, because of what’s in here,” he said, placing his hand over my heart. “And if what’s in here needs me to be slow or rough or whatever, that’s what I’ll be. Because *you* give *me* everything I need, and I’ll always give that back to you.”

I hadn’t thought I could love him more. Turned out I was wrong. I loved Nitro in ways I’d never imagined. My soul breathed when I was with him and I smiled like I hadn’t before. He was my love. He was my home.

DEVIL'S VENGEANCE

Devil's Vengeance
(Sydney Storm MC #3)

I know she's forbidden.
I've been warned.
But I'm in too deep.

Hailee Archer was mine the minute I met her and there's no way in hell I'm giving her up.

Our club is at war, though, and her brother is our greatest ally.
He's made it clear he doesn't want me anywhere near her.
He's threatened to walk away from our club if he doesn't get what he wants.

What he doesn't know about me is that I'm a stubborn bastard.
I will fucking fight to the bitter end for my family.
He wants to threaten me?
He can go right the fuck ahead.
He doesn't stand a chance.

To Jodie & Becky.

I couldn't have done this one without either of you.

DEVIL

The only good thing about the January heat in Sydney was the female skin on display. Skimpy shorts, bikini tops, and tight tanks clung to bodies made for sin. It was a fucking smorgasbord of tits and ass all summer long. And I was staring at the best set of tits I'd ever had the good fucking fortune of laying eyes on. But fuck if I'd make a move on them—the blonde they belonged to looked like the craziest bitch I'd seen in a long time. She stood in the middle of a fucking animal cruelty protest, waving her "Stop Animal Cruelty" placard around while spewing hatred towards whoever she thought was abusing the animals she loved.

Although I was in a hurry to get to the clubhouse, I slowed to dedicate a few minutes to her curves. Didn't matter that I had no interest in her or her crazy protesting ways; it never hurt to admire beauty in whatever form it came. However, as my gaze skimmed over her body, another woman stepped in between us, blocking my view.

Jesus, is the universe trying to cause trouble between King and me today? I should be almost at the clubhouse by now, not standing on a footpath with my dick begging to be let loose.

If I thought the blonde had a set I wanted to get my hands on, this dark-haired beauty kicked that desire up a couple of notches. The minute she opened her mouth and spoke, the knowledge that King would cut my balls off if I were late that morning fled my brain.

I stood transfixed while the crowd surged on the road in front of me listening to her speak. Her voice drew them in as easily as it did

me. The only difference being that I had no fucking clue what she said. All I knew was that I needed that voice to whisper dirty shit in my ear as I took her body in every way possible. She had the sexiest damn sound I'd ever heard.

Her loose black T-shirt slid off her shoulder as she waved her arm around while she spoke. I only had a side-on view that didn't give me the best opportunity to appreciate her completely. But it allowed me to admire her tattooed waist when her shirt lifted as she moved that arm around. My gaze drifted lower so I could take in her long tattooed legs and a sweet ass she barely covered with tiny ripped denim shorts.

Fuck, if only every Monday morning began with an animal protest in one of King's Cross's streets, led by this dark-haired beauty.

The buzz of my phone ringing distracted me. Without taking my eyes off her, I held it to my ear. "Yeah?"

King's voice snapped into the phone. "Where are you?"

"I'm on my way. I've just left home." I still had an hour before the time he'd set. At the rate I was going, though, I'd be lucky to make it.

"Make a detour on the way, brother. I need some shit from the supermarket, and I need you to drop it off at my place before you come here."

Fuck.

No way in hell would I have time to do all of that before the meeting. I'd give it a good fucking shot, though. "Text me what you need."

He ended the call, and a minute later, his text arrived. I scanned his list. Weirdest fucking shit King had ever asked me to get him—water cracker biscuits, lemons, ginger tea, pretzels and ginger ale. I figured it must be for Jen.

The fact he was looking after Jen was some of the strangest shit around. I hadn't been a member of Storm when they'd first got together so I didn't know what their relationship was like in the early years, but the last year of it had been hell. And not just for the two of them. King had brought his own personal hell to the club; we'd all suffered through it. I wondered what had possessed him to allow a woman who'd left him for another man back into his home.

I watched the dark-haired beauty for another long moment. I dragged that time out for as long as I could, but knowing that King wanted me to drop stuff off for Jen kicked my ass into gear. I'd seen the way he held her yesterday, and one thing was sure—he'd cut my balls off for being late to a club meeting, but what he'd do to me for not getting this shit to Jen as soon as possible was unpredictable. And an unpredictable King wasn't something I was willing to take a gamble on.

As I turned to leave, the crowd surged again, and the woman who'd held my attention crashed into me. I saw her coming and held out my arms to catch her.

"Fuck!" she yelled as she attempted to ease out of my hold. She wasn't yelling at me, though, but rather at the man who'd shoved her into me. "You filthy piece of scum," she spat at him. Hell, if her voice captivated me before, it all-out fucking turned me on after that.

Nothing better than a woman with some fight.

Although she clearly wanted me to let her go, I didn't. The menacing glint in the eye of the guy she yelled at concerned me. Lowering my mouth to her ear, I said, "How about you let me deal with him while you get back to your protest?"

Spinning around in my embrace, her brown eyes met mine and I instantly knew I'd found myself a spitfire. No fucking way would she listen to me. Those eyes flashed determination. "How about you let me go so I can take care of this asshole by myself?"

I couldn't help myself; I grinned. Damn, but I loved a woman who gave it to me like that. I tightened my hold on her. "How about we blow this protest and you let me show you—"

The asshole cut into our conversation when he grabbed her shirt and tried to pull her away from me. Anger and a desire to protect her consumed me when he also yanked a handful of her hair, snapping her head back and eliciting a cry of pain from her.

Moving quickly, I let her go and reached for his throat. Wrapping my fingers around it, I squeezed hard enough to ensure he'd struggle for breath. Only a moment passed before he dropped his hold on her and clawed at my hand while gasping.

My teeth clenched with determination. "You want me to let you go, motherfucker?"

Both his hands gripped mine as he fought me, but I didn't ease my hold. He tried to speak, but the only sounds to come from him

were grunts because I'd blocked his ability to talk.

"It wasn't a question that required an answer," I said.

"This guy doesn't like to give answers," the woman muttered.

I made a poor judgement call when I turned and glanced at her. The asshole used the opportunity to take a swing at me. The surprise of his fist connecting with my cheek caused my grip on him to loosen, giving him the chance to wedge his fingers between his throat and my hand.

"Fuck," I muttered, getting my head back in the game.

A moment later, my first punch almost knocked him to the ground. My second punch did. He'd chosen the wrong man to fuck with—I didn't earn the name Devil for no fucking reason.

If it hadn't been for someone pulling me off the asshole, I would have continued my assault. However, just as I was getting started, I found myself yanked back and slammed up against the brick fence on the footpath.

I scowled as I met Bronze's eyes. "The fuck?"

Clenching his jaw, he jabbed a finger at me. "Wait here." At my brow lift, he added, "Trust me when I tell you that this shit is the last thing you need to get mixed up in this week. Wait the fuck here."

Without another word, he turned and reached for the dark-haired woman. Snapping his hand around her wrist, he drew her attention and engaged her in a conversation that I couldn't hear over the noise of the crowd. She appeared just as fiery with him as she'd been with me. However, after a minute or so, he managed to get her to agree to follow him back to where I stood waiting.

"Follow me," he barked as he headed towards the side street closest to us.

Following a cop's orders was the last thing I wanted to do, but something in his tone caused me to take heed. I wondered what he knew about the activities Storm had planned for this week. Dealing with Bronze was King's gig; I'd hardly had anything to do with him, so I didn't know how deep in our business he actually was. But I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd been made aware of the shit going down this week. Having the cops on our side would help things run much smoother.

I followed him and the woman to his car parked on the side street. However, when he ordered me to get in the back, I refused. "What the fuck is going on?"

He watched as the woman settled into the back seat before answering me. Stepping close and lowering his voice, he said, "You're going to get in the back. I'm going to drive you away from this shit fight to your bike. And then you're going to head straight to your clubhouse because you'll be needed there in about"—he checked his watch—"an hour or so. Where's your bike parked?"

Before I could answer him, his phone rang. Pressing it to his ear, he said, "What's up?" His face scrunched into annoyance as he listened for a moment. He then said, "I'm on it," and ended the call.

"What's going on at the clubhouse? What the fuck do you know?"

Glaring at me, he appeared to be contemplating something. I knew what that was when he whipped a set of handcuffs from his pocket and snapped them over my wrists. "Get in the car. I have to go deal with another fight that just broke out and then I'll be back to deal with you."

"Fuck! You are fucking kidding, Bronze! I've got shit to do. Just let me go so I can fucking do it."

"Yeah, see the problem with that is I know the chances are high that you'll get yourself involved in another fucking fight along the way with these protesting assholes. And like I said, today isn't a day you need to be getting involved in any shit besides your club shit. So get the fuck in the car and wait for me."

Anger rolled through me. That, and frustration. But I knew when I was down, and I was fucking down. I did what he said and got in his goddam car. He slammed the door closed and left me alone with the dark-haired beauty. At least there was that.

"Arguing with him is pointless," she said, shifting so she faced me with one leg on the seat, her foot tucked under her other leg.

Struggling to keep my eyes on her face rather than all over her body, I said, "You know him?"

"You could say that."

"He's arrested you at one of these protests before?" Not that it appeared Bronze had arrested her, but she *was* sitting in the back of his car, so I wasn't sure what else you'd call it.

She smiled. It lit her whole face up, and my dick jerked his appreciation. Fuck, she was beautiful. Between her big brown eyes, her full lips that were painted in the deepest red lipstick and a face that would cause any man a lapse in concentration, I had to force myself

to keep my head clear of the thoughts trying to take over. The kind of thoughts that made me want to reach for her so I could drag those lips to mine.

"He has," she said, jolting me back to the conversation.

"So protesting for animal rights is your thing?"

"It's one of them."

She toyed with a strand of her long hair as she dropped her gaze to my neck and then to my arms. I sat in silence while she checked me out. Who the fuck was I to stop a woman from appreciating what I had on offer? Besides, it drew my attention away from the irritation I felt towards Bronze.

Time passed slowly while we sat there with her eyes on me, or at least that was how it felt. My dick grew so damn hard that I knew I needed to stop her. Usually in this kind of situation, I'd make my move, but sitting in the back of a fucking cop car, restrained by handcuffs, was not the ideal place to do that. So, I went with—"The guy you got in an argument with, you know him?"

Her eyes met mine again. "Yeah. He's a piece of work. Always shows up at our protests and tries to cause problems. We'd have peaceful protests if it weren't for him. He doesn't seem to think it's an issue for animals to be abused so that fucking gambling can continue."

I frowned. "As in greyhounds and shit?" I'd vaguely heard something about the government changing those laws recently.

Her eyes narrowed at me. "Yes, as in greyhounds and *shit*. Tell me, do you know much about what they do to those dogs?"

I fought the grin that wanted to spread across my face. I knew a tiny bit about it, but suddenly I wanted to know every-fucking-thing about greyhound racing and animal cruelty. "Can't say I do. Feel free to enlighten me."

She sat up straighter and leaned forward a little. Her eyes were wide, and her body vibrated with a passionate energy. "The government ran an enquiry into greyhound racing that lasted for thirteen months. They found that over the last twelve years almost a hundred thousand greyhounds were bred and that at least 50 to 70 per cent of those dogs were killed because they weren't competitive anymore. Nearly 70,000 dogs killed, all because of betting. And that's not to mention the horrific cruelty suffered by those animals." Her

eyes flashed even wider. "Does that not make you sick? Does that not make you want to do something to help them?"

"Jesus, you should run for office or some shit," I murmured, completely engrossed in what she was saying. Or just in her. I wasn't entirely sure. All I knew was that thoughts of King and Storm had taken a backseat and that wasn't something that ever happened.

She ran her fingers through her hair and relaxed her body. "Fuck that. Those assholes don't do anything unless it benefits them or their friends. I wouldn't be able to bring about real change if I worked for the government."

"So you do these protests often?"

"Every couple of months or so we run one."

"And you think they help bring change?"

"They bring awareness and that's what helps change to occur."

The sound of police sirens cut through our conversation. Her eyes darted towards the street that held the protest. "Shit, that's not good."

"I'm surprised you're not out there still."

She looked at me again. "It's not worth my while to leave this car. The protest organiser has enough people helping her today that she won't miss me."

"Why isn't it worth your while to leave?" I was fucking fascinated with her and wondered what shit she was into that made her follow Bronze's orders.

The back door of the car on my side opened, cutting off our conversation, and Bronze barked, "Out!"

She lifted a brow as she hit me with another smile. "When the cop says jump, it's time to fucking jump."

Before I could say anything, Bronze banged on the roof. "Come on, Devil, I don't have all fucking day."

"Aah, I see you know him, too," she murmured, her eyes dropping to my neck again.

"Yeah." I tried to move, tried to turn away from her to exit the car, but the pull was too great. She'd fucking captivated me. I could have sat and talked with her all day.

Pointing at my neck, she said, "That's Lawson's work, isn't it? I love his tats." Holding out one of her arms, she added, "This sleeve is all his."

Her arm was a fucking masterpiece. One I wouldn't have time to admire because Bronze yanked me out of the car right at that fucking moment.

"Fuck, Bronze," I complained as I stumbled. "I was in the middle of a fucking conversation."

He slammed the door shut behind me and reached for my hands. "Trust me when I tell you that you have nothing to say to that woman." He freed my hands and scowled at me. "I don't have time now to make sure you get on your bike and get out of here, but do King a favour and don't get caught up in anything here."

"What's going down with the club today? What shit aren't you telling me?"

He sucked in a deep breath. "Tell King to call me. Tell him I would have come to him this morning to warn him, but I didn't have time because of family shit."

"Jesus, that's it? That's all you're gonna give me?"

His jaw clenched. "Go. I've got stuff to do." With that, he stepped around me and got in his car.

I watched him drive away, wondering what the fuck was going down today. None of it sounded good.



"You're late." King cut his conversation with Hyde short to throw his accusation at me the minute I entered the clubhouse bar later that morning.

"Yeah, I got caught up in a fucking animal protest and Bronze of all people was there. He detained me in the back of his car for a while."

"You dropped that stuff off to Jen?"

"Yeah. She okay, King? I think she was vomiting before I got there, but when I asked her, she said she was fine." I omitted the part about her snapping at me when I told her she looked anything but fine and the part where she closed the door in my face when I suggested she let me in to help her.

He brushed it off. "She's okay." If he wasn't concerned, I wasn't going to waste my time worrying about her. Jen had a good dose of bitch in her, and over the course of the year I'd known her before she

left King, I'd learnt to steer clear of her. I had no intentions of doing anything but that this time, too.

A quick glance around the bar told me the boys were gearing up for what we had planned at midday. We'd worked closely with Silver Hell over the past few months putting together plans to wipe out Gambarro. The first strike would take place that day.

"Devil, you're with me, today," Hyde said, taking a step away from King. The tense body language between the two of them told me everything I needed to know—things weren't good between our club president and VP.

Hyde had been late for Church yesterday, angering King. That anger remained, and I wondered when it would ease. Hyde's mood was worse than ever, and King's patience with him had disappeared.

I gave Hyde a nod. "Whatever you need."

Nitro and Kick entered the bar and made their way to us. One look at Nitro and I knew something was up. He eyed King. "Dragon's not answering his phone. I don't have a good feeling about this, King. You want us to head over to their clubhouse and check things out?"

Before King could answer, his phone rang. "What?" he barked when he answered it. Silence for a moment, and then—"Bring him in." Ending the call, he looked at us with a frown. "There's a guy at the front gate who claims to be a fucking cop with info I need to hear about the Gambarro plans." Raking his fingers through his hair, he roared, "Fuck! This is the last fucking thing we need."

"Shit," I muttered. "Bronze said for you to call him and that he didn't have time to call you this morning because of family stuff he had going on. He knew something was going down."

"Christ." King scowled as he processed my words and then turned at the sound of men entering the clubhouse.

A moment later, Jacko stood in front of us with a guy who looked anything but a cop. Jerking his chin at the guy, Jacko said, "Says he's a fed. Showed me his badge, but I don't know if it's legit."

At first glance, I wouldn't have assumed the guy was a cop. Tattoos covered one of his arms, a scruffy beard filled half his face, and his clothes would have allowed him to fit in at any of the pubs we frequented. But when I looked closer and noticed his clean fingernails and expensive looking shoes that I'd never seen anyone I knew wear, I figured he could well be a pig.

He pulled out his badge and showed it to King. "Detective Ryland. I'm here to discuss your plans for Angelo Gambarro."

King inspected the badge. "What plans?"

Ryland shoved his badge in his pocket. "The plans you've been making with Silver Hell to take down Gambarro's organisation and kill him. The plans you are going to walk away from in order to avoid me investigating your club and generally making your life hell."

King's jaw clenched and his shoulders squared. "I don't know how the hell you know this shit, but I'm going to make it my mission to find out."

Ryland had some fucking balls. He stepped closer to King, invading his space, and pushed his face towards King's. "You're going to leave it be, King. I'm not a man you want to fuck with. We've been watching you and your boys for some time now, and the shit we know about Storm would be enough to put you away for a long fucking time." He cocked his head. "But maybe you want to spend time with Ghost. How long's it been since you've seen him?"

King's whole body tensed and his face contorted with anger. "Leave him the fuck out of it."

"Yeah, ten years behind bars for your club is enough to fuck with a man, so I'm guessing you and Ghost aren't on good terms these days."

"You've got no fucking idea what you're talking about," King spat. "And as far as putting any of my men behind bars, I'd like to see you prove a fucking thing in court. You're full of shit. Nothing we do is traceable and we sure as fuck don't leave evidence behind that you motherfuckers can use against us."

Ryland stepped away from King. "You go near Gambarro and we'll test that theory. But hear me when I say that we do have proof and we won't hesitate to use it." He took a few steps towards the door before pausing. "Also know that we're watching you 24/7 at the moment. There's no way for you to do anything without us knowing about it." With that, he exited the room. Jacko followed him to ensure he left the property.

King slammed his hand down on the bar. "Motherfucker!" Turning to Hyde, he ordered, "Call Dragon and see if they've had a visit from the feds, too. I'm calling Bronze."

Hyde nodded and pulled his phone out as he walked away in search of a quiet place to make the call. King did the same, heading to a corner of the bar. I watched as his face and body language changed during the call. Whatever Bronze told him, angered him more than Ryland had.

When he came back to where I stood with Nitro and Kick, he said, "The cops have a guy undercover with Silver Hell. That's how they know our shit. It seems that Gambarro is tied up with some counterfeiting operation and the feds are watching him to figure out who else is involved and who is running it. We kill him, they lose the one person they have who can lead them to more information."

Hyde joined us. "Dragon had the same visit we did. That's why he wasn't answering his phone this morning."

"What's his plan now?" Nitro asked.

"Says he can't afford to piss the feds off, so he's backing away from Gambarro for the moment. He did say, though, that he wants to move forward in the future, once this all dies down," Hyde said.

King turned silent, weighing up options by the look on his face. We all knew to stay silent while he thought it through. Finally, he said, "Gambarro goes on hold, but we keep eyes on him. Hyde, you and Kick stay on top of that and report back daily." Eyeing Nitro, he said, "You and Devil pay a visit to Ghost. I want to know if the cops have anything there."

Nitro frowned. "Ghost wouldn't talk."

King scowled. "Ghost is capable of anything, Nitro. Find out what we need to know."

I'd never met Ghost, but I'd heard the stories about him and King. No love was lost there. Not after Ghost made a play for King's woman years ago.

Nitro didn't seem convinced, but he nodded. "Will do."

As I followed him outside, I said, "On a scale of one to ten, how bad is this likely to get if Ghost is involved?"

He slowed so he could meet my gaze. "I'd say an eleven."

HAILEE

“You nail that chick last night?”

I glanced up from my phone and eyed my bandmate Hollis, who’d just asked one of my other bandmates that question. “Am I invisible?” I’d told him enough times lately to stop discussing the groupies they banged while I was in the room, yet, he continued to do it.

“Fuck, Hailee, this is how we’ve always talked. Even with you in the room,” he muttered. Gesturing at our other bandmates, he said, “Back me up, fuckers.”

Before either Dylan or Trent could say anything, I stood and said, “I know, but I’m over it. I don’t care that you do it, but I’d just rather you talk about your groupies when I’m not around.” Grabbing my bag, I said, “I’m gonna go grab a drink before our set.” The need to get out of this room was intense. My usually easy-going mood had disappeared, replaced with irritation I couldn’t shake. And I knew it wasn’t the guys causing it, but they were the ones who’d cop it if I didn’t leave.

Dylan frowned. “We haven’t finalised our set list yet.”

“Let’s just go with the same as last night.” I didn’t wait for anyone’s reply before exiting the room and heading towards the bar.

God knew, I needed a drink. It’d been a long day with the animal protest and then work. An argument with my grandmother right before coming to the pub had put me on edge. We hardly ever argued, but when we did, I usually realised she was right. And fuck it, I didn’t want her to be right this time.

"You look like you could murder someone," Doug said as I leaned on the counter of the bar. He was my favourite Fling bartender, and Fling was my favourite pub. All of this caused me to smile for the first time in at least two hours.

Sighing, I said, "Yeah, myself."

He placed a drink on the counter and slid it my way. "Saw you coming. Knew you needed this just by looking at you."

I glanced down at the French Martini he'd made me and then smiled up at him. Before I lifted it to my mouth, I said, "You're an absolute star, Mr Gilbert."

He grinned the sexy grin that nearly caused me to sleep with him once ages ago. I'd come to my senses when I'd realised I didn't want to chance ruining the awesome friendship we had. "And yet, she still refuses to sleep with me."

My smile morphed into a grin to match his. "And yet, he doesn't care as much as he makes out he does, because he knows we're better off as friends."

"I hope Wayne knows how lucky he is, Hailee."

My smile disappeared and my shoulders slumped a little. Placing my cocktail down, I said, "What do you really think of Wayne?"

Many of our conversations revolved around my dating life. After a shitty relationship of mine ended two years ago, I'd spent the time since then trying to find love. Without much success. I'd been dating Wayne for almost a month, and I thought he was a great guy—thoughtful, stable, steady job, seemed settled in life—but my grandmother had told me that afternoon that he wasn't the one for me. She said she saw no fire between the two of us.

"You want the truth, babe? Or aren't you ready for that yet?" Doug's eyes held mine while he waited for my reply. There was so much kindness there that I knew he'd give it to me gently. And he'd only ever tell me the God's honest truth as he saw it.

I nodded. "Give it to me."

He rested his arms on the counter. "Wayne's a good guy, no doubt about it, but I don't see any chemistry between the two of you. He doesn't light you up, and I don't think he's made you any happier than you already were." He leaned towards me. "Hailee, when you're with the right man, he'll make you smile more than you ever have. You'll feel more than you ever have. Hell, you might even ar-

gue more than you ever have with a guy. The point is, there'll be passion. I don't see that with Wayne."

"Have you been talking to my grandmother? She told me today that there's no fire between the two of us."

He grinned again as he straightened. "Always did love Jean. That woman knows her shit. She coming to watch you sing tonight?"

"No, it's Monday." At his frown, I added, "Monday nights are reserved for *Law and Order* reruns."

Doug's attention shifted for a moment as he looked past me. Lifting his chin, he spoke to someone standing behind me. "Hey, man, the usual?"

"Yeah." The guy's deep voice filtered through the air as he moved to stand next to me.

"Tatum here tonight?" Doug asked as he poured two beers.

I turned to look up at the guy. Jesus, he was built. And hot. I had to work hard to keep my tongue in my mouth.

He shook his head. "Not yet, but she's on her way."

"Billy got her working hard?"

The guy's jaw clenched, and I got the distinct impression from the way his lips pressed together that whoever Billy was, this man didn't much like him. "When doesn't he?"

Doug nodded. "Yeah, it seems that way lately. She hasn't been here as much, that's for sure."

A redheaded woman interrupted us. "Nitro, where's Tatum? I thought she'd be here by now."

"I thought she was coming with you."

"Nope, she rang to say she'd meet me here, and because I'm late, I assumed she'd be here already." She checked her watch. "Fuck, Billy must have dumped more work on her. I swear I'm gonna have words with that man. It's not fair how much shit he's got her doing these days."

Nitro took the drinks Doug passed him. "Yeah, well if he doesn't pull his head in soon, I'll be having words with him. And I don't give a fuck if Tatum doesn't like what I have to say."

"Oh, fuck," the woman muttered as Nitro left. Her eyes met Doug's. "The last thing any of us need is Nitro having words with Billy."

"I can't imagine anyone wanting to have words with Nitro," Doug said. "You want your usual, Monroe?"

Before I could stop it, my mouth opened and out gushed, "Oh, I love that name!"

Monroe's gaze met mine and she smiled, and when she smiled, she radiated the kind of warmth anyone would want to be next to. Her whole face lit up and I couldn't help but be drawn to the beauty she wore like a second skin. She was all gorgeous curves, stunning long red hair, flawless skin made up perfectly, and sparkling eyes. If I was the kind of woman to feel jealousy, I'd feel it with this woman.

"Thank you, honey," she said. "What's your name?"

"Hailee."

"I love that, too." Her gaze zeroed in on my cocktail when I drank some more of it. "Oooh, what is that? I need one of those." She looked up at Doug. "You've been holding out on me."

He chuckled. "Babe, I haven't been holding out. You've just been set on drinking Jägerbombs lately."

She pouted, her red lipstick catching my eye. I wondered if she was a make-up artist. Or maybe a hairdresser. Both her hair and make-up were amazing, so I figured she could be either. Clicking her fingers at him, she said, "Start me off with a Jägerbomb and then make me whatever that cocktail is." She settled on a stool next to me as she issued her request.

He arched a brow and she added, "Please," with a grin. Then—"Wait,"—glancing at me, she asked, "Do you want a Jäger with me?"

"Sure, I could do with one tonight. Or two."

Her grin spread further across her face. "Awesome. Two please, Doug."

My phone sounded with a text as he started on our drinks.

Dylan: You good?

Me: I will be.

Dylan: You reckon that'll kick in tonight? Or should I warn the guys to strap on some armour?

Me: You a funny guy *said in best foreign accent*

Dylan: Just looking out for my girl.

Me: Love you, D. Now leave me be. I'm getting wasted.

Dylan: Jesus. We've got music to play. Hold off on the turps.

Me: Just fucking with you. I'm only having two drinks.

Dylan: Famous last fucking words. I'm coming now.

"Girl, you are smiling like a loon," Monroe said. Lifting her chin at my phone, she added, "That your man?"

I placed my phone on the counter and reached for one of the drinks Doug had made us. "No, it's my bandmate."

"You two aren't together?"

"No. He's one of my closest friends." *Now that Tricia was gone.* I lifted my Jägerbomb up. "Cheers."

We threw the drinks down our throats and I remembered why I didn't drink Jäger often.

"You don't love it so much?" Monroe asked as she took in the face I pulled.

"It's not my favourite, no." I caught Doug's eye and raised my empty Martini glass while indicating that I'd like another.

She laughed. "We need to drink together more often. You just need to drink more of it and then you'll start to like it."

"Oh, God, is my cousin trying to make you drink Jäger?"

I turned to find a blonde woman standing behind us, a look of amusement on her face.

Monroe turned also. "Oh, hush, Tatum. I need to find at least one person who wants to drink it with me."

Tatum was gorgeous, but in a completely different way to her cousin. Where Monroe was ample curves, Tatum was slender; where Monroe was mostly clean skin, Tatum was inked all over; and where Monroe's eyes held warmth, Tatum's held hesitation.

Her eyes met mine, narrowing. "Have we met before?"

"I don't think so."

"You're so familiar to me."

Monroe's face washed over with recognition. "I've been sitting here thinking the same thing, and I've just figured it out. You're the singer in Cherry Vivid, aren't you? The band that plays here a couple of times most weeks."

"Yes, that's me." I'd never seen them here before, but that didn't mean much, because usually I was either working the stage or danc-

ing. I didn't spend a lot of time socialising unless you counted the time I spent with my bandmates or with Doug.

"Tatum!" A guy's voice cut through the air, and a sense of having heard that voice hit me.

Tatum turned at the same time I looked past her at the man walking our way. My tummy did flips like it was a freaking Olympic gymnast, and my legs threatened to give way when I saw who the deep rumble belonged to.

*The guy I'd met in the back of Aaron's car that morning.
Devil.*

Everything about him was sexy, from his chiselled jaw, to his muscular arms, to the scruff on his face, to the ink that covered his skin, to the way he sauntered my way with a knowing expression on his face. It was the kind of expression that told me he wasn't a man who hid his attraction to a woman, but I should have remembered that from when I'd met him earlier. He sure hadn't hidden it then. He'd looked at me like he wanted to devour me. Pretty much the same way he looked at me now.

Blue eyes met mine as he came closer, and his lips curled up into a smile that could wipe all thoughts from a woman's mind. *All thoughts except those about him.* "It's my animal protest girl." The way he said *my* only caused more Olympic-worthy somersaults in my belly.

"And it's my protector," I bantered back, wanting him to never stop talking. Guilty thoughts about Wayne swam through my mind for at least a moment, and I did my best to turn them off. *We aren't serious. We've made no commitments to each other. He said just the other day that it was a bit of fun to see where it went. Surely it's okay to flirt with another guy while we're seeing...*

"You two know each other?" Tatum asked.

Devil's eyes held mine. "No, I don't even know her name."

"Hailee," I said, not letting his eyes go either.

"Hailee," he murmured, my name sliding through his lips so damn huskily that I wanted to ask him to say it again. *And again.*

"And you're Devil?" It was what Aaron had called him that morning, but it seemed more like a nickname than a real name.

He took a step closer to me. "Yeah, Devil."

My breathing sped up a little at his proximity. "That's a nickname, right?"

His smile never left his face. "It is."

"You're not going to tell me your real name?"

"Nope."

"Let me guess, only the special girls get that."

"Every girl's special, darlin', but none of them get that."

"Oh, you're smooth. What about the story behind the nickname? Will you give me that?"

He leant his face closer. "If I tell you that, will you have a drink with me?"

"I can't. I've got work to do, and—"

Dylan joined us and cut me off. "And if she has another drink, she won't be able to sing tonight." He moved so he stood next to me. Right next to me, with his arm draped over my shoulder. His way of telling a guy to back the fuck off.

I sighed. Dylan and I had gone head-to-head numerous times over his protective ways, but he refused to stop. Just like my damn brother.

Devil seemed surprised. "Sing?"

Monroe chimed in. "Hailee's the singer in Cherry Vivid." At Devil's frown, she added, "The band that plays here all the time."

"I haven't had the pleasure of watching you perform yet," he said.

I hit him with a sexy smile. "Well, you'll get to tonight if you stick around."

"I think I just might, darlin'."

Our attention to each other was diverted by those around us then. Tatum pulled him aside to discuss something while Dylan dragged me back to the band so we could finalise our song choices for that night. The butterflies in my belly didn't ease, though. Devil had stirred them up in a way they hadn't been awakened in years.

DEVIL

I sucked back some beer as I watched Hailee sing a Pink song. Jesus, she could belt out a tune. The band had been playing for a good twenty minutes, and I hadn't been able to take my eyes off her. Between her voice, the way she interacted with the audience and her beauty, she fucking owned the stage.

Tatum shifted her face closer to mine to say, "Your girl's good."

I chuckled. "My girl?"

Her eyes met mine and she smiled. "You'll make her yours for at least a night. It's what you do."

Lifting a brow, I queried her, "It's what I do? Where the fuck do you get that idea from?"

"You forget I'm a lawyer, Devil. I see everything, and I've seen you around. You're a lover, not a fighter, right?"

I drank some more beer and nodded. "True, I am. But you make me sound like an asshole who fucks women for one night and doesn't look back."

"I'm not saying it's a bad thing. I'm just stating facts."

"Okay, so maybe I have had some casual sex lately, but that's only because there didn't end up being any connection with those chicks afterwards." Fuck knew why it was so important to me that Tatum not think I was an asshole, but it was. I'd gotten to know her well over the last few months and respected her enough to care what she thought of me.

"No connection? As in, no attraction besides sex?"

"Yeah, nothing that made me want to dedicate time, you know?"
I drained my bottle of beer and placed it on the table we sat at with

Nitro and Monroe. "I don't know, I need a spark, some passion... or some shit, and I'm just not feeling it with anyone lately."

Nitro cut in. "When you're finished with your relationship counselling, you and I need to discuss tomorrow."

Tatum ran her fingers through Nitro's hair. "You okay?"

He leant his elbows on his knees and took a moment before answering. Glancing sideways at her, he shook his head. "Lot of shit going on, Vegas. I've got a headache from hell."

"You wanna go home?"

He sat up again and laid his arm across the back of her chair. "No, we'll stay for a while."

Nitro had come a long fucking way since he'd met Tatum. He and I'd had a shitty day and I knew he didn't want to be here tonight, yet he stayed for Tatum. A long fucking way.

Tatum finished her drink and stood, reaching for Nitro. "Come on, champ, take me home."

His lips twitched, a smile almost forming. Standing, he slid an arm around her waist and pulled her close. He whispered something in her ear before looking at me. "I'll come by your place at eight tomorrow morning. We're gonna see Ghost if it fucking kills us."

We'd spent hours this afternoon attempting a visit with Ghost, but there'd been some issue at the prison and we hadn't been granted a visit. Nitro had asked Tatum to help, and she'd come through with the goods after talking with some of her legal buddies.

Tatum turned to Monroe. "You want a lift home, babe?"

"Yeah, thanks." Eyes on me as she stood, she said, "Good luck with Hailee."

I glanced at Hailee on the stage. "I never need luck, Monroe."

"I bet."

Nitro met my gaze. "Be ready for tomorrow, brother. Ghost can be a motherfucker when he wants to be."

Yeah, I'd heard those stories, too. I lifted my chin. "Go home. I'll see you tomorrow."

After they'd left, I made my way back to the bar and ordered another beer. "How much longer is the band on for?" I asked Doug as he handed it over.

"Don't fuck with her, Devil," he said, pissing me off.

"What the fuck does that mean?" I'd been coming to this pub for years, and as far as I was aware, Doug and I were on good terms.

This attitude off him wasn't fucking appreciated.

"It means that Hailee means something to me and I won't stand by and watch you use her."

"Jesus, does everyone think I'm an asshole when it comes to women?"

"Your history speaks for itself. I can't remember the last time you dated a woman."

I took a long slug of my beer. "It was two years ago, asshole, and *she* left me, not the other way around. And that was after two years of living together. I'm not a complete fucking bastard."

He leant on the counter. "I'm not saying you're a bastard, and I have nothing against you sleeping with whoever you want. Just don't fuck with Hailee. That's all I'm saying."

I was ready to tell him to go fuck himself when Hailee's voice cut through the crowd, announcing they were taking a half-hour break. Without another word to Doug, I headed towards the stage.

Hailee met me halfway, her eyes roaming appreciatively over my body before finding my gaze. A slow smile hit her lips. "You're still here."

I returned her smile. "You think a man could walk away while you're singing? Besides, I owe you a drink."

"I never said yes to a drink."

"That word may not have left your mouth, but it sure as fuck was written all over your body, darlin'." I tipped my bottle of beer to my lips and waited for her reply. This conversation could last hours and lead nowhere, and I wouldn't give a shit. I just wanted to be in her presence and soak her sexiness into my bones.

She moved into my personal space, our bodies almost touching. "I've got lots of words written all over my body, but yes isn't one of them."

I closed the tiny distance between us and traced a finger over her lips. She didn't stop me—a fair indication that she was as keen for this as I was. "How about I buy you a drink and we start figuring out how you'd like me to get you from clothed to naked."

"We could have a drink, but getting me naked could take some time."

I grinned. "I'm all about the challenge."

"Yeah, maybe not this one."

Fuck, when I finally got her under me, it was going to be fireworks. I ran my finger down her face, neck, and down to her collarbone. My eyes dropped to the tight, sleeveless black top she had on. The one that revealed a cleavage I'd like to get between. When I found her eyes again, I said, "I've never walked away from a challenge in my life, darlin'. I'm not about to now."

She gripped my hand when I started trailing my finger over her skin, down to her tits. Halting my progress, like I had hoped she would, because a yes given too soon was nowhere near as fun as a no dragged out, she said, "I'm not single."

"How *not single* are you? Like, are we talking close-to-marriage single or he's-barely-gotten-his-dick-wet single?" I'd never cut in on a serious relationship, but she wasn't giving me those kinds of vibes.

She didn't skip a beat. "Let's just say his dick is almost dry, but let's also say that I'm not looking for an alternative at this point."

"Let's also call it bullshit. I haven't met a woman more open to an alternative in a long fucking time." I dipped my face so my mouth was next to her ear. "We both know that if I pursued the fuck out of you tonight, you'd be bending that sweet ass over and letting me fuck you any way I wanted."

Again, she didn't stumble, and gave it back to me just as good. "I think we both know that me bending over for you is a long way off. As for letting you fuck me any way you want... that would be after you prove you know your way around a pussy."

"I know my way around a pussy better than I know my way around my dick. And that's saying something because—"

She silenced me by placing her finger against my lips. I loved her skin on mine and had to restrain myself from forcing her to keep it there. "Let me guess, your dick gets a good workout?"

Fuck.

This woman was fucking made for me, and it was taking every ounce of strength I had not to put my hands all over her body. "A French Martini, right?"

Her forehead wrinkled in confusion. "Huh?"

"That's what you're drinking tonight, right?"

"It is. How did you—"

I cut her off and dipped my mouth to her ear again. "I'm the kind of man who always makes it a point to know things, Hailee. I'm also

the kind of man who doesn't give up, so let me buy you a drink and spend some time with you."

I saw the moment she gave in when I pulled my face away from hers. Unfortunately, it was also the moment her boyfriend decided to show his face.

"Hey, babe," he said as he quickly kissed her cheek. *Her fucking cheek.* If Hailee was mine, no fucking way would I greet her with a kiss on her cheek. Especially not if she was talking with another guy. I'd be making it really fucking clear to him that she was mine and that he should back the fuck off and never go near her again.

She turned into him, but I caught the hesitation. His arm slid around her waist, but his attention wasn't on her. And it wasn't on me, either, which it should have been. His gaze had wandered to something behind me, while Hailee's eyes still held mine.

"Thanks for watching us play tonight," she said, letting me know this conversation was done.

"I'll be back to see more soon."

I watched them walk away, my attention on her ass and my mind stuck on what made her tick. She wanted what I wanted. I just had to figure out what was holding her back.



Ghost sat down across from Nitro and me at the prison the next day, and with one look at him, I knew this was going to be a hard conversation. And probably not one that would get us anywhere.

He glared at Nitro. "King sent you to do his dirty work?"

Nitro clenched his jaw. "How are you, brother?"

Ghost raised a brow. "Are you asking because you genuinely care, or is it the kind of question you ask to break the ice before you try to fuck a man in the ass?"

Nitro shoved his fingers through his hair and then rested his elbows on the table separating us from Ghost. "When the fuck have I ever tried to screw you over, Ghost?"

Ghost continued to glare at him while we all sat in silence. Finally he blew out a long breath. "Always a first time for everything, especially when the feds are breathing down the club's neck."

"So you know about that?" Nitro asked.

"Yeah, they came to see me a couple of weeks ago."

"And?"

Ghost didn't answer him but rather, glanced at me. "Who are you?"

Nitro cut in. "It doesn't matter who the fuck he is, answer my question."

The dark eyes I was staring into flared with anger, and again he said, "Who are you?"

"Devil," I answered.

"You been a member for long?"

"Seven years."

He leant back in his seat, stretching his legs out in front of him, his arms crossed over his chest. To anyone not part of this conversation, he would have looked casual, but I saw the tension that had settled in him. "So you joined a few years after they fucked me over."

"Fuck," Nitro bit out. "No one fucked you over, Ghost. When are you gonna let that shit go?"

Ghost's anger came to life and he pushed out of his chair, slamming his fist on the table. "When are you gonna see King for the motherfucker he is, Nitro? He's had you on that fucking leash for years, ready to do his dirty work whenever he says so."

Nitro shot out of his seat, a matching look of fury on his face. Before he could lose his shit, though, I stood too and placed my hand against his chest. Pushing him back, I cautioned, "Brother, this isn't the time. Sit down and let's get what we came for before the guards kick us out."

His lips pressed together and his eyes cut to mine. After a few deep breaths, he nodded and stepped down.

I turned to Ghost. "Sit the fuck down. You need to hear what we have to say."

He stood his ground. "I don't need to do jack."

"Yeah, you do," Nitro said. "For Ashlyn's sake."

Whoever Ashlyn was, she meant something to Ghost, because his face clouded over with menace. "You fucking touch her and I swear to fucking God you'll live to regret that decision."

"You give us what we need and I won't go near her. The decision is in your hands."

"Motherfucker," Ghost muttered before dragging the seat back to the table and sitting. "I fucking gave Storm everything and this is the way you repay me."

Nitro and I sat. He shook his head. "No, we looked after you, but you chose to walk away and be a cunt about it all."

"What would you have done, Nitro, if you'd been in my shoes? King stripped my vice presidency from me because I made one fucking mistake, and then he did everything in his power to cut me from the club. He chose pussy over a brother. Tell me that you wouldn't have taken that as a reason to walk away."

I was confused, not knowing the full story, but I was under the impression that Ghost was still a club member. "You left the club?"

Ghost met my gaze. "I'm nomad now. Stuck in a fucking prison for the shit I did for a club that didn't have my back after all."

"For fuck's sake, Ghost, when did you start making shit up in your head?" Nitro glanced at me. "He made a play for King's woman—"

Ghost cut in. "When I was fucking drunk!"

"So that makes it okay?" Nitro threw out.

Ghost raked his fingers through his hair. "It was a bad move, but you can't tell me you haven't done dumb shit after a few drinks."

Nitro leant forward. "But it wasn't the first time, was it, Ghost? You'd done that shit before. King forced Jen to tell him the truth after you were locked up. Turned out you hit on her almost every time you got wasted, and she didn't tell King because she didn't want to cause problems in the club."

"Yeah, well that didn't give King the right to take my vice presidency away and give it to Hyde." He looked at me. "Does he still put pussy before his brothers?"

I'd heard just about enough. "I've never seen King choose a woman over his brothers. And I'm betting there's more to this story than the shit you're spinning."

"There sure fucking is," Nitro said, but didn't elaborate.

Ghost didn't respond. He simply sat there seething.

"How about we get down to business?" I suggested, having had enough of this conversation. Ghost didn't appear to be the kind of person to ever consider he could be wrong. "What did the feds want when they spoke with you?"

Ghost crossed his arms over his chest again. He sat in silence for a beat, but quickly came to his senses. "They were asking questions about Storm's drug trade."

Nitro frowned. "What, from ten years ago when you actually had something to do with it?"

"Yeah, that and they also wanted to know what I knew about the shit that went down with Moses."

Fuck. This couldn't be good. The Moses incident should never have seen the light of day. We'd buried that, never to be heard of again.

The vein in Nitro's temple pulsed. "What the fuck do they know about Moses?"

"I don't know. I told them I knew nothing."

"So they just left it at that?"

"For now. I've a feeling they'll be back, though."

"Why?" I demanded.

Smug delight flashed on his face. "Because they want to bring King down."

The vein that had pulsed at Nitro's temple damn near pushed through his skin. "And let me guess, you want to help with that. Except, if you do, all bets are off the table as far as Ashlyn's concerned." He stood. "Are we on the same page?"

"Yeah, we're on the same fucking page, Nitro," Ghost replied. "But when I get out of here, you'd better watch your back, mother-fucker. No one threatens my sister and gets away with it."

"You think you're getting out of here?" Nitro took a step away from the table. "You might wanna stop making threats if you ever want that to happen."

I wasn't sure what to make of Ghost and his threats, but Nitro's? I'd never cross him. If he threatened to find a way to keep me in jail, I'd believe every word he said.

As Nitro left the table, I said to Ghost, "Not sure how well you know him, but I'd never fuck with Nitro. Make sure you call us when you hear from the feds again."

HAILEE

"I need your hands on me, Hails. Tell me what I've gotta do for you to stop saying no to me," Dylan said, a look of defeat on his face.

I flopped down onto his couch next to him and reached for the beer in his hand. After I took a sip, I said, "Dude, I've been working these hands and arms all day and I'm exhausted. Maybe if you actually book an appointment with me while I'm at work, you'd have more luck."

I was sympathetic to his cause—Dylan spent his days laying bricks to make ends meet—but eight-hour-plus shifts massaging people exhausted me.

He grabbed his beer back. "I can't afford an appointment with you. Your boss charges way too much for massages."

"That's only because you're a tight-ass. I mean, the amount of money you spend on beer could fund a couple of massages a week."

"Are you two arguing over fucking massages again?"

I glanced up at our bandmate Trent as he entered the living room and sat on the end of the couch. "Aren't we always?"

He grinned and threw me a wink. "Yeah, at least Dylan's consistent with his shit. You always know what you're gonna get with him."

After close to two years playing with these guys, I knew them inside out, and Trent was right—Dylan was consistent in his hounding me for free massages. Just like Trent was consistent with harassing me to help him with his girlfriend dilemmas.

"How's Pam going? Have you managed to break up with her yet?" I asked him. He'd been dating her for three weeks and had

been complaining about her for almost as long.

He grimaced. "Fuck, I can hardly get a word in with her, Hails."

"So that would be a no, then? You pussied out again?" He was way too nice and always trying to extricate himself from relationships he didn't want to be in.

"Who was that guy you were talking to last night before Wayne got there? Looked like he was all over you," Trent said.

"You trying to change the subject?" I asked.

He grinned. It was the grin that always got him out of trouble. Not that he was in trouble now, but it was his way of telling me he didn't want to continue the conversation about Pam. "You know me too well."

I decided to let him off the hook this once. Hell, who was I kidding? Trent was always being let off the hook in one way or another. Everyone loved the guy—enough to let him avoid dealing with whatever problem he'd found himself in. "The guy's name is Devil, but other than that, I don't know who he is."

"Gotta say, I was surprised Wayne didn't take a shot at him," Dylan said.

Wayne never would.

And that told me everything I needed to know about my relationship with Wayne. It wasn't that I wanted him to have a go at another man who gave me attention, but I wanted him to at least feel something about it. *Anything*. Even if he just made a casual remark about it. I wanted him to acknowledge it in some way. We'd been getting closer over the last few weeks, and I had been looking for a sign from him as to whether the relationship might develop into something more permanent. He could have used Devil's flirting with me as a way to stake his claim, because even though he hadn't heard our conversation, he had to have seen Devil lean into me while he spoke into my ear. The fact that didn't bother him bothered me.

But, the thing about Wayne was that he was safe. He was a good guy, and after the shit I'd been through with my last relationship, all I wanted was a good guy who I could trust to do the right thing by me.

"You see yourself with him for the long haul?" Trent asked.

I pushed up off the couch. I didn't want to talk about Wayne anymore. Looking down at them both, I said, "Are we gonna practise, or not?"

Trent lifted a brow as he stood. "Look who's changing the subject now."

I poked my tongue at him. Continuing to change the subject, I said, "Anyone hear from Hollis today? Are we thinking he's gonna make it tonight?" Hollis had a record of missing band practice, and tonight was a night I didn't want him to miss. We had new songs to practise.

"He texted me about an hour ago," Dylan said as we made our way out to his garage for practice. "He should be here in the next half hour. His boss was making him stay late today."

Hollis was an accountant, which had surprised me when I'd first met him two years ago. I'd put the call out for musicians to form a band with me, and he'd turned up straight from work in his tie, looking way too respectable to be a drummer. However, the minute he got behind his drum kit and ripped his tie off, he'd blown me away with his talent. These days I never saw the tie. Not even when he was wearing it. All I saw was the dirty-as-fuck drummer who could drink all of us under the table while lining women up to screw. Definitely not too respectable to be a drummer.

"Okay, let's run through these songs," I said. "Hollis knows them like the back of his hand, so it'll be good for us to go through them before he gets here, and then he can just jump in." While he was a dirty guy always looking for his next lay, Hollis surprised me with his ability to tap into his emotions when it came to writing songs. His lyrics were full of deep thoughts and often about love. He wrote most of our band's music. I helped when he needed it, and sometimes I came up with new material for him to work into a song.

Dylan picked up his guitar. "I forgot to tell you guys that I booked us for a wedding next Saturday."

Dylan took care of all our bookings and often forgot to tell us about a gig until the week it was on. I glanced at him. "I'll make you a deal. You start using that online calendar I showed you last week and log our gigs as soon as you get them, and I'll start considering giving you a massage every now and then."

As he began strumming his guitar, he smirked and said, "Come on, Hails, you gotta put out if you want the goods. None of this *considering* business. For every gig I schedule in your online thing, I want a massage from you."

God, the shit you had to do to get a man to do the shit he was supposed to do. But at least we might finally know our dates in advance. “You’re on.”

Trent started playing his guitar and I grabbed the mic. It was time to lose ourselves in the beats and drown out everything else in our heads.



“Hailee, are you even listening to me?” Leona asked over lunch in the park the next day. She swept away the few strands of her long blonde hair that had stuck to her face as the wind whipped through the air. The weather was bipolar that day; the morning had kicked off with promised heat, but the wind had slowly crept in, and the forecast was for a storm later.

I’d just finished eating my sandwich and had leant back, resting on my elbows on the grass, but I sat up straight as I answered her. “Kind of, but I’m watching that man over there”—I pointed at the guy in my sights—“because he just kicked his dog.”

Leona and I had worked together for two years and we’d become good friends, so she knew how much I loathed people who hurt animals. “You want me to come with you while you tell him off?”

“You sure?” The last time she’d helped me out, or should I say, the last time I *dragged* her with me to a protest, she’d been knocked to the ground and broke her wrist.

She pffted and said, “Of course. I’m your ninja warrior sidekick”—she waved her hand in the air—“or some shit like that.” Scrambling to her feet, she added, “Besides, when do I ever get some fun in my life? Jerry has me under lock and key and wrapped in cotton wool when I’m with him. I need you to lead me astray.”

I groaned as I stood. “Jesus, that man of yours must hate you spending time with me.” Some of the situations I’d gotten us in over the years ran through my mind—the time we’d been locked up for half a day, the time we’d managed to cause a brawl in a bar when I’d accidentally pissed a guy off and another one had stood up for me, and not to mention the time we had a minor car accident in her car because I’d distracted her by drawing her attention to a group of hot guys walking down the street. Jerry had almost lost his shit with me

over that car accident, but being the good friend she was, Leona had placated him with promises of hot sex. Mind you, Jerry's idea of hot sex and my idea of hot sex were two very different things. I loved Jerry for the good man he was, but no way could I have ever married him. I would have been bored within a week.

"He doesn't hate you. He just wishes we'd do stuff like... I don't know, quiet stuff."

I burst out laughing. "You mean like sitting home on a Saturday night knitting and discussing our menu plan for the next week? That kind of shit?"

She grinned. "Probably that kind of shit."

My gaze zeroed in on a woman who'd just approached the guy with the dog. She spoke quite angrily and snatched the dog leash from him. I expected him to retaliate, but he didn't. Instead, he turned and stalked out of the park.

I turned to Leona. "Looks like Jerry is saved from potential stress today." Reaching for my bag on the ground, I added, "We should probably get back to work. Rachel's looking for any opportunity to give me a warning these days." My boss had turned into a raging bitch from hell when her hubby left her for another woman two months ago, and since then my life at work had become a little nightmarish in so far as I never knew what to expect each day. Her moods swung swiftly from happy to fucked off with the world, and I just had to keep on my toes and do my best to stay off her radar.

"Oh God, same! And we've got IVF coming up again soon, so we need my pay cheque. I swear, if that bitch fires me, she won't know what hit her." Leona may have been one of the nicest people I knew, but even I knew she had a darker side. A "do not fucking cross me" side. I guessed, though, that three unsuccessful years of IVF would be enough to cause any woman to threaten those who crossed her when it came to having a baby.

"Is there anything I can do to help you guys?" It felt like a dumb question, because short of offering up my body to carry a child for them, there wasn't anything I could do. But the fixer in me needed to ask.

"Can you send a prayer up to the big fella and ask him to please just let me have one kid. Only one. I'm not greedy. Not anymore." The sadness I felt in her words sliced through my heart. Kids were all Leona and Jerry talked about. They'd been married for five years

and had been planning a large family from the beginning. But these days, she would do anything just to have one child.

I reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze. "I can't remember the last time I prayed, but I'm gonna send one out for you guys tonight."

She squeezed my hand back and gave me a smile. "Thank you," she said softly, all her fire over Rachel gone. In its place were all the emotions tied to her pain. *God, I hope this round works for her.*

Having children wasn't something I spent a great deal of time thinking about. At this point in my life, getting through the day was sometimes all I could focus on. I'd been on a path two years ago, a path that I thought led somewhere I wanted to go. I'd quickly learnt that the very thing we wished for could turn on us at any moment and bring us crashing down into our own personal form of hell. Getting back on my feet after roaming through that hell had taken time, and most days I still felt like I was learning how to walk again. So thinking past where I was now, into a future that could possibly have children in it wasn't something I did often.

DEVIL

"You take the back, I'm in the front," King said to me mid-morning on Friday. We stood outside a run-down old house in Blacktown, with grass almost up to our knees. The paint peeling on the house, the lack of lawn maintenance and the hole in the front door led me to believe no one lived there, but King was convinced the person he was looking for would be inside—the guy that had beaten up Jen.

"Sure," I said.

As I turned to slip around the side of the house, he grabbed hold of my shirt and halted me. When I glanced back at him, the angry glint I saw there caused me to stiffen. "You taking this seriously, Devil?" His words were too controlled. Hell, King was far too contained. Calm almost. But that was King when he was in the midst of his crazy.

Right before he was about to explode.

The eye of the storm.

"Yeah." I hadn't been, though. King had been on a mission all week to find this guy. He'd been in a kind of frenzy, and no one had been able to talk sense into him. Hyde had suggested he slow his shit down and think things through rather than being like a bull at a gate. King had only increased his maniacal efforts after that.

He stepped closer to me, so close I could hear his breathing. "You think I'm going overboard on this, too?"

I'd always been honest with him and wouldn't stop that now. Even if it earned me his displeasure. "What I'm trying to figure out is why you're going to such extremes, King? All this for a woman who screwed you over years ago?"

His crazy eyes stared into mine for what felt like minutes. Being under this intense scrutiny from him, though, was the norm, so I was used to it. If there was one thing King drilled into all club members, it was to be able to withstand an interrogation. He did it often enough for us to quickly work out how to hold up under those circumstances. King trusted no one and was all about being prepared for the potential threats that surrounded us. If the cops dragged a member in for questioning, he wanted them to be ready for it, and he'd done a good job prepping us. Each time someone had been interrogated, they'd withstood the cops' questions and kept the club safe.

Finally, he said, "I respect the fuck out of you, Devil, but you don't know mine and Jen's story. No one does. She may have screwed me over, but she had her reasons. Reasons I gave her. She wouldn't be in this mess if it weren't for the shit I did to her."

If there was one thing I knew in this world, it was people making judgements without knowing the full story. Growing up the black sheep of a good catholic family in a country town, I knew all about being judged. Fuck, I'd been tried and convicted in too many people's minds all my damn life. Always without evidence.

I nodded. "Whatever you need, you've got."

He lifted his chin towards the back of the house. "Go."

I left him, and when I rounded the corner of the house into the backyard, I dry retched at what I found out there. The filthy fuck who lived there, had left a dog chained up in the heat, and it's rotting body lay next to an empty bowl that I assumed once held water or food. Flies and maggots swarmed over the dog and the stench filled my nostrils.

Fucking assholes who did that kind of shit should be fucking shot as far as I was concerned.

I made my way to the back door, and when I found it locked, I lifted my boot and kicked hard, forcing it open. I entered the house through a dirty laundry jammed with putrid clothes and the kind of smell I was convinced could bring death to those who inhaled it.

Memories of my time living on the streets and in abandoned houses with filthy fuckers flooded my mind. A part of my life I'd rather forget. But even after twelve years, those memories were clear as day.

"Devil!" King roared from another room. "Need your help, brother."

I quickly found him in one of the bedrooms. King had a guy by the throat with his gun pointed to his head. A woman lay on the floor, her face full of bruises. Eyeing me, he said, "Devil, tell him what I like to do to men who beat their women up."

The guy's terrified eyes met mine. He'd be right to fear King. "He's been known to cut a guy's hands off for that."

King tightened his grip around the asshole's neck. When the guy grunted, the woman he'd been beating up whimpered on the floor next to the bed. I couldn't tell if she was scared for herself or for the guy. "I'm looking for Shannon Mercier. You know where he is?"

The guy shook his head. "No, and even if I did, I wouldn't fucking tell you."

"Fuck," I muttered. "Are you trying to get yourself hurt?"

His gaze met mine again. "Fucking cut my hands off. I'm not telling you where he is."

King let go of his throat. "Really? You'd give up your hands for him?"

The guy spat in King's face and opened his mouth to speak, but King punched him before he could utter a word.

As the asshole stumbled backwards, the woman cried out, "Marty!" She had enough sense to stay where she was, though, and leave King to his mission.

I shook my head at her. "Really? You're upset that the guy who beats you up is getting hurt?" Fuck, I'd never understand some women.

King ignored us, his attention solely on Marty. His entire body was taut with murderous energy as he bellowed, "You fucking spit in my face again and you'll lose your right hand. Now tell me, does Shannon mean that fucking much to you that you'd sacrifice body parts?"

"He's my fucking brother. I'm not giving him up."

"Figures," King said. "You both like to hit women. Your daddy teach you that shit?"

Marty bared his teeth. "Fuck you." Lunging at King, he attempted to wrap his arms around King's waist. However, he underestimated King, who always remained on high alert and anticipated what was to come.

"No, fuck you!" King roared as he raised his knee and jammed it up into Marty's chin. The force of his thrust knocked Marty onto his ass.

King moved swiftly behind him so he could grip his collar and drag him backwards. He slammed him against the wall, hard enough for his head to hit it and then bounce forward. He stared up at King through dazed eyes but didn't say a word. Blood streamed out of his mouth, coating his chin.

Crouching in front of him, King said, "Are we getting anywhere, Marty? Or do you need some more encouragement."

"Just tell him, Marty!" the woman screamed out. She'd scrambled her way up onto the bed, probably in an effort to escape King. At least one of them had some brains.

"Go to hell," Marty said, barely managing to get the words out.

King's mouth spread out into a wicked grin. Pulling his knife from its sheath, he said, "If anyone's going to hell today, it's you, not me." Pressing the tip of his blade to Marty's chest, he added, "I'll happily send you there if you don't give me what I want."

Marty's eyes widened as he realised where King was going with this. I doubted King would make good on that threat, though. If there was one thing he was really fucking good at, it was making people think his level of crazy meant he had no conscience, but I knew better. Sure, he'd done things in his life that most people would have nightmares from, but they weighed heavily on him. I'd been witness in the past to just how much. That was something, though, that I'd never tell another soul. It was King's private life, not mine to share. I wasn't sure if anyone else in the club had ever seen King the way I had, so most members bought into his crazy.

Marty's back pressed into the wall in an effort to move away from King, but he had nowhere to go. "Fuck, man, I can't—"

King dropped his knife beside him, took Marty's face in both hands and smashed his head backwards into the wall. "Stop fucking talking unless it's to give me some useful information."

"Wait! Don't kill him! I'll tell you what you want to know," the woman cried out. Marty grunted something unintelligible as he fought to move. King had put him in a world of hurt, though, and he was unable to push up off the floor.

Without a moment's hesitation, King swiped his knife off the floor and stalked to the bed. "Where is he?"

She stared up at him with fearful eyes. Her body was tense with anxiety. "You promise not to kill us?"

"Fuck, bitch," Marty muttered. "Shut the fuck up."

King gripped her hair at the back of her head. Yanking back on it, he said, "You give me what I want, and I won't touch another hair on either of your heads."

Ignoring Marty's desperate pleas to shut up, she said, "He's left Sydney. He found out you were looking for him, and he cleared out yesterday. Gone to Brisbane, I think."

Marty's "fuck" was enough to tell both of us that she wasn't lying. King let her go and glanced at me. "Looks like it's time to visit the Brisbane boys."

"You wanna leave today?"

He didn't reply, but rather motioned for me to follow him out of the house. When we stood outside at our bikes, he said, "I'm going to take Kick and Nitro with me. I want you to look after Jen while I'm gone."

I frowned. "Who does she need looking after from if the asshole who was hurting her is in Brisbane?"

"She's pregnant, Devil. I want you to make sure she stays that way."



"You should buy me a drink," I said to Tatum later that night when I found her and Monroe sitting at the bar at Flirt. I'd just checked in on Jen before heading to the pub to see if Hailee's band was playing.

Tatum's eyes met mine. Knowingly. "The band has just taken a break. They'll be back in about half an hour, but I think I saw Hailee floating around chatting with people, so you could go look for her now. And then if you still want a drink, I'll buy you one."

I grinned. "I like the way you think, Tatum."

Her gaze shifted to something behind me, and she lifted her chin. "Go. She just walked past us."

"I'll be back for that drink," I said before leaving her to go in search of Hailee.

I hadn't been able to get her out of my mind all week. Fuck, I'd even looked up the greyhound shit that she'd mentioned. And the

more I thought about her, the more determined I was to spend time with her.

I followed her as she weaved in and out between people on her way to the corner of the pub where her bandmates sat. When I caught up with her, I reached for her arm and stopped her.

She spun around and met my gaze. "Devil." My name left her mouth on a gush of breathlessness, and I sensed her pleasure at seeing me again.

The crowded pub forced our bodies together, and I found myself going from mildly turned-on to completely fucking captivated. She consumed every one of my senses. The people around us failed to exist; my mind and body were focused entirely on her.

"Fuck, you're beautiful." Possibly not the best use of my time with her, but it captured her attention.

Her eyes lit up and she arched her back a little, which forced her tits closer to me. Biting her lip, she smiled and said, "And you're hot as sin and just as dangerous, I bet."

I had to fight with myself not to touch her. She was so damn close and so fucking sexy. Even in her sweaty just-performed state, she was sexy as hell to me. Images of her with sweat-slicked skin, her long hair stuck to it, hit me, and I groaned.

"What time do you finish tonight?"

"In about an hour or so. Why?"

"Because I'm buying you a drink tonight, and you're not gonna argue with me this time." I moved my mouth to her ear. "I don't give a fuck if you're kinda seeing someone. You spend some time with me, and I'll show you what it's like to not ever wanna flirt with any man but the man you're seeing."

I pulled my face away from hers and took in how her eyes had widened a fraction and the way her breathing had slowed. Her mouth formed a small O before she finally said, "I hate to break it to you, bossman, but I can't hang around tonight."

"Tomorrow then." *Bossman*. I fucking liked it.

"Nope, can't do that either."

"Pick a day, gorgeous, and I'll be here. But no way in hell am I taking no for an answer."

She stayed silent for a beat before exhaling a long breath. "I'm not trying to fob you off. I really do have stuff on tonight and tomorrow."

"You got a date tonight?"

"You just don't give up, do you?"

I pressed my body harder against hers. "No."

Staring at me, in what I presumed was either bewilderment or frustration, she ran her fingers through her hair and said, "I don't have a date tonight. The guy I'm seeing is actually out of town for a week or so. I have to go home and look after my grandmother tonight. She fell yesterday and hurt herself, so she needs someone there as often as possible to help her."

Her words wound themselves around me with an unfamiliar emotion. It was a mixture of happy surprise and respect. I didn't meet many people who commanded those emotions from me, so it felt a little surreal.

"You live with your grandmother?"

"Yes. Why?"

I smiled. "It's not often I meet people who live with their grandparents."

"Well, my grandfather was an asshole, so I never had anything to do with him. My grandmother lived with my parents, but when my dad died six months ago, I knew I couldn't leave her with my mum, so I moved her in with me."

"Your family sounds like it might be as dysfunctional as mine."

She checked her watch before glancing back up at me with a look of regret. "I really need to get a drink and freshen up before we go back on."

I placed my hand on her waist to keep her with me, half expecting her to pull out of my hold. She didn't, though, so I kept my hand there. "Name a day, Hailee."

I could have sworn her body swayed against mine when she said, "Sunday afternoon, around three. I'll meet you here for a drink."

I let her go. "I'll see you then."

As I watched her go, I realised she was the first woman in years I'd hounded for a date. Not that she'd probably call it a date, but I was going to. As far as I was concerned, our drink on Sunday would be the end of whatever the fuck she had going on with the guy she was seeing. And the beginning of something with me.

HAILEE

“Miss Hailee, how are you today?”

I smiled at the man who stood behind the counter of the convenience store waiting for my reply. “I’m good. And you, Avi? I was worried about you yesterday.” I had been visiting this store at least once a day since my grandmother and I moved in to a house up the road six months ago. Avi and his wife, Preena, had become my friends in that time, and I’d been concerned when neither of them had been at the store the day before.

He waved away my worry. “Preena took ill, so I stayed home to look after her. She’s much better today.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” I scribbled my phone number on a piece of paper from my bag and handed it to him. “I want you to call me if you ever need help with anything.” I knew they had no family close by and not many friends. They’d called a friend in yesterday, but I wasn’t sure how many people they had to rely on, so I wanted to help them in any way I could.

Avi gave me a huge smile. “Thank you, Miss Hailee. You have been very good to us.”

“I haven’t really done anything.”

His eyes widened. “You have been like family to me and Preena. We can never thank you enough.”

Sure, I’d helped them a few times when they’d been run off their feet, and I’d done a few other things here and there for them, but I didn’t see this the same way he did. However, it made me feel like I may have done some good if he felt the way he did, so I gave him a

smile and said, "There's no need to thank me, Avi. It's what friends do for each other."

His phone rang, drawing him away from our conversation, so I turned to make my way to the fridges to grab some milk. I ran smack bang into a hard chest and a chuckle. Looking up, I found Devil smiling down at me.

"The places I run into you," he murmured, seemingly happy that he had.

Pleasure at seeing him again ran through me, but I did my best to contain it. That was proving harder to do each time I saw him. The man was smoking hot and a huge flirt. He'd been wearing his cut tonight, which he hadn't previously, so I discovered he was a member of the Storm MC. That should have been a warning, but it wasn't. When I'd told him earlier that I'd meet for a drink in two days, I'd meant it.

"Do you live around here?" As soon as I said it, I realised it was probably a dumb question. The convenience store was just down the road from the pub, so he was probably on his way home.

"Yeah, about two blocks that way," he said, pointing in the direction of his home. "Do you live close, too?"

I pointed in the opposite direction to his home. "I'm about a twenty-minute walk that way."

"You're walking home?" He seemed concerned, and my belly somersaulted at that. Having a man worry over me was something I hadn't experienced in years.

Stop it, Hailee. You have Wayne.

"Yeah, my car's out of rego and I can't afford to pay for it for about two weeks, so I'm currently walking everywhere." I smiled as I added, "It's great exercise." It irritated me that I always felt the need to tell people it was great exercise when I had to tell them why I couldn't drive. But I was a little embarrassed about not being able to afford all my bills, and I deflected with the exercise comment.

"Fuck, it's not safe for you to be walking these streets at night."

"My brother sometimes drives me home, but he had to work tonight."

"And he's happy for you to walk?" He sounded incredulous.

"I may have told him I would cab it home." Aaron would hit the roof if he knew I walked home, but he also didn't know what it was like to be dirt poor. He was never short of cash. I could have asked

him for a loan, but I didn't want to get even further behind in my bills.

"Right, grab your stuff and I'll walk you home," he said, taking charge in a bossy tone that, as much as I didn't want to admit, I liked. However, I'd never tell him that.

"I'm fine. I'm a big girl and I've done this walk many times in my life."

His eyes flashed with determination. "I know, but I don't care. Tonight you're doing it with me."

I stared at him. "We've just met and you wanna boss me around already?"

His eyes didn't let mine go. "Darlin', I'm betting you like me bossing you around. And to be honest, I like you arguing with me over it, so by all means, keep giving it to me, because I'll just keep giving it back."

He wasn't kidding. I didn't know him, but I figured that much about him so far. He didn't bullshit. I reached for a basket and yanked it up. "Oh, for God's sake," I muttered as if I was annoyed, but I wasn't. He was right—I liked the back and forth with him. But at the same time, I had an independent streak a mile wide, and no way in hell would I go down easily.

Without waiting for him, I walked to the fridges and grabbed milk and butter. I then stocked up on bread, Earl Grey teabags, and Tim Tams. My grandmother had an afternoon routine that consisted of tea and Tim Tams, and she'd be cranky if I forgot either of them tonight, because we'd run out during the day.

Devil stuck close behind me, but let me shop in silence. His presence alone caused a rush of butterflies in my tummy, though, and that put me off my game to the point that I dropped both the teabags and the Tim Tams while attempting to put them in my basket. And then when I bent to retrieve them, he did too, and we butted heads.

However, while I was in a state of nervous energy over it, he didn't appear to notice, being completely engrossed in concern for me. Reaching out, he placed his hand on my forehead. "You okay?"

"I'm fine." My voice was all breathy. God, what was happening to me tonight? I was like a damn schoolgirl around him.

I took the groceries out of his hand and dumped them in the basket before stalking back to the counter. I knew I was being all kinds of rude, but my thoughts and emotions were in a state of turmoil.

Confused as fuck was where I was at. Which was pretty much how I'd been since I'd met him. From that very first conversation we had in the back of Aaron's car, I'd been attracted to him. But I didn't want to be. I wanted to want Wayne, the predictable guy. However, I couldn't help myself around Devil. I flirted back every time he flirted. And I said yes to drinks before my brain caught up with my body. I was helpless to stop myself. The excitement I felt when he came near me was unlike anything I'd experienced before.

I paid for my items and chatted with Avi briefly before exiting the store. The summer heat hit me the moment I stepped foot outside, and I groaned my annoyance. Summer could fuck off; give me winter any day.

"Here, let me carry that," Devil said as he came up behind me and took the bag of groceries from me.

And there he went, surprising me by doing something most men I met didn't. "Old school manners. I like it," I said with a smile.

He fell into step with me as I walked along the footpath. "You don't make it through a childhood in a good catholic family without learning some manners along the way."

"Oh God, you too? The way you say 'make it through' leads me to believe you may have only just survived it."

He chuckled. "I made it through, but I'm not sure you could say I survived it."

"Same. Ruth Archer is not a woman you survive."

"That's your mum?"

"Yeah. She was a stay-at-home mother who excelled in all things wifely. Cooking, cleaning, raising a perfect family. She tried so hard to shape me to become just like her. Unfortunately, she failed, and all I became was one constant disappointment to her."

"So you're telling me you're *not* good at cooking and cleaning? I'm gonna have to rethink this whole chasing you thing now." The grin he watched me with almost caused me to trip over my own damn feet.

"If cooking and cleaning are what you're after, you've come to the wrong woman." I wanted to smack myself for flirting with him. Why the hell was I encouraging him?

"Darlin', cooking and cleaning can be learnt. The thing you have that I want can't be. I'm definitely not chasing the wrong woman."

I couldn't be sure, but I think my mouth dropped open at that. I wanted to shove it closed, but I was flat-out concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other while remembering to draw breath while I did it.

Finally, my brain caught up with my thoughts, and in an effort to change the subject, I blurted, "Tell me about your parents."

He didn't reply straight away. Instead, he took a moment before saying, "I haven't seen them for fifteen years. My father was ex-navy and strict, and my mother just went along with whatever he said. I loved her, but after a while, you wonder how you can love someone who allows bad shit to happen to their child."

I could hear the pain in his voice. His tone had turned from fun to hard, and it made me wonder what happened to him in his childhood. Devil had to be just over thirty, so fifteen years away from his parents would mean he left home in his teens.

The nurturer in me took over and I reached for his arm. I was never under the illusion I could fix things for people or take away their hurt, but the need to soothe compelled me to offer my touch. This often caused me trouble; a lot of people weren't comfortable with it and told me so. Or sometimes they didn't say anything, but they drew away from me.

Devil was different. He glanced down at my hand on his arm and then met my gaze. He didn't pull away and he didn't tell me to remove my hand. Rather, he said, "You wanna keep that up, I might not be able to restrain myself for much longer."

Although the street we walked along was lit only by the occasional streetlight, I could see the heat in his eyes. Or maybe it was that I could sense it, feel it. Devil didn't seem to be the kind of man to hide his feelings. They blazed brightly for all to see. I bet that most of the time he didn't even have to speak—his body language would probably be enough to convey his thoughts and emotions.

"I think you're lying," I said.

"How so?"

"Well, I know you've got manners and I know you were raised in a strict family, so I'm guessing that for all your talk, you're actually a man who *can* restrain himself and who treats women with respect. I don't think you'd ever make a move on a woman unless she signalled her readiness."

"And you don't think you've already signalled your readiness?"

I shook my head in mock exasperation. "I knew I shouldn't encourage you."

"And yet you did. That tells me everything I want to know, darlin'."

I didn't want to encourage him any further, so I shut up and walked the last few metres to my home in silence. Devil seemed to clue on to what I was doing and met my silence with that bloody grin of his that seemed to be permanently painted on his face.

He followed me up the few stairs we had to the front door and then down the hallway into the kitchen where he placed the groceries on the counter before saying, "For the record, you just looking at me encourages me, Hailee. But when you speak, it's like a whole other world I never knew opens up, and I want in on that world. And I don't give a fuck if that makes me sound like a fucking pussy. It's the truth."

My heart sped up to the point that I thought it would beat its way out of my chest. No man had ever said something like that to me before. My words sat in a big fat mess on my tongue, and I struggled with arranging them in a manner that they'd make sense if I said them.

My grandmother saved me the trouble of having to get my shit together when she entered the kitchen and cut in on our conversation. "It does make you sound like a fucking pussy, but hell if I wouldn't have fallen for that when I was Hailee's age. She'd be a damn fool not to give you a chance."

Oh. God.

Jean Archer had a way with words, that was for damn sure.

Devil chuckled as he glanced at her. "I can see where Hailee gets her sass from."

Without thinking, I flung my hand out and lightly smacked him on the chest. Our eyes met as I said, "I'm nowhere near as sassy as my grandmother, thank you."

His chuckle turned into a belly laugh and he grabbed my hand before I could pull it back. Holding it against his chest, he said, "Maybe I should take your grandmother out for a drink on Sunday instead."

It was my turn to laugh. "She'd probably love that." I turned to her. "You do love your gin after all."

Devil's hand on mine was doing crazy shit to my body, and I attempted to pull away, but he shook his head and mouthed, "No" before looking at my grandmother again. "How about it, Gran? You up for drinks with me and Hailee on the weekend?"

She narrowed her eyes at him and tsked. "I know what you're doing, young man. Trying to get into my granddaughter's pants through me. You're shit out of luck there, though. You want in, you're gonna have to do the work yourself."

I couldn't believe she'd just said that. But I should have, because she'd never been one to beat around the bush in her life. Well, except when it came to my mother. She'd beaten around that bush for decades.

"Jesus, Gran," I muttered as I pulled my hand away from Devil's. "Do you have to be so to the point?"

She scowled at me as she hobbled around the kitchen with her cane. Her seventy-five years were catching up to her, and she was slowly starting to lose her health, but she had her wits about her still. "Life's too damn short to fuck around, my dear. More people should just say it like it is, and then we'd all know where we stand." I knew this was coming from all those years of her trying like hell to get my mother to like her, with no success. The minute my mother turned on her completely after my father died, Gran hardened a little more and began speaking bluntly to everyone. I usually appreciated it, but with Devil, for some reason, I felt a little ruffled that she'd speak so openly to him.

I shouldn't have been concerned, though. He took it in his stride. Even seemed to welcome it. "Life *is* too damn short to fuck around. I agree. And yes, I was trying to get into Hailee's pants through you, but I see that's not going to work for me here. I appreciate the heads up. I'll shift gears now and try other avenues."

Gran nodded. I shook my head. "Really? You two are gonna stand here and talk about me as if I'm not even in the room?"

"Feel free to leave," my grandmother said.

Devil's lips twitched in amusement. "I'm gonna leave you two alone now. Maybe your grandmother can talk some sense into you," he said with a wink.

I rolled my eyes and shooed him into the hallway. "Maybe she'll tell me I should look for a man who's not a fucking pussy."

He stopped and turned, backing me up against the wall. He placed one hand on the wall above me and the other around my waist. Pressing himself into me, he growled, "You feel that, darlin'? That's what's waiting for you when you're ready to acknowledge how much you fucking want me." He bent his mouth to my ear and added, "When you're ready to leave behind a man who doesn't even have the fucking balls to tell me to back the fuck off when I'm watching you like I wanna run my tongue through your pussy before I fuck you into unconsciousness."

My legs turned to jelly.

I forgot how to breathe.

No words came.

I was a mess.

An achy, needy mess.

Devil let me go, and I watched as he walked the short distance down the hallway to the front door. He exited the house without a backwards glance at me, which was a good fucking thing. If he had looked back, he would have seen how desperately I wanted to beg him to come back.

"I like that man," my grandmother said, causing me to jump.

I stood straight and ran my fingers through my hair. My senses were scrambled, and I fought to unscramble them. "Huh?"

"I said, I like that man. He has some fire to him. You should dump Wayne and date him. What's his name? You never did introduce us."

"That's because you two were busy with your conversation," I muttered.

She stared at me. "Well, his name?"

God how I loved her, even when she was bossy and cantankerous. "Devil."

Her forehead crinkled in a frown. "Devil? What kind of name is that?"

"It's his nickname. I don't know his real name."

She hobbled back into the kitchen, throwing over her shoulder, "Find out his name. I want to know what it is. And invite him to dinner next week. I'll cook."

My eyes widened. She never cooked anymore. Hadn't in the time we'd lived together. I'd begged her numerous times, because she

was the best cook I knew, but she always fobbed me off with an excuse.

“Only if you cook roast pork,” I called out, holding my breath. She didn’t like roast pork, but she used to cook it for our family, and hers was the only one I loved. I could practically taste the pork crackling while I stood waiting for her reply. I’d invite Devil over, encouraging him further, against all my better judgement, just for her crackling.

“You buy it, I’ll cook it.”

Oh. God.

Devil was coming for dinner.

DEVIL

“You don’t like that King is looking after me, do you?” Jen said early the next morning when I dropped in to check on her.

I rubbed the back of my neck. Not a conversation I wanted to get into. Especially not at eight in the morning, after only a few hours sleep. I’d spent half the night thinking about Hailee, finally jerking off to those thoughts at around three and then falling asleep.

“It’s none of my business what King does,” I said, taking in her exhausted state. She’d looked tired the night before also, and I wondered if she’d had any sleep at all.

She ushered me into the house, and I followed her into the lounge room. Sitting on the couch, she curled her legs under her and rested against the arm of the chair. “It mightn’t be your business what he does, but if you’re gonna come over every day and check on me for him, I’d prefer you to not look at me like you’d rather be anywhere else but here. And I’m guessing you do that because you don’t like me.”

I sat on the edge of the couch opposite her and rested my elbows on my legs. “I don’t know you enough to decide whether I like you or not, Jen. But yeah, I guess I’ve formed an opinion of what you did to King all those years ago. Leaving a man for another man isn’t high on my list of honourable things to do.”

She watched me silently for a beat. “No, I guess it isn’t. But you don’t know the full story, so I really wish you wouldn’t form an opinion.”

Fuck, again, not a conversation I wanted to be having. Ever. What King chose to do in his life had nothing to do with me. He could

have allowed his women to fuck around all they wanted on him and I wouldn't have cared.

I stood. "Do you need anything? I can swing by later and drop it off if you do."

She joined me. "I loved King, still do. I would never have left him if he hadn't given me good reason to, Devil."

"Yeah, King said as much."

"But you didn't believe him?"

"Look, Jen, honestly I don't care what went on between you two. And I don't care that you're back together n—"

"We're not together."

Her words caught me by surprise. I didn't know why I thought that because they were having a child together, they'd stay together, but I had. I'd figured that'd be King's style.

She must have clued on to the thoughts running through my mind. "I'm not pregnant with King's child."

I stared at her. There was another guy involved? Fuck, I was way over this conversation. "Okay."

She grabbed hold of my arm as I turned to leave, stopping me. "The guy that I left King for? The one who was hitting me... he found me again..." She let me go and covered the sob escaping from her mouth. Tears slid down her cheeks as she tried to get herself under control. Her efforts were in vain, though. A moment later, tears gushed down her face and her body crumpled.

I caught her and held her while she sobbed. I didn't say anything, but rather waited for her to cry it out, at which point I hoped that she'd just want me to leave without ending the conversation we'd been having.

No such luck.

She pulled out of my hold and wiped her face. "This baby is his." She paused for a moment. "He forced himself on me about a month and a half ago. I didn't tell King because I didn't want to drag him into it any more than he already was. I really didn't want to cause him any more problems. The only reason he found out that Shannon was still threatening me was because my friend rang him about it."

"He knows it's not his, right?"

"Yes, absolutely. And I never told Shannon I was pregnant."

Thank fuck King knew this. I'd hate to see what he'd do if he thought the baby was his, only to discover later it wasn't.

"King's a good man," I murmured, deep in thought. I wasn't sure too many men I knew would do what he was for Jen.

She nodded and wrapped her arms around her body. "He is," she said softly, her voice cracking a little. "I just wish things could have been different between us."

"You're not going to do anything crazy, are you?" I remembered the way King had said he wanted Jen to stay pregnant. Looking at her, all I saw was despair, and I had to wonder how her mental state was.

Sighing deeply, she said, "I'm not going to do anything crazy. I know King thinks I am, but I won't. This baby may not have been conceived in love, but it doesn't deserve to die because of that."

"Yeah, that's true." Fuck, what a fucked-up situation. No wonder King was on a rampage to find this motherfucker.

"I'm sorry to drag you into all this."

Something told me that as much as she made that conversation about my opinion of her to begin with, what she really wanted was someone to talk to. I couldn't blame her.

"King gave you my number, right?" At her nod, I continued, "Call me whenever you need to, okay?"

Her eyes widened a touch—in surprise, by the looks of it. "Thank you," she whispered, and I noted the tears that leaked from her eyes.

I nodded before turning and leaving. I still didn't understand the whole King-and-Jen dynamic, but like I'd said to her, I didn't need to. But fuck, to carry a child who was the product of rape, and to say what she'd said about that child... Jen had my respect for that.



Saturday passed way too fucking slowly. I couldn't get Hailee out of my mind, so to pass time until I saw her, I decided to head over to my sister-in-law's and hang out there.

"Are you psychic?" Sonya asked when she opened her door to me mid-afternoon. "These kids are driving me crazy, and I think that uncle time is just what they need."

I grinned, stepping inside her house. "You wanna go out for the afternoon?"

As I made the short trek into her kitchen, I noticed the messy state of the place. Strange, because Sonya was a neat freak. Lego, dolls, and other toys littered the living room, and dirty dishes were stacked in a chaotic fashion in the kitchen.

"No, can you just play with the kids for a bit while I clean up? Adam has been sick the last couple of days, so I haven't had a chance to do anything."

"Fuck, Sonya, you should have called me to come over. When does Campbell get back?" Campbell was my brother and worked away from home most of the time with the navy.

"Oh, God, he's not home for another three weeks." Exhaustion and stress filled her voice, and I decided it was way past time for me to step in.

"Uncle Dominic!" Kylie squealed when she caught sight of me and threw herself into my arms.

I held her and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Hey, princess. What you up to?"

Her tiny mouth spread out into the biggest smile. God, she was precious. The last four years with her in my life had been some of the best years I'd known. When she was a baby, I used to lie next to her for hours while she slept. Just watching her. Making sure no harm came to her in her sleep. While they could be loud and demanding, children were so fucking peaceful. They didn't yet carry the baggage of hate and fear and hurt and distrust and doubt. And while they often had a temper, they didn't yet know anger.

Threading her little fingers through my hair, she gripped a few strands and said, "I wanna play on the swing!"

"Okay, we'll take Adam and go outside to play while Mummy cleans up inside." Sonya gave me a look of complete relief and thanks.

Kylie began kicking her legs in excitement. "Put me down! Put me down! I'll get Adam."

I let her go and watched as she ran out of the room in search of her brother. Glancing at Sonya, I said, "You do what you need to do here, and then I'm taking everyone out for dinner so you don't have to cook."

"Thank you, Dom. I honestly don't know what I'd do without you most of the time."

"You'd get by." And she would. Sonya was a strong woman. I just liked to be able to help her where I could.

"Yeah, but Campbell wouldn't recognise me when he came home from sea. I'd be a messy, grumpy wife. Maybe even an alcoholic, too."

"You wouldn't be. You don't have time to drink."

She laughed. "True!"

Kylie came back into the kitchen, her brother in tow. Two years younger than her, Adam was often dragged around by his sister. He adored her, though, and never complained. She grabbed my hand. "Let's go!"

I allowed her to pull me with her and a couple of moments later, we were at the swing in the backyard. I'd bought it for the kids a couple of weeks ago, and it had fast become Kylie's favourite thing to do. Sonya both loved and hated me for that swing.

We spent the next hour playing outside. After they'd had enough of the swing, we kicked a ball around for a while, and then I chased them around the yard in an effort to wear them out for Sonya. When we went back inside, we found their mother asleep on her bed.

"Shh," I said to them with my finger against my lips. Once I'd herded them out of the bedroom, I quietly closed the door and led the kids to the living room. Change of plans for the night. "Who wants macaroni and cheese for dinner?" I knew it was one of their favourites, and I knew how to cook it. They both squealed their delight, and when I added, "After dinner, we'll watch a movie, your choice," they were completely sold on leaving their mother to sleep. And I managed to hold my title of favourite uncle for another day.

HAILEE

As I entered the pub on Sunday afternoon, I adjusted the straps on my dress. It was hot as hades, so I'd worn a short flowy black dress to meet Devil for drinks. I'd paired it with flat sandals, which was not my usual style, but in this heat, I just wanted comfort and air on my skin.

I'd spent the weekend going back and forth in my mind between Devil and Wayne. My brain had whiplash over it, and I was thankful to be seeing Devil that afternoon. Perhaps spending time with him would push my mind in the right decision. The thing was, I knew it was my fear holding me back more than anything. And fear needed to be banished from my life. I'd worked hard over the last two years not to let it in, so I'd be damned if I did now.

Scanning the pub, I found Devil kicking back on a lounge, watching me with those eyes that told me how much he wanted to fuck me. He wore jeans with a black fitted T-shirt and a wicked smile. Jesus, the man was sin personified.

He didn't stand to meet me, just waited where he was, not moving an inch. His eyes moved, though. All over me. So much so that when I finally stood in front of him, my carefully constructed thoughts about how I'd handle him were flailing helplessly. No way would today go the way I planned. Devil had taken charge without even uttering a damn word.

He did stand when I met him at the lounge. His hand slid easily around my waist, and he pulled me close so he could place his mouth near my ear. It seemed to be his favourite thing to do. Possi-

bly because he'd worked out that it put me off my game. "Anyone ever tell you how sexy you look in that dress?"

I pressed a hand to his chest. His rock-hard chest. His chest that I wanted to get a glimpse of. Fuck, I needed to keep my thoughts in check. Pushing him away, I found his gaze again. "I can't say they have."

His hand lingered on my waist. "That's a damn shame. A woman like you should hear that all the time."

Guilt washed over me as I basked in his compliment. There was no more denying it—I liked Devil. More than I liked Wayne. It was time to end whatever it was I had going with Wayne, because I was definitely not the type of woman to lead a man on. Or the kind of woman to cheat on a man. Regardless of where this ended up with Devil, Wayne was not the man for me.

Devil's eyes narrowed at me. "What are you thinking, darlin'? Looks serious."

"I was thinking that you should get me a French Martini. And that I want to know everything there is to know about you."

His fingers dug into my skin at my waist and he lowered his mouth to my ear again. "You wanna know what *my* thoughts were?" At my nod, he said, "I was thinking about how much I want to fuck you with my tongue."

Burning hot need slid through me, straight to my core. I squeezed my legs together at the same time that I ran my hand down his chest and gripped the side of his shirt. When our eyes met again, I said, "I was thinking more along the lines of you fucking me with your cock, but we could begin with your tongue."

"Fuck," he hissed.

I let him go. "You should go get the drinks so we can get started."

He did, and when he returned, I'd kicked off my sandals and settled on the lounge with my legs tucked under me. Sunday afternoons were for comfort as far as I was concerned.

Devil returned, and I watched in fascination as he folded his body onto the lounge next to me. I'd never been with a man who was as built as he was. My eyes were glued to him—his ass, then his legs, his thighs—oh, God how I imagined them in bed—his chest and finally, his arms. It was like muscle heaven.

Lifting a bottle of beer to his mouth, he spread an arm across the back of the lounge behind me and drew my attention back to his

face. "Say the word, gorgeous, and we'll get out of here. I'm all yours."

In an effort to buy some time and find my words again, I took a sip of the cocktail he'd bought me. The thought of having all of him—every inch of his body—made my pulse speed.

He'd twisted slightly so he faced me. He was so damn close I fought the urge to run my fingers over his lips. Instead, I said, "You're intent on driving me insane with lust, aren't you?"

"Is that what I'm doing?"

"Yes, but I'm guessing you already know that."

He leaned even closer, his eyes fixed firmly on mine. "I don't know anything for sure with you, Hailee."

While Devil was fun and flirty, every now and then he gave me a glimpse of the intensity I was beginning to think burned through him. I'd sensed a dangerous undertone to him before, and I wondered how deep it ran.

I decided to let him in on my thoughts. Playing with men wasn't my style. "I'm not going to see Wayne anymore."

Approval flared in his eyes. "Good."

"And my grandmother wants you to come to dinner one night during the week."

A smile touched his lips. "I'm free any night. You tell me which one and I'll be there."

I wasn't sure what I'd expected, but it wasn't the easiness of his reply. I still couldn't work out if he was a player or not. His smooth manner made me think he was, but everything else about him made me feel like he was chasing me for more than sex.

I decided to be completely upfront with my thoughts. "Are you just after sex here? I mean, if you are, I'm on board with that, but I'd rather know going in what this is rather than thinking it could be more when that's not what you're thinking."

He smiled harder and leant forward so he could kiss me. His lips on mine blazed a line of hunger along my skin. I wanted more. And he didn't disappoint.

Parting my lips, he deepened the kiss, his tongue searching for mine. He took my face in his hands, and his body slid across the lounge towards mine until we were touching.

I wanted to crawl into his lap and never let him end this kiss.

I wanted to rip his shirt off and put my hands all over his body.

God, I wanted to do so many dirty things to him—things I'd never done to another man, but had dreamt of.

"Darlin'," he rasped, pulling his mouth from mine, which made me want to cry out my disappointment. "We need to stop this now or else I'm not gonna be able to stop. I'd happily fuck you on this lounge if it's what you wanted, but I doubt it is."

I took hold of his face. "I need your lips on mine for at least another five minutes, and if you can't control yourself, that's on you." My words came out on a huff of bossy breathlessness, because that was what a kiss from Devil did to me. I could only imagine what sleeping with him would do. Hell, he might cause me to stop breathing all together.

His eyes widened a fraction before he grinned. "Jesus, you're something else, woman."

And then he gave me what I wanted.

And I knew what his answer would be about whether this was just sex or not.

This was never going to just be about sex.



"Your pussy tastes sweeter than I imagined," Devil said as he moved his way up my body, pressing kisses to as much of my skin as he could along the way.

After just over an hour at Flirt, driving each other crazy for sex, he'd leant over and growled in my ear, "I'm done, here. I want you on the back of my bike, and then I want you on your back. And don't think for a second that you'll be leaving my place before tomorrow."

I hadn't argued, because what woman would ever disagree with a man like Devil when he took charge like that?

Meeting his gaze as his face came closer to mine, I said, "You imagined what it would taste like?"

He positioned his body over mine, his hard cock teasing me. Devil had gotten me naked faster almost than I could blink. I'd hardly had time to take a look at his home before he'd undressed me. That was pretty much as soon as he closed his front door behind us.

Once he had me naked, he'd thrown me over his shoulder and walked us into his lounge room. He'd rummaged in a cupboard for a blanket, thrown it on the lounge room floor, and positioned me in the middle of it. I'd watched, transfixed, as he'd stripped. Every glorious inch of his body had been revealed to me, and I'd been like a kid at Christmas, practically bouncing with excitement to find out exactly what was inside my present.

Devil really was like a present. An exquisitely wrapped one with his beautifully inked skin. I'd only had a taste of what was inside, and I needed more. I wanted to know everything that was inside this man. His thoughts, feelings, hopes, regrets, flaws, strengths, weaknesses, talents, disappointments, successes... all of the things that made him who he was.

And that frightened me a little, because I knew I was the kind of person who didn't do things by halves. When I was in, I was all in, and it scared people off. It certainly scared men off. I couldn't count the number of guys I'd started dating who had fled the minute I wanted everything all at once. I had tried to change this about myself, but I couldn't change the one thing about me that caused it—I felt things on such a deep level that they consumed me. And I'd never found a man who could handle that.

Devil dipped his mouth to mine and kissed me before saying, "Since the moment we met, I haven't *stopped* thinking about what you'd taste like."

I wrapped my arms and legs around him. "Seriously, every word out of your mouth gets me wetter. You could probably just keep talking and I'd come."

He grinned. "We'll have to test that theory out one day, but not today. Today I've got other plans."

"I hope they include your tongue inside me again." *Oh, God, please say yes.*

"They include more than just that inside you, darlin'."

I let him go as he pushed up, and then I watched in anticipation as he lowered his lips to my pussy again.

His eyes held mine as he licked slowly from one end to the other, before sucking my clit into his mouth.

My back arched.

My arms flung out and gripped the blanket.

Fuck, yes.

Yes, yes, yes.

I closed my eyes as the pleasure he gave rippled through me. It started out small and grew in intensity until every last cell in my body sung with adoration for everything that was Devil.

His tongue.

His lips.

His hands.

And his God-given talent for using all those things together in the way I was pretty sure God meant them to be used. Well, maybe not, but I was, again, almost certain every woman on earth would agree with me there.

As he brought me closer to orgasm, a chant I had no control over fell from my mouth. A combination of his name and God's name and a few swear words. I could hardly hear myself over the rush of bliss roaring through me, but I knew words were flowing.

When I finally fell over the edge and lingered in that divine space of pleasurable nothingness, Devil's strong hands moved along my body, up to my waist where he gripped me with one hand while the other one slid up my back to take hold of my neck. He pulled me to a sitting position, bringing our mouths together. Nipping my bottom lip with his teeth, he rasped, "Listening to you say my name over and over has my dick so fucking hard."

I opened my eyes to find him staring at me, full of need. Reaching for his cock, I said, "It's my turn now."

He stopped me with a shake of his head, his hand pushing mine away from its destination. "No, darlin', I need in this sweet pussy. You can suck my dick later, but right now, I'm gonna come inside of you."

Before I had a chance to respond, he had me on my back with my legs spread while he reached for a condom in his wallet.

"I honestly figured you for a guy who'd fuck me from behind, maybe with your hand around my throat," I said, watching his muscles flex as he moved. Goddam, he was gorgeous. My pussy clenched, desperate to have him inside.

He took hold of his cock and ran it through my wetness before rubbing the tip of it over my clit. Over and over in a delicious rhythm that caused my body to arch up again.

His eyes met mine, dark with desire. "That'll come, but the first time I fuck you"—he pushed his cock inside me, not far, but enough

for me to miss it when he pulled back out—"I wanna watch your face while I stamp my name on your tongue." He caught my lips in a long, deep kiss, and then added, "I'm going to show you how it feels to be fucked by a man who is so fucking caught up in you that all he can think about is you and when he'll next get to see you. You ever had that, darlin'?"

Oh, fuck, I had never had that. I was sure of it, because I'd never felt the way Devil made me feel. He'd lit a fire in me, and it had spread from my mind to my core and out to my fingertips and toes.

I couldn't think straight.

I couldn't process my feelings.

All I saw was him.

All I felt was him.

And all I knew, right then, was *him*.

"No," I whispered, "I've never had that."

He growled as he entered me, and it vibrated through my body, setting off another round of extreme pleasure. My breaths turned into pants when he started fucking me. Good God, his dick was huge. I'd never been filled so well. It was exquisite, and worked me into such a state that I found myself clawing my fingernails into his skin while I begged him to fuck me harder. Rougher.

With his body on top of me and my limbs around him, his eyes clung to mine. "You want it harder?"

I dug my fingers into his back. "Yes."

He pulled out and then slammed his dick into me harder. "More?" The word left his lips on another growl. The kind of deep, masculine sound that did all kinds of good shit to me.

I wondered how much harder he could give it to me. Tightening my arms around him, I demanded, "Yes, more."

"Fuck," he roared as he gave me everything he had.

I'd never been fucked the way Devil was fucking me. It was rough and dirty, and I couldn't get enough. He gave me the whole experience—his dick pounding into me, eyes that never left mine, a powerful body that commanded my attention, guttural sounds that told me how into me he was, and dominance that excited me.

He took me on a ride I never wanted to get off, and when my toes curled and my core quivered, and I came, I knew I'd do anything to have him again. Devil had made good on his promise. He'd stamped

his name on my tongue. Hell, he'd engraved himself all over me, so much so that I wasn't sure I'd ever look at another man again.

DEVIL

My phone woke me the next morning, dragging me from the best fucking dream I'd ever had. Hailee featured in it, and for all my efforts to stay with it, the fucking phone made sure I didn't.

I flung my arm out towards the bedside table in search of my phone but failed in my attempt. When it stopped ringing, I gave up and reached for Hailee.

I found an empty bed.

What the fuck?

I thought for sure she'd still be here after the night we had last night. And it wasn't the sex that blazed front and centre in my mind. It was the way she managed to make me anticipate what was to come between us. I hung off every word she said, every smile she sent my way, the way she saw everything. The thrill of not knowing what I was gonna get from her next could become an addiction. I wanted to sit and talk with her for hours. I wanted to reach deep into her mind so I could know her. *Really* know her.

I wanted to see the parts of her she showed no one else.

Leaving my bed, I threw on some shorts, brushed my teeth and headed out to the kitchen. I needed coffee. And hopefully I'd find Hailee there, too.

She wasn't in the kitchen, but I did find her in the lounge room. I slowed as she came into view when I entered the room. She sat cross-legged on the blanket I'd spread across the floor the night before, with her hands resting on her knees and her eyes closed. I wasn't sure, but she appeared to be meditating.

Resting my shoulder against the wall, I crossed my arms in front of me while I watched her. I loved that she had thrown one of my tees on. There was something about seeing a woman who did crazy good shit to you, in your clothes.

A good few minutes passed before she said, "Morning." She didn't stop what she was doing, though. She simply carried on in silence after taking a moment to acknowledge my presence.

"Mornin', darlin'. You do this every morning?"

She nodded and murmured, "Yeah."

I pushed off from the wall. "I don't want to interrupt you. I'm gonna make coffee. You want one?"

She turned then and hit me with a smile that woke every part of me up. "I'd love a coffee, thank you."

Her legs unfolded and she spread them out in front of her, drawing my attention there. The only thing in my mind after that was the memory of those legs hugging me last night.

As I stood staring at her legs, lost in thought, her soft laughter floated through the air. "Am I not getting coffee now?"

My eyes found hers again. "Yeah, but as soon as you're finished in here, I want your ass in the kitchen." Without waiting for her to reply, I walked out of the room.

Christ, it was hard to take those steps when all I wanted to do was bend her over and fuck her again. But I also wanted to give her the space to finish whatever it was she'd been doing.

"Devil."

My step faltered at the sound of her right behind me. Spinning around, we came face-to-face.

Hailee was fucking perfect.

Even first thing in the morning when her mascara from the night before was a little smudged and her hair a little messy.

Especially first thing in the morning.

I ran my finger down her cheek and along her jaw. Holding her eyes, I said, "Why do you wear so much makeup when you're fucking beautiful without it?"

Her lips curled as she smiled. That smile made it all the way to her eyes, too, as she reached for my waist. Her fingers ghosted over my skin lightly before she gripped me. Moving closer, she stood on her toes and planted a good-morning kiss on my mouth.

Hailee's morning kisses were something I was going to work hard to experience on a regular basis. She didn't stop at one; she kept going until our bodies melded together, our arms clung to each other and we were breathless. She tasted like toothpaste, and I loved that she'd felt comfortable enough to use my stuff.

When she finished kissing me and tried to pull away, I grabbed my tee she wore and pulled her back to me. My other hand held her ass as I said, "You don't think a man could be satisfied with a few kisses, do you?"

She slid a hand over my shoulder and up into my hair at the back of my neck. "I'm dying for a coffee. I've been awake for at least an hour, and believe me when I tell you that if I don't get caffeine in the morning, I'm a grumpy bitch."

I gripped her ass harder. "First, you might be dying for coffee, but *I'm* dying for pussy. Second, why the fuck didn't you wake me an hour ago? I could have had my fill, and you could be on your way to caffeine. And third"—I dipped my mouth to her neck and sucked her there for a moment before glancing up—"I'd like to see the grumpy, bitchy side of you. I think it'd get my dick even harder for you."

She moved her hands so she could push against my chest. "I hate to break it to you, bossman, but I have to go to work today. There's no pussy worshipping time available to you this morning."

As I let her go, I said, "You're fucking killing me here, Hailee. How long do I have?"

"You have the time it takes you to make me a coffee and talk to me for fifteen minutes. Then I have to go home so I can get ready."

"Your take-charge attitude turns me on, but let's remember who's the boss here." Truth be told, I could go all day with her trying to boss me.

She lifted a brow. "*Let's* remember who has the pussy here."

I snaked my arm around her waist and yanked her back to me. Bending my mouth to her ear, I growled, "And let's remember just how wet that pussy is for me. I'll give you your coffee and conversation this morning, but to be clear, you're back in my bed tonight, and my dick *will* be deep inside you more than once."

Her breaths came faster at that. Finding my eyes again after I let her go, she said, "Damn, you are demanding."

"I am. Now move that sweet ass into my kitchen so I'm not wasting a minute of the time I have left with you this morning."

She did as I said, and a minute later, I had her sitting on my kitchen counter while I made us coffee. Her legs dangled over the edge while she leant back and rested her hands behind her. I loved how at home she looked. How at ease she seemed with me already.

"How long have you been with Storm?"

I filled the kettle and spooned coffee into mugs. "Seven years."

"How old were you then?"

"Twenty-five."

"What made you join? Like, did you grow up around the club?"

I rested my ass against the counter and folded my arms over my chest while I waited for the kettle to boil and contemplated sharing the truth of my story with Hailee. I didn't usually tell it to anyone and especially not women I wanted to sleep with, but I already knew I wanted something with her. And if she couldn't accept my club ties, we had no chance at anything.

"You sure you wanna know that story, darlin'? It's probably not one you'd like."

"If there's one thing I've learnt in my thirty years, it's that perfection doesn't exist. Everyone's story is filled with imperfection. And who am I to judge yours?"

"Why the fuck did it take us so long to meet? I've been going to that pub for years, and not once have I seen you play there."

She smiled. "I think we meet people when we're supposed to. When we need them."

I uncrossed my arms and let them drop to my sides. "That seems like very fucking woo-woo-out-there kinda shit. I'm not sure I buy into that. What about the people we meet that are assholes? What do we need them for?"

Her smile grew. "Maybe they need us. Maybe they'll teach us a lesson, in which case we do need them."

The kettle boiled at that point, and I turned to make coffee. "Milk? Sugar?"

"Just a tiny splash of milk, please. No sugar." I heard her feet hit the floor, and a moment later, her arm slid around my waist. "So will you tell me your story about Storm, or will I have to wait for that?" She paused for a second. "Just so you know, I'm down for waiting. We've got all the time to get to our stories."

I turned my face to look at her. "Yeah, we do," I murmured. "I think I might leave that one for another day." She really wasn't ready for that one.

The smile on her face seemed to have settled there. "Okay, you've gotta give me three things about you, then. Anything. And then I'll give you three things about me."

Shifting on my feet, I turned my body to face her. I loved that she kept her hand on my waist. "What shit do you wanna know, gorgeous?"

She thought about that for a minute, and then her smile morphed into a grin. "Tell me your favourite movie."

That was an easy one. Growing up, we'd watched it over and over to the point I could recite it along with the characters. "*The Karate Kid*."

"You surprise me, Devil. I thought for sure you were gonna say some violent action flick. Any others?"

I had to dig deep, because I didn't watch movies often. "What's the name of that one with that chick from the movie with the bus that the guy from *The Matrix* was in? The chick from the bus movie takes in a poor kid who goes on to become a top football player."

She laughed and shook her head. "Your clues are a mess, dude, but it's *The Blind Side*. And it's Sandra Bullock who stars in it."

"Good flick. Fucking loved her character." I pulled her closer to me. "What are your favourites?"

"My absolute favourite movie ever is *Marley and Me*."

"The dog flick, yeah?"

"Yes."

"Guaranteed to make any chick bawl." I made a mental note to watch it with her simply for the opportunity to get her in my arms when she started crying.

She nodded and her hand squeezed my waist as she said, "Okay, favourite thing to do on a Sunday."

"Why a Sunday?"

"Because that's our rest day."

"Fuck, are you a happy clapper?"

Laughing, she said, "I'm not sure. What's a happy clapper?"

"A religious nut."

"Ah, I see the math you did there. Rest day, religion. I believe in God, but I'm not into church or any of that, if that's what you mean."

When I talk about rest day, I just mean that I personally believe in taking one day a week and doing nothing but things you love."

It was my turn to smile. "So the fact you chose to hang out with me yesterday was a good sign that you really like me?"

She reached for my face and angled it down so she could kiss me. "You should most definitely take that as a good sign."

I warred with myself over the desire to keep her lips on mine versus the desire to finish this conversation. In the end, I decided I wanted to know shit about her more than I wanted a few minutes kissing her. "Okay, tell me your favourite things for a Sunday."

"Well, besides having drinks with hot bikers, I love to go out dancing or to see a live band. A lazy sleep in is always a good way to start the day, and time with friends shopping and having lunch is always good, too."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "When you say drinks with hot bikers, plural, that was just a slip of the tongue, wasn't it?"

Her body swayed against mine a little as she softly laughed at that. "Of course. There's only one hot biker I know. The rest aren't hot."

We needed to move away from this topic. Usually, I had a good sense of humour and could handle teasing like this, but with Hailee, I was experiencing a weird rush of territorial bullshit. I'd always lived with the belief that if the person you were with wanted someone else, then so be it; you weren't meant to be. I hadn't ever really experienced jealousy. Suddenly, jealousy was crawling all over me, and I didn't know what to do with it.

I reached for the coffee I'd made and passed it to her. "What are you doing tonight?"

Taking a sip, she looked at me over the rim of the mug. "Are you trying to change the subject? You haven't told me your favourite Sunday things yet."

This conversation I could handle. I grinned. "Darlin', there're only two things a Sunday should be reserved for. A long ride and sex."

"You're not a Sunday armchair sportsman, then?"

"Armchair sports are best watched in bed while balls deep in a sweet pussy, but I have been known to watch some motor racing or footy with the boys. A coldie in front of the telly is always a good thing on a Sunday afternoon."

She moved her hand from my waist to my chest. "Just putting it out there that I'm not the kind of woman who shares my cock time with a bloody television, so don't go getting any ideas that I'll put up with you watching sport while we have sex."

My dick twitched at her declaration. Mostly because her attempts at ordering me around got me hard, but also because that declaration told me she also planned for us to be something. I drank some of my coffee before saying, "I like the way you think. Sex first and then television."

"Or maybe, just sex. Hours and hours of it. And no television."

I grinned again. "Even fucking better."

She finished her coffee and said, "Okay, bossman, I gotta leave."

I stopped her as she took a step away from me. "Not until you agree to see me tonight."

"The band always plays at Flirt on a Monday. We could hang out after."

"What time do you start?"

"Eight tonight."

"I'll see you then."

She planted another kiss on my lips, driving me crazy because I needed more than one quick kiss from her. When she pulled away, I said, "I'll take you home."

Surprise flickered over her face. "I was just gonna walk."

I frowned. "Fuck no."

A slow smile crept across her face as she looped her hands around my neck. "In that case, I don't have to leave so soon. I can stay for another half hour."

My arms snaked around her so I could take hold of her ass. Lifting her, I turned and deposited her on the kitchen counter. "Thank fuck, because I've got at least half-an-hour worth of things I wanna do to you before I let you go." Without wasting another second, I dropped my mouth to hers. It was going to be the longest day on record while I counted down the hours to have these lips again.

HAILEE

I yawned as Rachel rattled off the customer complaints we'd received last week. Monday mornings at work were always reserved for Rachel's weekly rundown of the week ahead, plus a reflection on the past week. Sadly, her favourite thing seemed to be to berate each of us for our mistakes rather than to build us up by focusing more on our strengths. I was all for acknowledging where we could have done better, but I was a firm believer in motivating through encouragement.

"Are we interrupting your sleep, Hailee?" Rachel threw me a glare as I yawned.

I sat up straighter. "Sorry." God, she irritated me lately. We used to have a great work relationship, but that was back when her love of belittling people hadn't existed. Ever since her hubby left her, it was like she was a whole new person. And not a good one.

"If your side project is keeping you up at night and interfering with my business, you'll need to decide which one you want to keep."

I froze. Where the fuck had that come from? "My project has nothing to do with me yawning, Rachel."

Three months ago, I'd started offering free massages to elderly people who couldn't afford them. It was all done in my own time at night and on weekends. Leona had seen what I was doing and had offered some of her time also, and then other local masseuses had come on board, too. Within two months, I'd grown my group of helpers to twenty, and it had turned into a project where I spent a lot of time managing everyone involved. A local journalist had discov-

ered what we were doing when his mother requested a massage, and he'd written a piece about us for the paper. The past month since that article had been published had been hectic. However, I'd worked hard not to let it interfere with my work.

Rachel continued glaring. "Yes, well I highly doubt that, Hailee. I think your commitment to this business has waned."

Leona groaned next to me, and I kicked her under the table. The last thing she needed was to lose her job or hours because she supported me.

"What are you saying?" I asked. I needed to know if I was in jeopardy of losing my job.

Her eyes bored into mine as she said, "I think you need to reconsider your goals in life and decide if you want to pursue your charity massages or if you'd prefer to focus on building a career here."

My chest squeezed with stress. I couldn't afford to lose my job, but no way in hell was I giving up helping people. I wanted to stand and walk out, telling her she could shove her fucking job, but I bit my tongue. I'd try and string her along until I could find a new job, and then I'd take great delight in telling her what I thought. "Okay," I bit out.

She lifted a brow. "Okay?"

"Okay, I'll reconsider everything." I wanted to scrape that damn brow from her face. She was always arching it, indicating her contempt for us.

"Good," she snapped. Turning to address all the staff, she said, "I hope I can count on your continuing loyalty to this business also." And then she exited the room, leaving me with a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

"Fuck, Hailee," Leona said. "What are you going to do?"

I looked at her. "Do you really think that if I was willing to give Tricia up because of this project that I wouldn't hesitate to give up this job?"

Her lips smooshed together in a sad frown. "Yeah, but we both know that you didn't walk away from your best friend simply because she gave you an ultimatum and made you choose between her and the project."

She was right. There was a fuckload more that had gone on in that relationship, but the nail in the coffin had been Tricia's inability

to share me with my new friends and the project that made my heart soar.

I nodded. "That's true. But honestly, I'm going to look for another job," I said as everyone in the room hustled around us to leave and get started for the day.

Rachel had put the fear of God into them. I'd seen it on their faces. And I'd wondered how many would stick with me and continue to offer free massages. Out of the fifteen masseuses who worked for her, seven of them donated their time to my project. I figured most of them needed this job more than they needed to help elderly people for free.

Leona stood and looked down at me. "I've decided to look for another job, too."

"Oh, God," I said, standing with her. "You guys really can't afford to screw around with finances at the moment, Leona. I won't accept your help with my project anymore."

"Pfft," she muttered. "I'd already decided to start looking. This just cements that decision. And if you think you can keep me away from helping, you're dreaming. I'm with you on this 100 percent."

I shook my head as I smiled at her. Leona was a stubborn woman, and I knew there was no way to change her mind.

For a day that had started off so well, it hadn't taken long to turn to shit. And yet, I smiled all the way through the day knowing I'd get to see Devil later.



I arrived at Flirt early that night. Much earlier than needed to chat with my bandmates before we started playing. After a shitty day with Rachel constantly on my back, I'd decided to dance some stress off.

"What'll it be tonight, babe?" Doug asked when I rested my arms on his counter.

"Hit me with something strong, please."

"Bad day?"

"The worst. I need a strong drink and then an hour or so dancing, and then I'll be good." Thank goodness Doug heavily discounted my drinks, pretty much to the point of not charging me anything. And

then putting what I owed him on a bar tab that he allowed me to pay off whenever I had money.

"You want me to blast your music for you?"

I smiled. Doug always looked after me when I felt the need to dance. I loved the good old Aussie rock that the pub preferred to play, but long ago I'd handed Doug a CD with the kind of rock I liked to dance to. I'd frequented the joint for long enough that the regulars put up with my music every now and then.

"You're good to me, Doug."

He made me a drink and said, "Just looking out for your mental health. And maybe mine. You forget that I've experienced your mood swings over the last two years."

I took the drink as he passed it over. "Yeah, no one needs to experience that." I'd had a few meltdowns over the years, especially over assholes who'd treated me badly. Doug, unfortunately, often copped the brunt of them.

He jerked his chin at me. "Drink up. I'll sort your music out."

I took a gulp of the drink. It tasted fruity and very alcoholic—exactly what I'd asked him for. "What is this?"

"It's a zombie. Lots of rum in that one. Guaranteed to give you some buzz."

I finished the drink and then headed out to the dance floor. Doug had already started playing my music, and a few minutes later, I was dancing, eyes closed, working the tension from my body.

A good hour, maybe more, passed before I decided I'd had enough. A few other girls had joined me on the dance floor, but mostly I'd danced alone, which was the way I preferred it. Getting lost in the beat drowned out the thoughts running through my mind, and I always felt refreshed afterwards. Sweaty, but refreshed.

As I made my way towards the back room where there was a bathroom I could shower in, Devil stepped in front of me. His eyes found mine, and I shivered at the desire I saw there. "I've been thinking about you all fucking day, darlin'. And after watching you dance for the last half hour, I'm not sure I can wait another few hours to have you."

"You've been watching me?" The way that turned me on surprised me. I was a performer, but I never thought of it in the way that people were watching me but rather that they were listening to me. I loved the idea of Devil watching me.

His body moved against mine and I felt his need for me. He slid a hand up my neck, behind my ear and into my hair so that he could grasp my head. Nodding, he said, "I had to restrain myself from dragging you off the dance floor and finding somewhere here I could fuck you."

His words caused an ache between my legs. One that only he could fix. And I needed him to fix it right now. Stepping away from him, I grabbed hold of his hand and led him out the back. We hit the staff room a few moments later, and I attempted to lock the door after I'd closed it behind him, but he dragged me to him before I could.

Lifting me, he pushed me up against the wall. I wrapped my arms and legs around him while he pressed his mouth to mine. He then kissed me like he'd been denied my lips for years.

His kiss consumed me.

Every single part of me.

If I thought dancing cleared my thoughts, Devil kissing me completely wiped them from my mind.

When he came up for air, he dropped his eyes so they could roam my body, and said, "Fuck... your body..." He didn't end his sentence, but rather, ran a hand over my breasts.

I took hold of his face so I could bring his gaze back up to meet mine. "You just want me for my body?"

"I want you for a lot fucking more than that, but right now, all I can think about is getting inside you."

Oh. God.

Devil had a way with words, but he also had a way with delivering those words. His voice could well become my kryptonite. It was deep and rumbley and husky and gravelly all rolled into one. And he knew just when to inflect it with one tone more than the other to achieve his desired goal.

I kept hold of his face and smashed my lips down onto his. He groaned as our tongues tangled in a needy rush. Devil was physically everything in a man I'd ever dreamt of. Besides the muscles and strength he possessed, he exuded the kind of sexuality every woman wanted to experience in their lifetime. Even if he tried to hide his desire for a woman, I was fairly sure he'd struggle, because his entire being revealed it.

It was in the way his chest and hips opened up to me, the way his hands reached for me, the way his mouth fell open even when I was

sure he didn't realise, the way his breaths quickened, and the way his eyes glazed over with heat.

I loved the way he didn't try to hide it.

And I loved the feeling of being in the arms of someone who so clearly wanted me.

Devil moved so he could place my feet back on the ground, but his lips stayed glued to mine. When he had me in place, he reached down to lift my dress.

Thank fuck I wore a dress tonight.

I dug my fingernails into the skin at the nape of his neck when his hands found my panties.

I started panting through our kisses when his fingers slid under my panties.

And when two of his fingers easily entered me, I cried out, "Oh, God, yes!"

"Fuck," he groaned into my mouth while he momentarily stopped kissing me. "I fucking love your pussy." Our eyes met and I sucked in a breath. I could listen to Devil talk dirty all night, and if he looked at me the way he was right now, I would do absolutely anything he requested. "I want to finger you for hours, darlin'. I want to make you come over and over by reaching deep inside you and"—he hit my G spot, causing me to cry out with pleasure—"doing that." His mouth was still near mine as he spoke, and the moment he finished talking, he dragged my bottom lip into his mouth and sucked it before kissing me again.

The sound of people talking just outside the door made me remember we hadn't locked it. I pulled my mouth from his. "You need to lock the door."

His eyes dipped to my throat and he bent to kiss me there, sucking hard on my skin. Ignoring my request.

"Devil," I urged, "the door."

Glancing up at me, he shook his head. "I'm going to fuck you with the door unlocked, Hailee."

Fuck.

No.

Any of my bandmates could walk in on us. Or Doug. Or any of the other staff working that night.

I let him go so I could move to lock it myself, but he quickly held me in place. Shaking his head, he growled, "No." Pressing his mouth

to my ear, he said, "I'm going to do this"—he reached his fingers deeper in me, adding another as he did so—"until you come, and then I'm going to give you my cock. And the door's going to stay unlocked during all of that."

I wanted that damn door locked.

And yet, I wanted everything he'd just promised me with the door unlocked.

I was torn.

The threat of someone walking in on us caused a whole new level of lust for him.

I wanted him to fuck me hard with his fingers.

I wanted him to fuck me dirty with his dick.

And I wanted him to growl filthy words in my ear while he did all that. *While I worried about someone seeing us.*

I drew his mouth back to mine. "I'm going to let you fuck me with the door unlocked, and in return, you're gonna eat me like you're a starved man later tonight."

His breathing picked up as he bit my lip. "Two things. One, you get no say in the lock. Just so you realise who's in charge here." My legs turned to jelly. I already thought they had, but I was so wrong about that. "And two, I *am* gonna eat you like a starved man later, because I *am* a fucking starved man. I've never known this level of hunger in my life." He kissed me deeply then, messing up any last thought I may have had, before dragging his mouth away to look me in the eyes and say, "Just so you realise how much I want you."

His fingers continued to work their magic inside me while he spoke, and I came as he told me how much he wanted me. I sagged against him as the pleasure consumed me. His strong arms held me up while his lips peppered kisses down my neck to my throat and out along my collarbones.

My need for his cock intensified when his hands roamed my body a moment later. The unlocked door was all but forgotten as I desperately undid his jeans and reached inside them for his cock.

He stopped what he was doing and chuckled. "You want some dick, darlin'?"

"You have no idea, bossman. Now, please tell me, for the love of God, that you have a condom." I was going to scream if he didn't. And I'd possibly hurt him in some way.

His grin spread right across his face as he reached into his back pocket. When he pulled a condom from his wallet, I motioned for him to hurry up and put it on. "Why the hurry?" he asked, taking his sweet time.

I took hold of his chin. "There's gonna be hell to pay if you don't hurry up and get that condom on and fuck me."

The grin on his face grew. Not that I would have thought it possible, but it did.

"What are you grinning at?" I demanded, feeling all kinds of desperate for him to speed this along.

As he slid the condom on, he kissed me and then said, "I'm grinning because I'm thinking that if you can be this demanding for my cock after only knowing me a week, I'm fucking excited to think about how demanding you'll be after a few years."

I reached for his ass to pull him closer in an effort to get him inside me. Circling my arms around him, I lifted myself into his hold as I said, "And what makes you think I'll still be demanding anything from you in a few years?"

He gripped my hair and yanked my head back as he thrust inside of me. Licking a line from my throat up to my mouth, he rasped, "You will be. There's no way you'll ever be able to go without this cock again."

I closed my eyes as he fucked me, and I thought about the truth in that statement. I'd never experienced love at first sight or instant lust in my life. Not until Devil. I'd only had to have one taste to know I wanted to drown in him. I came for the second time as that knowledge sank in.

Devil had wrapped himself around me after only one week, and I didn't ever want to escape.

DEVIL

"How's Jen?" King asked me early Tuesday morning when he phoned to check in.

"I've just left your place. She seems good today. Better than the last couple of days." She'd perked up a lot since I'd started checking in on her last Friday.

"She still sick?"

"Yeah, that morning sickness is really knocking her around. Nothing seems to be helping too much." She'd been so sick yesterday that I'd googled for suggestions to ease it, but nothing much came up in the results that she hadn't already tried.

"I'm hoping we'll be finished up here in the next day or so. We're heading out to Warwick today and will check in that area for Shannon. Scott got a lead for us out there." He paused for a moment before asking, "How's Hyde? Is his head in the game?"

Fuck, Hyde had been off the grid most of the time since King left on Friday. He'd shown his face for an hour or so yesterday, but that was it. I didn't want to burden King while he was away, but he'd made it clear he wanted to know this kind of shit. "I've hardly seen him, King, so I can't really answer that. I've left a message for him to make sure he's at the drop this afternoon, but I'm yet to hear back." We had a shipment of coke coming in at four, and I needed Hyde with me for it. The motherfuckers who supplied us had grown increasingly hostile lately. Fuck knew what I'd do if he didn't show.

"Fuck," King muttered. "I'll call him, too. Let me know if you don't hear back from him in the next hour or so."

After we ended the call, I placed my phone on the counter of the bar where I sat in the clubhouse and found Kree watching me with concern. "What?" I asked her. She'd grown into a good friend the past few months, and I often ran shit by her because she always came up with good suggestions.

She leant her hip against the counter. "Is Hyde okay?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Why?"

"He doesn't seem okay to me. Working in the bar, I hear a lot of whispers. And it seems to me that you're all frustrated with him, but it also seems that no one has checked on him."

"Fuck, Kree, you know what Hyde's like. He doesn't let anyone in. I've tried to talk with him a few times, but he either shuts down or loses his shit with me. There're only so many times someone can be told to fuck off before they do. What do you expect me to do if he's not interested in sharing whatever is on his mind?"

"Ask again. And again. Devil, friends don't give up on each other. Eventually he'll confide in someone, but only if he knows you care."

I sat and contemplated what she said while she poured drinks for some of the guys. She was right. But, Hyde could be a prick. Knowing that, though, told me I was the club member who would have to try harder to get through to him. Fuck knew, none of the others would have the patience.



"Since when did you start smoking again?" I asked Hyde while we waited for the drop that afternoon. Thank fuck he'd turned up. Not that he'd bothered to reply to my message or King's.

He glared at me. "None of your fucking business."

Hyde had quit smoking two years earlier. He'd always been a heavy smoker, so it had stunned all of us when he'd just up and quit one day. After the way he stopped cold turkey, I'd never expected him to take it back up.

"Why the fuck are you such an asshole, Hyde? I don't get it. We're your brothers, just trying to look out for you, and you treat us like absolute fucking shit some days." None of us knew much about his past, and that seemed to be the way he preferred it. I'd never

pushed to know more, because I believed everyone had a right to privacy, but maybe knowing more about him would help me understand why he was the way he was.

He took a long drag on his smoke as he stared into the distance. We were waiting outside an abandoned warehouse that we used as one of our drop-off points. Thunder rumbled overhead, and the clouds darkened, threatening for the sky to open and dump rain on us. Hyde's features darkened, too, as he contemplated my question.

Finally, he looked at me and said, "You ever done something that altered your entire life, Devil? Something that also impacted other people's lives, too. In a bad way, I mean."

I thought about that for a moment. The answer wasn't one I wanted to think about too much. "I've done bad shit that's affected other people's lives. And it affected me, too, but I wouldn't say it altered my life entirely. Why?"

"I have."

"And?" I wasn't sure where he was going with this.

He finished his smoke and stubbed it out before glancing back up at me. "And... I think maybe I fucked up more than I thought I did."

Kree was so fucking right. Hyde needed us. As I tried to figure out how to word what I wanted to say, the guys we were waiting for showed up, and the moment was lost.

I watched as Hyde stalked their way, his body tense, and I hoped like hell this drop went okay. His unpredictable nature concerned me, so I hurried to catch up to him.

Rolland had brought three guys with him today instead of the one he usually showed up with. We'd agreed a year ago when we started working together that we'd both only ever bring one person with us to these drops.

"What's going on?" I asked him when we met in the middle. I jerked my chin towards the men he'd brought. "What happened to the deal we had?"

His shifty eyes moved between Hyde and me. He knew us both because King always switched up who he brought with him. "Got shit to discuss with you boys today and didn't wanna take a chance that the information I'm about to share would get me killed."

"Fuck," Hyde said. "Start talking and let's see how this shakes out."

Sweat rolled down Rolland's face, and I figured it wasn't just because of the heat. A large thunderclap overhead caused him to jump. "Fuck," he muttered. "This shit ain't all on me, so you just keep that in mind, yeah?"

I stepped forward. "When Hyde tells you to start talking, he doesn't mean to start talking shit. Spit it the fuck out!"

He raked his fingers through his hair. "Okay, so the deal for me to only supply Storm... it has to end." As he said that, the three men with him all pulled their guns and trained them on us. "As of today, I'll be supplying you and one other guy. And like I said, this ain't my preferred decision. I owe someone."

Hyde's lips pulled up into a snarl. "Who else are you supplying?"

"He's a new player in town. I doubt you know him."

Hyde grasped Rolland's shirt, ignoring that two guns were instantly trained on him. "I didn't fucking ask if I know him, mother-fucker. I asked you for his name."

The biggest guy that Rolland had brought with him pressed his gun to Hyde's head. "I suggest you back the fuck away, asshole. I'm under strict instructions to shoot if you threaten any of us today."

Hyde ignored him and continued to stare at Rolland. "I'm waiting!" he barked.

"Rolland," I started, but the big guy turned his gun on me, causing me to stop.

"Oh for fuck's sake," Rolland muttered. "You're gonna find out anyway. I owe loyalty to no fucker. His name is Wesley Marx." He paused for a moment before saying, "Now, can we get this shit done so we can all leave?"

The last thing I wanted to do was carry on as if nothing had happened. Wesley Marx cutting in on our territory was a big fucking deal, and King would probably hunt him down and threaten to slit his throat if he didn't stop. But with three guns on us, Hyde and I didn't have much choice but to carry on.

As we watched Rolland leave after we'd completed the drop, I said to Hyde, "This is gonna get messy."

He glanced at me and nodded. "I'll look into who Wesley Marx is and you let King know about all this."

"You don't want to let King know?" He was the VP after all.

"No, you do it."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "You wanna finish that story you were telling me earlier?" Whatever it was, I felt like it must tie in with the shit going down between him and King.

His eyes turned hard. "No. And don't bring that shit up again." With that, he turned and stalked to the van we'd brought to the drop. And I wondered if that would be my only chance to get Hyde to open up.



Just after five thirty, I pulled up outside Hailee's work. When I dropped her at home that morning after she stayed the night at my place again, I'd told her I'd pick her up. She was a stubborn woman and argued with me, sprouting some bullshit about being capable of walking. I'd given her a good five minutes in which to argue with me, and then I'd told her how this would go. She'd argued for another five minutes before finally giving in. I figured that was ten minutes well spent, because I planned to pick her up every day from here on out.

"You're late," she said, walking my way. She'd been perched on the low brick wall outside her work, waiting for me.

I remained on my bike and passed her a helmet. "How long you been waiting, darlin'?"

"Maybe like five to ten minutes. Somewhere in that range."

I grinned. "Bullshit. I just did the block trying to find somewhere to park. You weren't waiting out here then."

She poked her tongue at me, a cheeky smile pushing its way through. "I've gotta keep you on your toes somehow. Start as you wish to go on, and all."

I reached for her waist and pulled her close before she had a chance to put the helmet on. "For the record, I'm on my toes. But I do like your style."

"Good to hear," she said as she hopped on the bike behind me.

Reaching back for her, I grabbed her thighs and slid her along the bike towards me. "You're too far away. I need that sweet pussy against my ass."

She did as I said and wrapped her arms tightly around my waist. It occurred to me a moment too late that by the time we made it to

her place, my dick would be like steel. Not the best way to turn up for dinner with her grandmother.

For the next forty minutes, we weaved in and out of some of the worst Sydney traffic I'd seen in a long time. This meant that when we arrived at Hailee's home, my prediction had proved correct.

Hailee's eyes travelled from my crotch to meet my gaze as we stood in her driveway. She didn't say anything, but the way her lips twitched gave me an idea of her thoughts.

"You're amused by my pain?" I asked.

She frowned. "It hurts?"

"No, but *I'm* in pain. One, I really don't wanna go inside to your grandmother like this. And two, I'm pained that I have to wait to get you under me. I'm all for dinner and talking with Jean, but a man should be able to pick his woman up from work and take her straight home to bed."

Her face and body softened in a way that caused *me* to soften. The woman who had told me she wanted to keep me on my toes was all but gone, replaced by a woman who looked at me like I'd made all the bad in her day disappear just by being there.

She swayed a little as she clutched a handful of my shirt. "Your woman? We've only known each other for just over a week."

My eyes searched hers. "You don't believe that two people can meet and just *know* they're meant to be together?"

"I don't know.... I've never put much thought into that. I guess I've never met a man who fit that category." Her words stumbled out in much the same way I figured her thoughts were stumbling all over each other. I'd caught her off guard, and it was a fucking beautiful place to catch her.

From what I knew so far, Hailee wasn't a closed off person, but when she was open like this, she was even more beautiful than usual.

It all affected me. The way she chewed on her lip, and the way her thoughts caused her to waver between being a little lost and being completely there with me. Also, the way she smiled at me like I really was the only person in the world. And how she gave me her complete attention. She made me feel like whatever I had to say was important enough for her to consider.

Hailee had this kind of gentle yet spirited soul I'd never known in a woman before. Not that I knew her that well yet, but even if she

tried to hide from the world, she'd never be able to. Her inner beauty shone just as brightly as her outer beauty.

"You've never met a man who fit that category because *I'm* that man for you."

She processed that for a beat. "I don't know that I believe in knowing someone is the person for you straight away. I thought the last guy I was in a long-term relationship with was the one for me. Turned out that after two years of living with him, I didn't know him at all. And instead of giving me a lifetime of happiness, all he gave me was self-doubt and a fear of falling for the wrong man again."

Her gaze had drifted to the ground as she spoke, and my gut told me this asshole had fucked her right up. Tilting her chin up, I said, "What did he do to you?"

Her eyes met mine and she swallowed hard. "I don't really want to talk about this tonight," she said in a half whisper.

I moved closer to her. "Hailee, what did he do?"

She blinked a few times and her body stilled. I wasn't convinced she was going to give me what I wanted, but then she opened her mouth and shared a piece of her soul with me. One of the many pieces I'd be fighting to own from here on out. "He started to change just after we'd been together for two years. Like, he'd lose his shit if I came home from work late, or he'd pick a fight with me after dinner and then go out for the entire night, not coming home until the morning and refusing to tell me where he'd been. His moods swung all the time until the point where I didn't know what to expect from one hour to the next. He would go from him telling me how much he loved me to him belittling me and telling me I didn't deserve anyone in my life and that I should be lucky he chose to stay with me. It got to the point where I decided we needed a break. I wasn't sure if I was going to leave him all together, but I did need some time away from him to think straight." She paused for a moment and took a few deep breaths before continuing. "That day... the day I told him I needed some time away... he beat me so badly I couldn't go to work for a week."

"Motherfucker," I swore. Pulling her into my arms, I kissed her head and said, "Men like that don't deserve to breathe."

She clung to me for a while. When she pulled away, she said, "No, they don't."

"You left him after that?"

She nodded. "I called my brother for help. I was living in the UK at the time and had no money to fly home. He flew to me, sorted Mickey out and then brought me home. And while I'll always be grateful for what he did for me, he's been a pain in my ass ever since. He's so damn overprotective now when it comes to men I date that he scares most of them off."

"I like him already. That's exactly what I'd hope a brother would do for you."

She raised a brow. "Yeah, you wait until you meet him and then tell me what you think. I bet you'll agree with me soon enough."

"Okay, so let's get one thing clear here. You're my woman."

She smiled. "Is that your way of telling me you don't want me to see anyone else?"

"It is. It's also my way of telling you that from here on out, I'll be picking you up from work every day and dropping you off, too." I placed a finger against her lips when she attempted to argue with me. "And that Sundays are to be reserved for me. I don't care what we do so long as we do it together."

Her eyes widened. "Umm, no, that's not gonna happen, bossman."

"Which part of that?" I had to work hard not to grin at her reaction. I fucking loved going head-to-head with her.

"All of it."

"Uh, yeah, it is."

"No." She shook her head emphatically. "There's no way a guy I've just met is gonna tell me what I can and can't do."

"So you're saying that after we've known each other for some time, you'll allow it?"

Her forehead scrunched her disapproval of everything I was saying. "Don't try and twist my words."

I grinned. "Okay, try and word it again. At which point in our relationship do you think it'd be acceptable for me to demand a few things?"

"Never!" Fuck, I was working her up. And in turn, she was working my dick up more than she already had on the way over here.

"Right, I'm glad we've got that settled," I said as I moved towards her house.

She grabbed hold of my arm. "Wait. We haven't settled anything."

I halted my progress and looked at her. "We have. We've worked out that you're gonna fight me all the way, which for the record, I'm already getting hard about." Dipping my mouth to her ear, I added, "I'm not the type of man to give up when I want something, Hailee. And I just told you how much I want you. So fight all you want, but this relationship *is* going to happen, and I *am* going to demand things from you."

HAILEE

I watched Devil laugh as my grandmother told him something funny. He had the most infectious laugh I'd ever heard, and my lips curled up into a smile simply from the sound.

After his declaration outside when we'd arrived, the one where he tried to lay down the law with me about having his way with bossing me around, we'd come inside to find Jean struggling to pull the roast from the oven. Devil had quickly taken over and had also settled my grandmother at the kitchen table with a drink of water. That had earned him brownie points. And then I'd all but forgotten being mildly irritated with him when he proceeded to finish cooking dinner.

Who knew bikers could cook? Not me. But it had been confirmed when I took my first bite of the honeyed carrots he'd made. I mean, what biker even knew to honey carrots?

"Hailee, cat got your tongue, dear?"

I stared at my grandmother who'd just asked that question, breaking into my thoughts. "Sorry, I was just thinking about something."

"What?" Gran always did ask the hard questions. Well, not hard so much as intrusive.

I decided to share my thoughts. Glancing at Devil, I said, "Who taught you to cook? Specifically, who told you that honey and carrots go so well together?" Looking back at my grandmother, I said, "That's what I was thinking."

Devil grinned. Always with the sexy grin that caused my brain to go fuzzy. "My mother and my sister." He winked as he added,

"Specifically, it was Lee who taught me about carrots and honey." That wink shot heat straight to my core. God, how I wanted to rip those clothes off him and—

"Lee's your sister?" My grandmother asked, cutting into my dirty thoughts.

"Yeah. She's a year younger than me but was the kind of kid who hounded Mum to let her help cook from the age of three. Mum got pneumonia when I was thirteen, and Lee took over the family cooking. Part of that was roping me and my brother in to help."

"You're close to your sister, then?" Gran asked.

Devil nodded. "Yes, ma'am." He pulled out his wallet and flashed a photo at her. "That's Lee's daughter, Skye. She's just turned one." I wasn't sure I'd ever seen a man beam so much while talking about his family. And yet, I knew from a previous conversation that he hadn't seen his parents for fifteen years, so I wondered what his family looked like these days.

I leant forward. "Do you see them often?"

Regret clouded his features as he shook his head. "No. Lee and her husband settled in Tamworth where we grew up. I haven't been back there since I left home, so the only time I see them is when Lee comes to Sydney. And that's probably only once a year. But we Skype, so Skye knows who I am."

Silence fell over us for a moment. I didn't know what to say, because he appeared sad about not seeing them often. And that was an emotion I was yet to meet in Devil, so it required a moment of thought on my behalf as to how to approach it.

My grandmother, though, jumped right on it, changing the subject completely. "Hailee tells me she doesn't know your real name, young man. Is that correct?"

Oh. God.

"Gran," I chastised her, hitting her with a dirty look.

She gave me the look she reserved for when she intended to ignore my plea. "Hush, Hailee. If a man wants to see my granddaughter, he'd better be offering up his name. I need to know who has my baby out at night in case anything happens."

And there it was.

Jean Archer showed her love in cantankerous ways that I both adored her for and argued with her over. She was just like Aaron—

she'd never stopped worrying about me since I arrived home from England.

Devil's face turned serious, and I knew that he knew where she was coming from, too. He nodded. "My name is Dominic Ford."

Dominic.

His name sat on the tip of my tongue. It totally suited him.

"Thank you, Dominic," Gran said as she stood. "I'll be right back."

Watching her hobble out of the room, he frowned. "Is she okay?"

I sprinkled some salt onto my veggies. "She's starting to have some health problems and has fallen a couple of times lately, but mostly she's doing great."

Looking up from my dinner, I caught the thoughtful expression on his face. Warmth flooded my belly that he not only seemed genuinely worried about a woman he'd only recently met, but that he'd also taken the time to help her, answer her questions and begin getting to know her. Not one other man I'd dated had ever done that. Sure, they'd feigned interest in her, but to them, she was just an old lady who was part of the package with me.

"She needs a railing put on those front steps," he said, "And does she have a rail in the shower? I can organise that too if you need it."

"Wait. What?" I'd been deep in thought and was sure I must have missed something he'd said. "Did you just say you'd install some railings?"

"Yeah, I'll get some of the boys to help me. We can probably swing by in a couple of days and do it."

I held up my hand to stop him talking. "Devil, you don't need to do that. And besides, I'd have to clear it with the landlord first."

"Who's your real estate?"

I stared at him in silence while I contemplated everything he'd just said. "You're going to take charge of this, aren't you? If I tell you the name of the real estate, you'll just go and sort it out with them?"

"Hailee, your grandmother is unsteady on her legs. She needs help, and I can give it to her," he said as if he thought he had to defend his choice. Which he didn't.

Still staring at him, I smiled. Huge. And my heart burst open a little more. He had no idea what he'd just done. Standing, I moved to where he sat and kissed him. Long and hard. When we came up for air, I said, "Thank you."

He reached for my hand and held me in place before I could move back to my chair. "I feel like you're thanking me for a whole lot more than a couple of railings," he murmured, his eyes holding a question.

I slowly nodded and folded myself into his lap, my arms looped around his neck. "My grandfather screwed around on my grandmother and left her when I was only young. Her daddy had left all his money to my grandfather, thinking he'd look after her forever. But when he left her, he took everything. She had to move in with us just so she could afford to live. When he died, he left his money to my father, and I thought she'd be okay after that." I took a breath before continuing. "However, when Dad passed away, Mum got everything. I'm pretty sure he assumed she would continue to look after his mother, but Mum treated her awfully. Mum gives me a small amount of money each month to care for Gran, but it's nowhere near enough. I'm drowning in bills, and every day I wake up not knowing how I'm going to care for my grandmother as she gets older. I also don't have a lot of spare time to organise stuff like this. You offering what you have is a huge load off my mind." My voice choked on that last sentence, because even though I'd said he'd taken a huge load off my mind, that didn't even begin to cover it.

I knew that for a man to offer this at the beginning of a relationship meant that there'd be more like this to come. And that right there caused my emotions to jump all over the place.

Before Devil could reply, my grandmother joined us again. Taking her seat at the table, she said, "The man's a keeper, Hailee."

Devil's smiled, but he didn't say anything. Didn't offer a cheeky reply. He simply kept quiet and waited for me to speak. The space I'd started to clear for him in my heart grew a little. I liked that he seemed to understand my emotional response to what he'd offered. That he understood my need for a moment to get my thoughts under control.

I pressed my lips to his again for a brief moment. "I'm beginning to think he is, too," I said softly when I ended the kiss.

As I moved back to my seat, Gran said to Devil, "We use that little real estate on the corner near the pub."

"The one near the meditation studio. And it's Brett who we deal with there," I threw in.

"I'll contact them tomorrow," he said.

My grandmother engaged him in a conversation about gardening after that. Time in the garden was one of her loves, and she would talk anyone's ear off if they gave her the space to do it. Devil gave her that space, and while I listened in for the first few moments, I quickly drifted away to thoughts of him and all the things I didn't know about him yet. I couldn't wait to get to know everything.

DEVIL

I eyed Hailee apologetically as we stood in her hallway. "I'm sorry, darlin', but I've gotta go."

We'd finished dinner just over an hour earlier and had been watching television with Jean since then. Well, Jean had been watching television; Hailee and I had been fighting to keep our hands to ourselves while her grandmother was in the room with us.

"It's all good. You should go and help your friend out," Hailee said.

Nitro had called to ask me if I could head over to Monroe's place and check on her. He'd received a garbled message from Tatum about something to do with Monroe and couldn't get hold of her to find out what it was.

My phone buzzed with a text.

Nitro: Take Hyde with you. Just heard from Tatum. There's some asshole threatening Monroe.

Me: Is Tatum there too?

Nitro: No, thank fuck. Although she'd probably take the guy down given half a chance.

Me: True. Hyde's on his way. I already phoned him.

Nitro: Let me know when you're done.

I slid my arm around Hailee's waist and kissed her. "Thanks for dinner. I'll text you when I'm done and see if you're still awake." I didn't think she would be because she'd yawned her way through the TV show.

"Okay," she said, but as I moved to leave, she grabbed a handful of my shirt and held me in place. "Be safe." I heard the concern in her voice.

"There's nothing to worry about. Nitro's just overprotective." I wasn't sure, though. Nitro might have been extremely protective of Tatum and Monroe, but he wasn't the type to worry easily. However, I wanted to put Hailee's mind at ease.

She let me go and said, "I'll talk to you later. And, Devil... thank you for humouring my grandmother and watching television with her."

I smoothed her hair back off her face. Fuck, she had no idea how far gone I was. "Hailee, I want to know every little thing about you, and part of that is your family. I'd have gone to Mars with Jean if that's what she wanted."

Her eyes lit up, and I knew I'd said the right thing. I hadn't been stretching the truth, though. Not that lying was my thing with women, but I'd been known to smooth the truth over a little in my time. With Hailee, I didn't want to chance fucking this up.

She shooed me away with the flick of her wrists. "Go, before I beg you to stay."

On the way to Monroe's place, it struck me how different Hailee was to all the other women I'd dated. She hadn't sulked or tried to stop me from leaving. There was none of the guilt trips I was used to from women. And she'd been more concerned for me than she'd been disappointed I had to leave. It was a fucking refreshing change.



Hyde was already at Monroe's by the time I arrived.

"Just got here about two minutes ago, brother," he said. "You hear anything else from Nitro?"

I nodded. "Yeah, apparently someone was threatening her."

"Okay, you want me to take the back?"

"Sounds good."

Hyde headed around to find the back door while I investigated the front. I couldn't hear any yelling or arguing and all seemed to be okay. So, I knocked on the door and waited to see if Monroe answered.

She did, after she checked me out through the curtain and unlocked a bunch of locks on her front door.

"Thanks for coming, but the guy's gone. He did, however, do something I think you might be interested in seeing and hearing about," she said as she motioned for me to enter.

I stepped inside her tiny home. It was one of those brick boxes that probably only had two bedrooms and not much living space. But, she'd made it homely, and I found myself drawn to the framed photographs lining her walls. That, and the crazy wallpaper. I wasn't sure, but I could have sworn I saw cats on the wallpaper in her lounge room as we passed it.

She led me into her very retro kitchen. Between the aqua coloured stove and fridge, to the red-and-white chequered floor, to the zany, weird multicoloured ornaments she'd filled the room with, I didn't know where to look first. Not until a guy came into view. And then all my attention zeroed in on him.

Before I could say anything, Hyde entered the kitchen, too. My gaze met his. "You pick the lock or break the door?"

"Fuck," Monroe muttered, looking at Hyde. "Tell me you didn't break my door."

Hyde stilled for a moment in a way I'd never seen him still. His eyes ran all over her. He took so long to answer her that I cut into whatever thoughts were running through his mind.

"Hyde. You break the door, brother?"

His gaze snapped to mine. "No." Glancing back at Monroe, he said, "Your door is in one piece."

Relief filled her features. "Thank fuck. That'd be an expense I could do without at the moment."

I eyed the guy sitting at her kitchen table. Jerking my chin at him, I said, "What happened?"

Before he could reply, Monroe jumped in. "This is what that asshole did. Fox drove me home from work and stayed for dinner. The asshole must have followed us from work. We'd just finished when the guy knocks on the front door and barges his way in when I open it. He looked so damn friendly when I checked who it was in the

window. And he held up one of those—" She snapped her fingers as she searched for the word.

Fox volunteered the information when she couldn't. "He had religious shit with him."

"Yes!" Monroe explained. "That's the only reason I opened the door at this time of night. I wanted to say thanks but fuck off. In a nice way, of course. I mean, those guys are only trying to help the world, right? But I've got no need for religion in my life."

Hyde stood staring at Monroe in silence. I could never get a good read on him, but he appeared a little bewildered by her. Understandable, though, because she was always like a wild rush of energy every time I saw her. He'd never met her. Not that I knew of, so I guessed he was still getting his bearings with her.

Turning back to Fox, I said, "Okay, so why the fuck did he cut your face up like that?" Fox's face was a nasty mess of cuts and blood. By the looks of the first aid box on the table, Monroe had been attempting to clean him up, but he was still a mess.

"I owe a guy for some coke."

"And?" I said.

"And he sent the motherfucker around to collect."

I frowned. "Monroe, I'm not sure how this is of interest to us."

"Well," she started, "the guy said that we should remember his boss's name—Wesley Marx—because he was about to become the main supplier in Sydney. And that Storm didn't know what was about to hit them."

Wesley fucking Marx. The asshole who was using our supplier.

"Why would he mention us?" Hyde finally joined the conversation.

Monroe glanced at him. "I told him he should be more careful about who he threatens, because I have Storm on speed dial. That's when he mentioned your club. He seemed pissed off that I even mentioned you."

"Really?" I said. "Storm on speed dial?" I tried not to laugh. I had no idea where women came up with some shit.

She waved her hands in the air dismissively. "Well, I've got Nitro. By default. That counts, right?"

Hyde's lips twitched in amusement. Fuck, I'd never seen that in my life. The only emotions I knew from him were anger or begrudging acceptance. "Yeah, sugar, that counts."

Sugar?

Jesus.

Monroe hit him with a smile that could have blasted light to Antarctica. I watched in fascination as her entire body language switched from alert to soft. She'd come a long way since I'd met her when Nitro first took up with Tatum. Monroe had been wary with me at first. Trusting a biker, she told me, was like trusting a teenage boy with your virginity—you hoped for the best, but would most likely end up fucked over and wishing you'd not put your faith in them. And after all that, there she was looking at Hyde like he was the only other person in this room.

I took charge. "Okay, so if you're okay and don't need us, I'm gonna report this back to Nitro and then go finish what I was doing before he called."

Monroe nodded her agreement. Staring at Hyde, she said, "Thanks for coming. I'll let you boys know if we see that asshole again."

As I was about to leave, something struck me. Turning back to Fox, I said, "This guy? You ever seen him before?"

Fox shook his head. "Nope."

"You been buying off Marx for long?"

"I've never met Marx. The dude I buy from is a scrawny teenager I met when his brother came to get a tattoo."

"So he works for Marx, too?"

"Yeah, but I don't know how Marx is about to become so big in Sydney when he's only ever been some two-bit operation."

"Thanks for the info, man," I said.

As we exited Monroe's home, I said to Hyde, "Seems to me that someone is backing Marx. And we need to find out who that is."

HAILEE

I drank half the martini Devil bought me before stopping and placing the glass on the table we sat at in the busy Italian restaurant he'd brought me to for dinner. "It was a long shitty day."

And a long crappy week. Work used to be my happy place. Not so much anymore. Thank God for Friday.

The thing that had kept me going during the days was the time I spent with Devil at night. He made good on his promise to pick me up after work every day, and I looked forward to that each day. Not to mention the long nights of sex. After locking us away at his house for a couple of nights, though, he'd insisted we go out for dinner that night.

"Any luck finding jobs to apply for?" I'd told him how and why Rachel was being a bitch, and he had encouraged me to search for a new job.

I shrugged. "I've found a couple, but none of them really excite me. Plus, none are as close to home as Rachel's."

"How was she today?"

I rolled my eyes. "She was still going on about me needing to work out my priorities. If I have to sit through another week of that next week, I may just stab her in the eye with a pointy stick. I mean, I've worked for her for two years and never once given her any reason to treat me badly. I've tried pointing out that the free massages don't hurt her business, but she seems to have it in for my project." I drank some more of my cocktail and added, "I just don't get it."

"Have any more of your volunteers pulled out?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I've lost four in total now. So I had to spend my lunch hour reworking the schedule for the next week. I think I've got it sorted. So long as no more leave me. It just means that I'm going to be busy a few nights next week and all day next Saturday doing massages."

He grinned. "I tell you what, darlin', I'll massage your tired body afterwards."

I couldn't help but smile. Devil had a knack for making me laugh when I didn't think it possible. He'd made this week bearable. "Let me guess, you'll pay special attention to certain parts of my tired, weary body... like, my feet and hands."

His grin broadened. "Definitely your hands. We don't need them to get too sore and tired. I have plans for those hands."

"And do I need to pay you for these massages? Or are you doing it from the goodness of your heart?"

"I do everything from the goodness of my heart, but a blow job wouldn't be a bad form of payment."

My body relaxed as all the tension Rachel had caused seeped away. I lifted my glass to my mouth and said, "If you play your cards right, you may just score one of those tonight."

I drank the last of my cocktail after that, enjoying the way he responded to what I'd said. Just watching Devil was something I could spend all my time doing, but watching him while pleasure and satisfaction danced across his face took my enjoyment to a whole new level.

It was while we sat in silence simply gazing at each other that my brother slid into the booth next to me, joining us.

"Aaron, uh, what are you doing here?" I faltered on my words because he'd caught me by surprise.

He gave me a tight smile. Glancing back and forth between Devil and me, he said, "I'm here for dinner with a friend and just happened to see you as the waiter took us to our table. Figured I'd come and say hi to my little sister and see what she's up to since I haven't heard from her for a week." He zeroed in on Devil when he added, "*And* since she never told me she'd started dating a new guy."

His gaze met Devil's as he said that, and I didn't miss the look that passed between them. I wasn't sure what it meant, but I guessed it was some male thing that we women would never understand. I suspected Aaron's eyes were saying, "Don't fuck with my sister or

I'll slice your dick off before I feed you to the sharks," while Devil's eyes said, "We're cool, man, no need to threaten death to my dick."

"Since when do I have to report in with you every time I go out with a man?" His attitude annoyed me. It seemed to be way worse than ever before, too. I figured that maybe they knew each other, but wasn't sure. I never had spoken to Devil about that day in the back of Aaron's car. We'd had other things on our minds.

Aaron didn't respond to that, but rather, said, "You two meet that day at the animal protest and then just decide to start seeing each other?"

Devil ignored the attitude blazing from Aaron. "No, man. We met again after that at the pub Hailee's band plays at."

"How long do you intend to date Hailee?" Aaron's voice took that hard edge he often reserved for when he was working. I hated that he used it on Devil.

Devil didn't appear surprised in the least that Aaron was being an asshole. "For as long as she'll have me."

Aaron's body tensed next to me. He was built, so we were crammed into my side of the booth, sides touching, and I felt his turn rock hard. "I don't see it going anywhere."

I spun sideways to face him. "Aaron!" I chastised. "Do you mind? How dare you come here and be so damn rude."

He hardly even acknowledged me. Instead, he kept his focus completely on Devil and said, "Hailee's been through enough shit with men to last her a lifetime. She sure as fuck doesn't need you coming along and breaking her heart when you decide to show her who you really are." Anger was practically rolling off him, and I couldn't figure out where it came from.

"Right, I think that's enough," I snapped. "You need to leave."

Devil cut in with a shake of his head. "Darlin', why don't you give your brother and me a moment to have a chat?"

"Really? You wanna sit here and listen to more of that?"

"Yeah, I do."

I stared at him, wondering what he thought he could achieve with Aaron. It was then that I decided he didn't know Aaron at all, because if he did, he'd know there was no talking my brother around when he'd made up his mind.

"Okay," I said. "Good luck."

Aaron let me out of the booth, and I left them to it. I headed to the ladies room to freshen up and prayed like hell they didn't take each other's heads off.

DEVIL

If Bronze thought I would give Hailee up, he was seriously mistaken. As we sat watching each other, his eyes full of mistrust, mine with determination, I knew I was in for a hell of a fight.

He rested his arms on the table and leant forward, his nostrils flaring. "Get the fuck up and walk the fuck out of this restaurant now."

My hands clenched by my side. Because he was Hailee's brother and a club ally, I gave him the space to be an asshole. "Bronze—"

He cut me off without hearing a word I planned to say. "I don't want to hear it, Devil."

"And what the fuck did you think I was about to say?"

"Some bullshit about how you don't plan to hurt her, or how you're different to other guys, or some other fucking lie about how much you care about her. I've heard it all before from the other motherfuckers she's dated, and I've seen the proof of it being nothing but bull." He leant forward even more. "Tell me, Devil, you have a sister?"

"I do. And—"

"And you ever had to fly across the fucking world to save her from a man who wanted to beat her until she agreed to stay with him? You ever seen your sister's face so bruised and swollen you hardly recognised her?"

"No." I knew better by that point to just answer his question and let him continue. He'd only cut me off if I tried to get a word in.

"Yeah, well let me tell you, it's something I never plan to do or see again." He took a breath. His chest was pumping up and down

rapidly as he worked himself up. "The last fucking thing Hailee needs is to get mixed up with Storm. I know the kind of men your club deals with, and like fuck will I sit back and watch my sister get involved with something or someone who could bring harm her way. You get me?"

I met his gaze as I rested my arms on the table, too. "I get you, Bronze. Completely. But there's no way in hell I'd allow any harm to come to Hailee. It'd be over my dead fucking body."

He stood. "I'm not interested in hearing it. I'm telling you now, walk the fuck away from my sister."

As he took a few steps away, I called out, "I'm not leaving her, Bronze."

He stopped and turned back to face me. Steam practically billowed out of his head. "I'm warning you, Devil. The consequences of you not doing what I've asked won't be pretty." Without another word exchanged, he stalked to his table.

I stared after him, pissed off. He could threaten me all he liked, but no fucking way would I walk away from his sister. Not unless she told me to. And even then, she'd have a fucking fight on her hands. I wasn't a man who gave up easily. I'd been a fighter since I was a kid, my dad had made sure of that, and I wasn't changing that anytime soon.



Just over an hour later, we arrived at King's home after I received a call from Jen towards the end of dinner. She'd been distraught and rambling on about Shannon. I couldn't make sense of what she said so I told her to calm down and I'd come over on my way home.

"I'll just wait out here," Hailee said when we pulled up outside King's place.

"Like fuck you will. I'm not having you standing out here in the dark on your own at this time of night."

Her hand curled around my neck and she pulled me close so she could kiss me. "This protective side of yours gets me so damn excited, bossman. I hope this doesn't take too long because I really need you to get me naked."

I groaned and slapped her ass. "This better not take long. Jen's been highly fucking emotional this week while King's been away, so she probably just needs someone to tell her everything's gonna work out. Shouldn't take too long."

Hailee frowned. "Is something wrong with her?"

I hadn't told her anything about Jen, and wouldn't share much. That was Jen's and King's story to tell. "She's been sick while he's been away. I've been checking in on her, making sure she's doing okay."

Her frown shifted to a smile. "You're a good guy, Devil."

I wavered between wanting to let her keep thinking that and telling her she was far off base. In the end, I went with, "Okay, let's do this so I can get you back to my place and get inside you."

I led the way to the front door, surprised to hear King's voice inside as we approached. I knew he was on his way back to Sydney, but wasn't aware he'd arrived.

"Fuck," I muttered as I made out what was being said. They were arguing over Shannon. I hesitated to knock on the door, not wanting to interrupt them, but when Jen screeched out something about knowing King would never change, and him retaliating with rage, I decided they might need me. Even if only to give King a moment to blow off some steam. I hadn't heard that level of anger from him in a long time and wondered what the hell had inspired it.

Lifting my knuckles to the door, I knocked loud enough to be heard over their shouts. A couple of moments later, King yanked the door open, his wild eyes meeting mine. I sucked in a sharp breath at the madness I saw in him. Not only had his anger come out to play that night, so had his crazy.

Fuck.

The hair on the back of my neck stood up and apprehension prickled over my skin.

I shouldn't have brought Hailee here.

"Devil," King barked, his attention solely on me. It didn't appear that he'd even noticed Hailee standing behind me. "What are you doing here?"

I'd never faltered around King. Had never felt the fear of him that so many did. However, I did in that moment. Not for me, but for Hailee. I couldn't put my finger on the reason, because I didn't

believe he'd hurt her, but the need to protect her from him nevertheless churned deep in my gut.

"Jen called me. She seemed upset and confused, so I told her I'd come over. I didn't realise you were home."

"I called him when you took off," Jen said, coming into view behind King. Her tear-stained face was painted with mascara streaks and puffiness. But as much as he'd upset her, the old Jen I'd known seemed to have made an appearance again. I hadn't had a glimpse of her all week when I'd visited. She'd been soft and welcoming, seemingly happy to have my help. The Jen standing in front of me now had the hard glint in her eyes and the don't-fuck-with-me stance that I associated with her from years ago.

King's chest rose and he held his breath for a beat, as if he was working hard not to lose his shit with her. When he finally exhaled a long breath, he said, "Come in, we've got shit to discuss anyway." Stepping aside, he motioned for me to enter.

I hesitated for a split second. King never missed anything and didn't miss this. And he was as fucking perceptive as he always was when he said, "For fuck's sake, Devil, bring her in with you. I'm not gonna hurt her."

With that, he stalked back inside his house.

Jen's eyes met mine, a fraction softer. "I'm sorry to get you involved in this, but he came home just before I called you and went completely psycho on me. He—"

King's voice bellowed from another room. "Jen, get your ass in here and stop fucking bitching."

She stiffened. "I don't know why the fuck I came back to him. I should have known things would never change."

I frowned. "You thought you and King would get back together?" She'd told me the other day she wished things could have been different between them, so I figured that meant they had no hope of reconciliation.

Her words were a mix of disappointment, hurt, and bitterness when she answered me. "I've always held out hope, Devil, but that man will never change. No woman will ever be able to compete with his first love and beat her for the top place in his heart."

I watched as she walked away, defeat clinging to her body so hard I wondered if she'd ever get over it.

I took hold of Hailee's hand. "You good, darlin'?"

She nodded, no hint of hesitation to be seen. "I'm good."

When we found King in his kitchen, he passed me a glass of rum. "Drink up, brother, you're gonna need it for what I'm about to tell you."

I took the drink and knocked back half of it. When King thought news was that bad I'd need alcohol to stomach it, I knew something was up.

King's eyes fell on Hailee. "Who are you?"

"Hailee." She sounded calm and unfazed by him, but her body was tense.

"And?" He clipped out. King wasn't known for his patience with the women club members dated. Not until they became official. Then, he had all the time in the world for them.

"And I'm hoping this won't take too long because Devil was about to take me home and fuck me before he received the call to come here," she said, her body losing some of its tenseness.

King stared at her in silence, his face blank. You could bet his mind wasn't blank, though. That brain of his would be processing thoughts at a rapid pace. Finally, he threw the remainder of his rum down his throat and said, "Jen, take Hailee into the lounge room. I want to talk to Devil alone."

Jen shot a look of anger King's way and started to say something, but King's face clouded over with a dark warning and he barked, "Now!"

Her face scrunched up and she spat out, "You can be a fucking asshole when you want to be."

King's eyes didn't leave her. "Yeah, well it takes a bitch to bring it out in me some days, and you've managed to hit the fucking motherload today." He tracked her movements as she exited the room, Hailee in tow. When we were alone, he jerked his chin towards the backyard and said, "We need to take this outside."

I followed him all the way to the middle of his yard. Darkness cloaked us and the heat of the night stuck to our skin. We were in the middle of a fucking heat wave in Sydney, and it wreaked havoc on my ability to think straight at times. However, my thoughts were clear as fuck. Something had spooked King and I sensed danger ahead.

"We found Shannon," he started. "He won't be a problem for anyone anymore. But he told me some of the shit that Jen told him

while they were together, and it's likely to come back and bite us in the ass."

"Jesus, what did she tell him?"

"A lot of shit about how the club operates. Who supplied us back when she and I were together. Who our allies were, and our enemies, that kind of shit."

"A lot of that has changed, though, King. How will that hurt us? Especially if he's dead now."

His voice dropped. "She told him about Moses. And I'm guessing that if the feds are sniffing around about that, he's told them or someone else."

"Fuck." I raked my fingers through my hair, a sense of dread snaking through me. "Why the fuck would she tell him that? And what exactly did she know?"

"That's what we've been arguing about. She swears she was drunk when she told him and that she didn't tell him much at all. She doesn't know the full story of what happened, because I never told her, but I'm guessing she knew just enough to give the feds a fucking hard-on." He blew out a harsh breath. "I swear, women are more fucking hassle half the time than they're worth. I should have known that Jen was sneaking around the fucking club sniffing out gossip and information."

After spending time with Jen that week and seeing a different side to her, and then hearing her desperation tonight to reconcile with King, I paused for a moment while trying to take in all this new information. It would be easy to brand Jen as a malicious and vengeful bitch, and while she definitely fit that bill, I knew she was so much more complex than that. Not that giving her an inch of forgiveness would help the club, yet I couldn't quite bring myself to despise her completely.

"Okay, so we can't go back and change what's been said or done. And I know you, King, as much as you're angry with her now, you'll end up standing by her, for the baby's sake if nothing else. Which means that going another round with her is pointless. Why don't you let me talk to her and see what I can find out?"

He remained silent for a beat; the only sound coming from him was his angry breaths. His anger made me think he'd say no to my request, but he surprised me when he agreed. "That woman will be the absolute fucking death of me one day. I know that, yet I can nev-

er say no to her. I can scream at her until I'm fucking blue in the face and feel like my chest has been ripped open with rage and hate and love. And yet, I can't fucking say no." His words fell out of his mouth along with his anger. In the end, all he seemed to be left with was an overwhelming sense of powerlessness. It reminded me that the only time I'd ever seen him like that also involved Jen.

"I understand, brother."

And, I did. What he said about her dredged up my deeply buried feelings about my father. Feelings of hurt that were threaded with rage and hate and love also. However, just like King, I knew that if my father reached out to me now, even after fifteen years, and offered me hope that things could be different, I wouldn't be able to say no. Even though saying yes could destroy me.

"Talk to her, Devil. Find out what we need."

I headed back inside and found Jen and Hailee talking in the lounge room.

Jen glanced up at me. "Hailee has a wealth of knowledge about morning sickness. I'm hoping she might have the cure for me."

Jen and King were so fucking similar. I guessed that was why they clashed so much. They were the only people I knew who could go from one extreme of emotion to another in less than ten minutes. Gone was her anger and in its place was something close to calm and happy.

Hailee touched her arm gently. "That remedy hasn't worked for everyone I've told about it, but it has had some great results."

"What's the remedy?" King asked from behind me.

I stepped aside so he could join us. When he didn't enter the room, I glanced back at him to find his arms crossed over his chest and his hard stare back in place. While he seemed resigned to the truth of his relationship with Jen, it didn't appear that he was going to make it easy for either of them.

Jen's wary gaze lingered on him. "A glass of milk and a milk arrowroot biscuit before getting out of bed in the morning. We're not sure if it will help much in the afternoon, but I'm mostly sick in the morning now, so I'm hoping this will cure it."

King listened intently and then nodded before giving his attention to Hailee. "Hailee, I think it's time you and I had a chat. I figure that any woman Devil brings to my home must be one he intends

spending some time with, which means she's also a woman I want to get to know."

Hailee's eyes revealed her surprise, but she didn't hesitate to stand and agree. The earlier apprehension I'd felt had eased and had been replaced with confidence that King would treat Hailee well.

Jen turned to me after they left and said, "He wants you to talk to me, doesn't he?" She sighed. "That seems to be his way of dealing with me these days."

I sat next to her. "He does, but it was my idea. Clearly, you two weren't getting anywhere."

Her caustic reply came straight back. "Clearly. But that's because he wasn't willing to listen to anything I had to say. Which, correct me if I'm wrong, seems to be King's go-to response when he doesn't get his own way. He's always been like that."

If I was going to get anywhere with her, I needed to ease her into this. "He does like things to go his way, Jen, but aren't we all like that? He's not perfect, that's for sure. But are you?"

She fired up at that. "No, but I never said I was!"

"I know. And I also know that he's hurt you deeply. I don't know the ins and out of it, and I don't want to know. But I do know that he cares about you, even when you feel like he doesn't."

Her body sagged and the spirit she'd brought to her fight with King, drained from her. "I know," she whispered, her voice close to breaking. A tear slid down her face. "I can't help myself from fighting with him. We just bring the worst out in each other sometimes. And then at other times, he's amazing and I remember why I love him so much." A guttural sob tore from her and she clapped her hands over her mouth as she looked at me in horror. "What have I done, Devil? He'll never forgive me for this."

I sat quietly and watched while she fell apart. There wasn't anything I could say in answer to her question. I didn't know what this would do to their relationship. I suspected he would forgive her, but maybe he'd simply stash it away as another knife to his heart and hope like hell he could still look at her without despising the shit she'd done to him and his club.

I reached for her hands and pulled them away from her face. "Jen, listen to me." When I had her attention, I continued, "What's done is done. You both have to figure out how to live with it, but the only way you're gonna do that is if you speak honestly and tell him,

or me, exactly what you told Shannon. We need to know what we're dealing with here so we can put measures into place to protect the club and everyone involved."

She nodded, back and forth, over and over, like a crazed woman. Gulping back her hesitation, she said, "All I knew about Moses was that he was dumped on the club's doorstep one morning and that the club whore who birthed him killed herself later that day. The next thing I heard about it all was that the baby and the father went missing." She slid sideways on the chair, closer to me, and lowered her voice. "But I know that their disappearances weren't because the father took the baby and left. I heard King talking about it on the phone one night, saying that he had no clue what happened to the child, but that all the tracks were cleared up and no one would be able to prove a thing later on."

Fuck.

"And that's what you told Shannon?"

Fear radiated from her as she whispered, "Yes."

King was right to be worried, and I felt the distinct urge to drown in a bottle of rum. I stood. "I'll pass this info onto King." I struggled to look at her myself; I wasn't sure how King would manage it without wanting to throttle the life out of her.

Her fingers clawed at me, gripping my arm as I tried to leave. "Wait!" She stood. "What do you think King will do now that he knows all that?"

I raised a brow. "You're fucking kidding me, right?"

She remained silent.

Easing out of her grip, I said, "What do you think he's going to do, Jen? You betrayed his trust and you've put him and everything he values at risk. I think you know what he'll do." The thing was, though, that I figured he'd do what he already told me he'd do—he wouldn't be able to say no to her. Plus, he wouldn't leave a child to fend for itself with Jen as its mother.

She blinked rapidly a few times. "Yeah," she said with quiet unease.

I left her then and hoped I never had to see her again. Betrayal like she'd dealt to King wasn't something I could understand, and if she were in my life the way she was in his, I wasn't sure how I'd ever deal with it. Forgiveness would be a hard battle.

I found him and Hailee. She took one look at me and knew something was up. "I'll leave you two to it."

As he watched her go, King said, "I like her." He then turned to me. "But I'm not going to like what you're about to tell me, am I?"

I shook my head. "No."

After I relayed the information to him, he sat in silence for a long time before finally saying, "If she wasn't having a baby, I'd kick her out in a heartbeat." I felt every ounce of his dilemma. With one final glance at me, he said, "Why do we continue to love those who cut our hearts out and let them bleed all over the floor while telling us they really do love us?"

HAILEE

I snuggled up to Devil and traced patterns on his belly. It was still early, somewhere around six, and he hadn't stirred. Usually he woke around that time, but this morning, he slept like the dead.

He'd been a little off after we'd left King's the night before. Whatever they'd been discussing had greatly affected him, King, and Jen. When we finished up there, none of them were talking. Devil and King seemed okay with each other, but neither man could look at Jen.

He'd even been subdued while we had sex. Rather than being wild and passionate, it had been slow and deep. Instead of looking at me like he wanted to consume every part of me like he usually did, his eyes had held something else all together. I'd felt like he was trying to read me. As if he'd been trying to figure something out. But we'd fallen asleep almost straight away, so I didn't get a chance to ask him about it.

"What secrets do you have buried deep?" I whispered as I kissed his chest.

I'd known him for almost two weeks and felt completely at ease with him. And yet, I hardly knew anything about him. Our relationship still felt right, though, and I hadn't experienced the usual new relationship nerves. I desperately wanted to know him on a deeper level, but I didn't want to push him to share anything he didn't want to. It wasn't the way I liked my relationships to go. If a guy wanted to take his time to open up to me, I could live with that so long as I felt he was invested. And Devil had made it abundantly clear he was invested.

He cut into my thoughts when he murmured, "Mornin'."

I almost jumped out of my skin when he spoke. Turning my face up to his, I found those eyes of his that saw everything, focused on me. The intense way he often watched me never failed to stir butterflies in my stomach. "Morning."

He placed his arm around me, sliding his hand down my back to rest just above my ass. "You sleep well?" God, how I loved his voice first thing in the morning. I mean, I loved it all the time, but particularly when it was husky from sleep.

Despite being skin-to-skin with him, I attempted to wriggle even closer. By the time I was done, I was practically lying on top of him. "I did. Did you? You were so tired."

"It's been a long week. I'm glad it's over, because now I've got you all to myself for two days."

I grimaced. "Well, I *do* have two massages I have to give and then I have that wedding to perform at tonight, remember? Which means I have to leave just after one to get there and set up. And that means I have to start getting ready at about eleven thirty."

"Fuck, it takes you an hour and a half to get ready? What do you have to do?"

I pulled a face and huffed at him. "I love how guys think women just magically appear all beautiful. Honestly, if you knew the number of hours we spend doing hair and make-up and getting dressed, you'd realise just how lucky you were to be born a male."

He grinned and pressed a quick kiss to my lips. "Keep talking dirty to me, gorgeous. You know my dick gets hard when you go all spitfire on me."

Ignoring him, I said, "So, that means we have about eight hours before I have to leave you. But I *am* free all day tomorrow."

His arm tightened around me as he said, "I'm counting on it."

That intrigued me. "Why? You got something planned?"

He ran his fingers lightly over my skin. "I thought I'd take you on a long ride up to The Entrance." A sexy smile spread across his face as he added, "Maybe get you in a bikini and spend the day in the sun."

I traced his lips with my fingertip and said, "A bikini, huh? What if I don't do bikinis?"

Lines creased his forehead as he frowned. "Why the fuck wouldn't you? Your body is made for a bikini, Hailee."

"Maybe I don't like men ogling me." I didn't. I hated it. And I hadn't worn a bikini since I was about fifteen.

"They wouldn't want to so much as look at you while you're with me." His mood darkened a little, and I knew that me wearing a bikini could be a very bad idea.

"Well, I don't own a bikini, so this whole conversation is a waste. Now, tell me, what did you and my brother discuss last night? We never did get around to talking about that." He'd told me we would talk about it when we got home, but after visiting King, that was all forgotten.

He stalled, and I thought maybe he would try to fob me off, but he didn't. "He gave me the usual grilling a brother gives his sister's new guy."

I would kill Aaron when I saw him next. "I'm sorry. He does this to every guy I see. He's a complete asshole to them and usually scares them off."

Devil rolled, taking me with him so that I ended up underneath him. Caging me in with his hands planted on the mattress either side of me, he said, "Nothing and no one is scaring me off, Hailee. Don't worry about your brother. He'll come around when he realises I'm not going to hurt you."

I hadn't realised that I was concerned about Aaron convincing Devil to walk away, but the relief that engulfed me when he said no one could scare him off told me otherwise.

Smiling up at him, I attempted to coax him into the shower. It was my preferred place for him to fuck me in the mornings. "I think we should move this to the shower."

He grinned, knowing exactly where my mind had gone. "You know I'm always down for that." He moved swiftly off the bed and I followed right behind, only to be caught by surprise when he lifted me over his shoulder to carry me into the bathroom. Chuckling at my surprise, he said, "And don't think I've forgotten about that bikini. I'm making it my mission to convince you that you should wear one."

As much as I had no intention of ever wearing one, I loved his determination. Or maybe it was just the fact that he really, really liked me and would go out of his way to show me. A girl needed that in her life, and it had been far too long since I'd had it.



"Put me down!" I squealed as Devil scooped me up into his arms and carried me from my lounge room to my bedroom. His eyes sparkled with devious intent as he ignored me and continued on.

We'd spent the morning together at his house, and he'd then brought me back to my place so I could get ready for work. Eleven thirty ticked closer on the clock, and I really only had five minutes until Dylan would arrive to pick me up. He'd agreed to be my chauffeur for the day.

"I'm not letting you go until you agree for me to pick you up after the wedding tonight," Devil said as he dumped me on my bed. We'd been going back and forth arguing over this, and he was being his usual demanding self.

I shifted so I could rest on my elbows while I stared up at him. "Why do you have to keep arguing with me over this? I've already organised for Dylan to bring me home. I could get him to drop me off at your place if that would make you happy."

"The only thing that's gonna make me happy is if I come pick you up myself. Give me the address and the time, and then you can go wait for Dylan."

"See that's the thing. I never really know what time I'll be done by. I mean, we're booked until eleven, but sometimes we're having so much fun that we just keep playing until they kick us out. So, it —"

He straddled me as he cut me off. "Darlin', the address," he said forcefully, and I knew it was time to just give in and give him what he wanted.

"Fine," I muttered, "but don't whinge when you're sitting there twiddling your thumbs waiting for me if we decide to stay."

"Jesus, woman, do you not think I'd happily sit for a day twiddling my thumbs while I waited for you?" His eyes searched mine before he dipped his face and caught my lips in a kiss.

I melted into his kiss in much the same way I basked in his words. And for the first time ever in my life of playing gigs with Cherry Vivid, I didn't want to play that night. I wanted to stay right where I was in Devil's arms.

When we came up for air, he stared down at me with lust-filled eyes. "I don't want you to go," he rasped. Sitting back, he shoved his fingers through his hair. "I'm so damn hard for you. Always, so fucking hard. Just thinking about you gets me there."

I reached for his shirt, gripping a handful. "I don't want to go either," I said, my voice just as affected as his.

After a few moments of silence, he finally moved off me and held his hand out to help me up. Slapping my ass, he said, "Come on, let's get you outside so I don't throw you down on that bed and fuck you so hard you won't be able to walk out of here."

I wanted exactly what he wanted, so it was safest to do what he'd said. As I exited the bedroom, the doorbell rang.

Thank you, God.

Dylan's timing was perfect.

However, when I opened the door, Dylan wasn't standing on the other side. Wayne was.

"Hailee," he greeted me with a smile.

Oh. God.

No.

No.

No.

I gripped the door while I sent at least ten urgent prayers up to God for him to give me an out. Right now. He could just let the floor cave in and allow me to slide into hell. Because that was where I should have been sent.

I was the worst person in the world.

I'd spoken to Wayne on the phone a few times while he was away.

When I'd started sleeping with Devil.

While I'd technically still been dating Wayne.

I hadn't wanted to string him along and lie to him, but telling someone you didn't want to see them again over the phone was a dick move. So I'd decided to wait until he arrived back home and then break the news to him.

I hadn't expected him to turn up on my doorstep unannounced.

While Devil was there.

Standing. Right. Behind. Me.

"Uh, Wayne. Hi." Fuck, could I sound any more pathetic? I was a tongue-tied mess. Not only that, I was sure sweat was about to drip

from me. It was a hot day already, but my temperature had just doubled. At least.

Devil's hand slid around my waist as his body moulded to mine in one of the most possessive moves I'd ever experienced from a man. If I hadn't been so frazzled, I would have been turned on by it.

The smile in Wayne's eyes died as he tracked Devil's hand going around my waist and pulling me back against him. When he looked up, his gaze met mine briefly before he looked past me at Devil.

"Wayne," Devil said, his voice deep and gruff. *Dominant.*

Wayne's gaze flicked back to mine. "What's going on, Hailee?"

Anxiety burned in my chest. I hated confrontations. But even more than that, I hated hurting people. "I'm sorry, Wayne... I didn't want to tell you over the phone." I stumbled all over my words again, but I managed to get them out eventually.

"So, what? You're screwing him now?" Wayne shot his question at me like venom, and I recoiled.

Devil's other arm circled my chest and he held me tightly to him. "You can leave now, Wayne," he ordered. A shiver ran through me at the malevolence I heard in his tone. He was so calm, though. I wouldn't want to be in his firing line, because that kind of calm was more dangerous than fire.

Wayne ignored him. "I want a fucking answer, Hailee. Are you fucking him?" His eyes glittered with disgust, and I realised I'd dodged a bullet with him. No way did I ever want to be involved with a man who treated me like that. Even if he did feel betrayed.

I'd hardly had time to process that thought when Devil switched our positions, putting himself in front of me. His calmness disappeared, replaced by a ferociousness I was yet to see in him.

"You ever speak to her that way again, and I'll make sure you never utter another word in your life. Now turn the fuck around and go the fuck back to where you came from."

My heart beat faster as I waited for Wayne to reply. Placing my hand on Devil's back, I found it hard as rock. He was wound so tight that I worried what his reaction might be if Wayne chose to argue with him rather than doing what he said.

"You know what I think?" Wayne spat out.

"What?" Devil's back tensed even more, like he was ready to lash out any minute.

I wished like crazy that I'd just been a dick and told Wayne over the phone. I didn't want Devil involved in this because it all seemed to be going to hell in a handbasket.

Wayne puffed up his chest. "I think she clearly doesn't know how to choose men. You're a pig, and there's no way you'd treat her as well as I would have. You two deserve each other."

He took a step back as if to leave, but Devil's hand shot out and grabbed him. Moving closer to him, Devil snarled, "And you know what I think, motherfucker? I think you know nothing about me and that you shouldn't be so quick to judge another person. I also think that if you don't leave right now, I won't be able to control myself much longer. My fist is fucking itching to smash itself into your face."

I'd never dated a guy as intense as Devil. His violent outburst frightened me, and I felt the need to stop him going any further. Especially since this was all my fault.

I cut through the tense air, inserting myself in front of Devil. I ignored the way he tried to pull me back, and placed my hand on his chest as if to say, "Back off." Eyeing Wayne, I said forcefully, "I'm sorry for the way this went down, but you need to accept my decision. And I think it would be best if you left now before this goes somewhere none of us want it to go."

He glared at me for what felt like longer than it probably was. I was so damn tense, worried that Devil would punch him, that it screwed with my concentration. I breathed the longest sigh of relief when he finally said, "Fine. I'm leaving. But don't come crawling back to me when you realise I was right."

A low growl sounded behind me as Devil pressed against my hand on his chest. But Wayne left us, and no harm came to pass. When I turned to face him, I found his angry eyes still following Wayne as he walked to his car.

I smacked his chest to gain his attention. "Devil."

He grunted, and I got the impression it was taking all his restraint not to go after Wayne.

Scrunching a handful of his shirt, I pulled on it. "Devil, stop. I don't want you doing something you might regret."

His eyes cut to mine, still angry. "Darlin', no way in hell would I fucking regret anything. That asshole needs to learn to shut his trap and not insult people."

"That's true, but honestly your response seemed a little over the top."

"It wasn't." Fury still flashed in his eyes, and I wondered where it came from. I struggled to believe Wayne caused it all. There had to be something else going on here that I didn't know about.

"You really believe that?" I knew bikers were renowned for using violence, but threatening Wayne in the manner he had seemed too much.

"We're gonna have to agree to disagree on this one, Hailee." He forced the words out on a harsh breath, unable to let his outrage go.

"Yeah, well I'm just telling you that I'm not a fan of unnecessary violence. You know my history with that. I don't know anything about your club and what goes on there, but if we're gonna keep dating, I'd rather you didn't bring your temper home." I pushed past him and went back inside. The confrontation between him and Wayne had really shaken me up, and I needed a moment to get myself together.

He didn't follow me inside, so I guessed he needed the same thing. It was the first disagreement we'd had, and while we hadn't really fought about it, I felt like this could turn into a problem for us. Devil was a biker after all and I hadn't really stopped to think about that too much since I'd met him.

DEVIL

“So you let your temper get the best of you?” Sonya asked as she chopped vegetables for dinner.

After Hailee had left for work, I’d gone for a long ride to clear my head and then found myself at Sonya’s place. The kids had been a good distraction for the afternoon, and she’d asked me to stay for dinner.

“Yeah.” I’d just finished telling her about the way I’d reacted to Wayne when he showed up at Hailee’s home.

She glanced up at me. “Why? We worked so hard on getting it under control, and I thought you were doing better. Why all of a sudden did you snap?”

Just thinking about Wayne stirred my anger again. I took a couple of deep breaths while I tried to work through it. “I can’t explain it. Well, not the initial trigger. That seemed to come from an urge to protect Hailee. But after that, when he started badmouthing both of us, it sparked all those old feelings of being worthless that Dad used to make me feel. It put me right back there with him.” Sonya was the only person I ever spoke so honestly with about all this shit. Having been my brother’s high school sweetheart, we’d grown up together and she’d lived through my hell with me.

Anger to me was like alcohol to an alcoholic. Or at least it had been for more than a decade. I’d used it to numb the hurt and the shame of not feeling wanted by my parents.

I held Sonya’s gaze while I said, “What kind of parent wants a child enough to create them, and then abandons that child when they decide it isn’t good enough for them? How can a father do that

to his son?" He'd kicked me out of home and ran me out of town when he didn't approve of my choices in life. And I still lived with that hurt.

She stopped chopping the carrots and put her knife down. Moving to me, she enveloped me in a hug and said, "Ivan Ford is a fool, Dom. We've already discussed this. Why are you allowing yourself to be dragged back down by him?"

It always felt safe with Sonya. *She* was my safe place. Even though Campbell took issue with my choices in life and made it hard for me to be close to his family, she'd never once let me down. We'd spent the last few years working on my temper and angry outbursts, and she'd guided me every step of the way. Her mother was a psychologist in Tamworth, and Sonya had relied on her advice to help me. However, regardless of all that, my internal walls were up, and I couldn't access my own damn feelings. I didn't know why this was all surfacing.

I moved out of her embrace. "I have no fucking clue. I haven't heard from him or even really been thinking of him lately, so I don't know why all of a sudden he's in my fucking head."

She turned quiet for a moment, thinking. "Maybe it's finally time for you to go back," she said softly.

"You're not serious?" She couldn't be. "You've seen the way Campbell still treats me. He gets that from Dad. Campbell fucking hangs off every word Dad says, so there's no way in hell Dad has changed his mind where I'm concerned if Campbell still thinks that way. And besides, I have no interest in going back there.

"I'm not suggesting you go back because anything has changed with your father. I'm suggesting it because maybe *you* need the closure. I think you've been holding on all these years hoping he'd come to his senses. You need to see for yourself what his thoughts on the matter are now. And then hopefully you can either close that door or decide you're okay with still leaving it open."

"That fucking door *is* closed." It fucking slammed shut years ago when he ran me out of the town I grew up in.

Kylie ran into the kitchen then, flying straight into me. Her little arms wrapped around my legs as she squealed, "Uncle Dom, you're still here!" Sonya had put Kylie and her brother to bed earlier, and she'd been upset at the thought of me not being there when she woke up.

I pulled her up into my arms and gave her a huge smile. "Of course I am, baby girl. I told you I would be."

She almost choked me in a hug as she squished her arms around my neck. "I wanna go on the swing!"

I met Sonya's gaze. "You need me to help with dinner?"

She shook her head. "No, you guys go play. It'll give me some peace and quiet."

"Okay," I said to Kylie, "let's go find your brother. We'll play for a bit and then it's bath time before dinner."

Her glee was infectious. Fuck, I loved playing with kids. They made me forget all the ugly shit in the world. "Yay, yay, yay!"

That excitement and the love she never failed to give me was exactly the medicine I needed after spending the afternoon beating myself up.

I pressed a kiss to her forehead as I carried her out of the kitchen. "I love you, kid."

She buried her face in my neck. "I love you, too, Uncle Dom."

Exactly what I needed.



My Sunday plans to get Hailee into a bikini had to be changed when she woke with a sore throat and fever. She could hardly move, so I figured there was no getting out of bed for her.

I placed my hand on her forehead and frowned. "No bikini for me today."

"I told you, there is no bikini for you ever," she croaked.

I fought a smile and bent to give her a quick kiss. "Oh, there will be a bikini. I'll make sure of it."

She groaned and pushed me away. "Don't come too close. You'll get sick, too."

I scowled. Moving my face back near hers, I ignored what she said. "What do you need, darlin'? Asprin? Advil?" I grinned as I added, "Cock?"

She smiled at that. "As much as I want your dick, and as much as I think it has magical powers, I really doubt it will cure the headache I have or ease my sore throat. But I'll take a raincheck, okay?"

Sliding my hand down her body, I reached for her pussy. "I could just—"

She slapped my hand away. "God, you're gonna drive me crazy today, aren't you?"

Laughing, I admitted, "Maybe."

"Okay, well let's start with some Advil. If that helps, we might move onto cock." Even through her sickness, she couldn't hide her amusement, giving me an eye-roll that was mixed with a shake of her head.

I pushed up off the bed. "I'm on it."

When I came back to her with a glass of water and pills, I found her curled almost into a ball while she had a coughing fit. Sitting next to her, I waited for her coughs to subside before passing her the glass and tablets. "What else can I do besides the pills, darlin'?"

She sat up enough so she could swallow the tablets. "Hold me while we watch a movie together?"

I switched the television in the bedroom on, positioned her next to me on the bed, and held her close while we watched *Marley and Me*. It was the absolute worst movie choice because it made her cry and hurt her throat.

But it was the perfect movie choice because she snuggled against me and told me how much she loved that I'd listened to her when she told me that was her favourite movie.



Hailee was sick in bed for three days. I spent that time taking care of club business during the day and looking after her at night. I moved her back to her home on Monday afternoon after I finished up with club work. She was hardly conscious that night, so I had dinner with Jean, listening to stories of the crazy shit Hailee got up to when she was younger, before spending the night taking care of Hailee.

Tuesday night, I cooked dinner after arriving and finding Jean not feeling well. I sent her to the couch to rest after making sure she'd had painkillers. Hailee was awake in her bed but didn't have the energy to eat dinner at the table, so I took it into her.

She hit me with a smile as I passed her a bowl of soup. "Thank you," she croaked. She'd told me her throat wasn't sore anymore. It

had left her with a raspy throaty voice that did amazing shit to my dick.

I sat next to her. "You like chicken soup?"

She glanced at the soup before looking back at me. "Did you make this?"

"Yeah."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "Wow."

"I told you my sister taught me to cook. Chicken soup was one of those things."

She stared at me with a stunned expression.

When she didn't speak, I said, "I know you're sitting there thinking how fucking amazing I am. I mean, not only am I good at using my dick, I'm good in the kitchen, too."

Shaking her head at me, she muttered, "You really are too much sometimes. Let me taste it and see if you're as talented in the kitchen as you are in bed."

I smirked but didn't say another word while I waited for her thoughts on my cooking.

Her eyes lit up as she had her first taste. She quickly ate more and was halfway through the bowl when she finally said, "Oh my God, you can fucking cook. This is the best chicken soup ever. I need to meet your sister so I can thank her for teaching you some mad skills."

I lifted a brow. "You ever gonna doubt me again, darlin'?"

"Don't go getting ahead of yourself, bossman. A girl's gotta make sure of these things sometimes. In fact"—she handed me the empty bowl—"I think I need to test it some more. You know, just to be sure."

I took the bowl and stood, grinning. "If you're fucking well enough to run me around after you, I think you're well enough to give my dick some action tonight."

"Ha," she said with a laugh that turned into a cough. "I could probably lie there while you do your thing, but this mouth isn't up to sucking or anything like that, so don't go getting excited."

"I'll take a hand job," I threw over my shoulder as I exited the room.

The tension I'd been carrying in my shoulders and neck due to the stress with the club started to ease thanks to Hailee. The last week had been spent trying to figure out Wesley Marx's game. We'd

also tried to work out what the feds had on us over Moses. Bronze was helping with that, but even he struggled to find out what we needed to know. King was furious with Jen and had started sleeping at the clubhouse, leaving me to deal with her. On top of that, Bronze had pulled me aside yesterday to tell me again to leave his sister alone. Nothing had been resolved with any of these things, and the stress was beginning to show in the club. I was fucking grateful to have Hailee to come home to at night. She couldn't fix my problems for me, but just being with her helped me forget them for a while.



Shit with the club came to a head on Thursday afternoon when Bronze turned up at the clubhouse, furious.

"Two things," he bellowed after King had ushered him, Nitro, and me into his office. He held up one finger. "Firstly, I've been able to confirm the feds are indeed investigating your club over the Moses thing and they're also looking into your drug activity." He turned to me and held up a second finger. "And secondly, you put fucking railings on Hailee's house even after I told you to stop fucking seeing her. I wasn't mucking around, Devil. Either stop seeing her or I'll fucking walk away from this club and cut all ties."

My temper exploded at the same time Nitro's did. We both responded with an angry outburst, but King cut through the noise we both made with—"Enough!" When all three of us stopped and stared at him in furious silence, he rubbed his temple and said, "For fuck's sake, I've got the headache from hell. I've had no fucking sleep for days, we're dealing with fucking crisis after crisis, and you wanna bring this shit to me? What the fuck, Bronze?"

Bronze's eyes blazed with fury. "My sister mightn't be important to you, but she's fucking important to me, and I refuse to allow Devil to drag her into your world."

King frowned. "Hailee's your sister?"

"Yes!" Bronze squared his shoulders. "I will walk, King, and I won't fucking look back."

King's nostrils flared as his body tensed. "Like fuck you'll walk."

"I give no shits about the cash you give me. I'd give all that up without a second fucking thought."

King took a step closer to him. The dangerous glint in his eye matched the deadly energy vibrating from him. "And I give no fucks about the cash either. What I *do* care about, though, is what I did for you seven years ago. Has that shit vanished from your memory? Do you need me to remind you about that? About what it would mean for your life and your career?"

Bronze's lips flattened as he stared at King with resentment. "Maybe it's time for me to pay for my sins."

"You don't want to pay for those sins, Bronze. You'd fucking die at the hands of all the motherfuckers you've helped lock up if you went to jail now."

"Maybe I'd rather die than have Hailee's safety compromised."

They stared at each other in silence for a long few moments before I finally stepped in. "Her safety isn't compromised."

Bronze's head whipped around so he faced me. Snarling, he said, "It mightn't be yet, but I've seen the shit your club gets involved with, and I don't want her anywhere near that."

I opened my mouth to reply, but King's venomous voice sliced through the air. "You talk a good fucking game, Bronze, but I think we both know that you are so far entrenched in the activities of this club that you could spend an eternity trying to climb your way out and you'd not come close to escaping. I've heard enough of this bullshit. Get me more info on what the feds know." With that, he stalked out of the office, leaving Bronze staring after him.

"Hailee's happy with me, Bronze. Think about that before you try to take it all away from her," I snapped before exiting the office also. If I didn't leave then, I wasn't sure I'd be able to stop myself from trying to knock him the fuck out.

I found King in the bar with a drink in front of him. Eyeing me as I approached, he said, "I'd suggest you stay clear of me today. I'm in a foul fucking mood, and I'm more than fucking ready to get into it with someone."

I ignored him and indicated for Kree to bring me a drink. "You need to go home and get some sleep, King. And while you're there, you need to talk to Jen. She's losing her shit, and I'm concerned for the baby."

His eyes darkened. Throwing some of his drink back, he said, "If I go home before I get my mind straight, you'll be fucking worrying

about more than that baby. No fucking way am I setting foot in that house this week."

Fuck.

"I'm telling you, she's not coping." This was the last fucking conversation I wanted to be having, but I'd found Jen on the bathroom floor that morning holding a knife. The way she'd been staring at that knife led me to believe she intended to harm herself. And as much as I hated what she'd done to King, and agreed with his anger towards her, I knew he'd never forgive himself if that baby died because of something he could have helped stop. I'd managed to talk her down this time and was increasing my visits to her, but what she really needed was him.

He slammed his hand down on the top of the bar and roared, "And I'm fucking telling you that she should have fucking thought of that before she betrayed me." He drained his glass and slammed it down, too. "Fuck!" With his eyes boring into mine, he said, "I want to wrap my hands around her fucking throat and strangle her last breath out of her, Devil. You still think I should go see her?"

I shoved my fingers through my hair, unsure of what to suggest. Nitro's voice sounded from behind us. "Devil and I will go with you."

King swivelled to face him. "What, to save Jen's life?" He spat. "You really think the two of you could stop me from doing something I've spent the last six nights dreaming of doing? No fucking way, Nitro."

Nitro stepped closer. "I know you, King, and I know how much you love that woman. You might scream at her, and spew your hate at her, but you'll never hurt her physically."

King forced out an angry breath. Without looking at her, he barked, "Kree! I need another fucking rum."

She dropped what she was doing and quickly made him a drink. He emptied the glass in one go before saying, "Devil, this thing with Hailee, is it serious?"

I nodded. "Yeah, it is."

"Fuck," he muttered. "Was really fucking hoping you'd say no."

Nitro's phone rang, distracting him, and he moved away from us to take the call.

King watched him for a moment. "I'll never make the same mistake I made with Nitro by not listening to what you have to say, but

I'm asking if you could tone it down with Hailee while we wade through this shit with the feds. I've got enough dirt on Bronze to use in an effort to convince him not to walk away from the club, but I'm not getting the vibe from him that he gives a fuck about the consequences of that."

I wasn't either. The last thing I wanted to do was what he'd asked. However, my loyalty to him and the club caused me to re-think that. "You think Bronze can keep us out of the shit with the feds?" He'd looked after us for years, burying evidence and keeping us safe from prosecution, but he didn't work for the federal police so I wasn't sure how far his reach extended.

King nodded, though. "Bronze has people everywhere, Devil. He's good for this. He walks, we're fucked."

Nitro came back to us while I thought about what King had said. "That was Hyde." He met King's gaze. "I asked him to keep an eye on Ghost's sister. They just turned up at her house and she's gone."

"Gone, as in skipped town?" King asked.

"Yeah, as in her house is empty and we don't know where she is." His voice hardened. "As in it looks like Ghost is trying to keep her safe."

There was only one reason why Ghost would want to keep her safe.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" King's temper flared again. "Find her! And while you're at it, let's, for the love of fuck, find out what the hell Wesley Marx's game is!"

HAILEE

I sat in my car outside my mother's home late Friday afternoon dreading the thought of going inside. She'd called last night demanding I join her for dinner. The fact I was still recovering from being sick wasn't enough to get out of it. I could have said no, but that would only have lead to her bitching about my refusal for months. It was far easier to suck it up and go.

My phone sounded with a text.

Leona: You there yet, babe?

Me: Ugh. Yes. Send luck.

Leona: Luck!

Me: Tell me something good. I need that to get me through the night.

Leona: Jerry fucked me the minute I walked in from work. I'm fairly sure I'm pregnant now.

Me: Why?

Leona: He never has sex without planning it. This is a whole new thing for us.

Me: So you think his sperm are partying with your eggs because of his spontaneity?

Leona: LOL Yes!

Me: Okay that was good. Every time my mum pisses me off tonight, I'll think of your baby.

Leona: Love you, Hails.

Me: Love you. Now go have sex again just to be sure.

A tap on the car window caused me to jump as I shoved my phone back in my bag. Looking up, I found Aaron bent over looking at me.

Opening the door, I muttered, "Fuck, Aaron, way to give a girl a heart attack."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "You paid your rego?"

I rolled my eyes as I got out of the car. He was asking from a cop perspective. All his rules and regulations pissed me off. Sometimes, I'd just like him to be laid-back about stuff. "Yes, I paid it yesterday if you must know."

He stepped back to let me out. "Christ, did you have a bad day?"

I slammed the door and then glared at him. "Yeah. It turns out my brother doesn't like my boyfriend, so my mum refused to invite him to dinner, which means I have to sit through this fucking night by myself."

"I'm here, Hailee. You're not on your own."

I stared at him. "God, you have no idea."

He blew out a frustrated breath. This was our same old argument. Without fail, we always had it when we visited Mum. "Tell me, what do I have no idea about this time?"

I straightened my shoulders, ready to lay it all out, when Mum called out from her veranda, "Aaron, come inside, it's hot out here."

My brows shot up and I jabbed a finger in her direction. "*That* for one. No worries about Hailee being fucking hot!"

I stalked away from him, up to where Mum stood waiting. Her mouth spread out into a thin smile for me as I approached, before her gaze darted to Aaron and her smile grew.

"Hi, Mum," I greeted her as Aaron's boots sounded on the step behind me.

"Hailee," she murmured, running her eyes down my body as a scowl appeared on her face. I guessed she didn't like the short shorts I'd worn that night. Or maybe it was the skimpy white T-shirt I'd paired them with. The one that clung to my boobs in the way I knew she hated.

She quickly transferred her attention to my brother. Her gushing over him sickened me, so I left them and entered the house.

My gaze fell on the family portrait that had always hung in the entryway. The portrait of the three of us with Dad and Gran. *The fucking portrait that had disappeared and been replaced with a framed family photo that didn't include Gran.*

Turning back to Mum, I demanded, "Where's the family portrait?"

She looked at me with distaste. "I beg your pardon? Since when do you come into my home and speak to me in that manner?"

I ignored her question. "I can't believe the way you've acted since Dad died. You were just itching to cut Gran out, weren't you?"

"Hailee," Aaron said in a deep voice full of warning.

My phone buzzed with a text, and because I was waiting to hear from Devil, I quickly flicked it over in my hand so I could read the message.

Leona: Sperm. Babies. Happy times. You've got this, girl.

Fucking fuckity fuck.

What the fuck was I doing? I never won an argument with my mother. Fucking never. So why bother trying now?

Just take a deep breath, Hailee, and get through this night. You won't have to see her again for another three months if you're lucky.

With another glare at Aaron, I turned and made the long trek down the hallway to the dining room where I knew Mum would be serving dinner.

This house was way too big for her. She kept it because it had been in her family for years. I figured she had plans to leave it to Aaron when she passed away. Good luck to him, because all I could think was the amount of cleaning it needed. That wasn't something I ever wanted in my life.

Mum served dinner ten minutes later. At least I could always count on her not to fuck around and keep us waiting. She was a stickler for being on time, and when she said dinner was at six, you arrived at six and you were eating by quarter past. This was good for me because it meant I had half a shot at being out of there by seven thirty.

She'd cooked a roast lamb and vegetables, and my guess was she had apple pie and cream for dessert. *So damn predictable.* My life had run on predictability while I grew up. It was one reason why I left the country and travelled as soon as I could.

"Hailee." Aaron's voice broke into my thoughts. I glanced up to find him staring at me as if he was waiting for an answer to a question.

"Huh?"

My mother tsked. "I asked you how your work was going?"

She didn't really want to know. Usually I'd give her the standard reply that all was well so she could move straight onto Aaron who she actually *was* interested in, but I'd had some exciting news that day, and I decided to share it with them. "I received a phone call today from a woman who wants to invest in my charity work."

Mum stared at me blankly while Aaron smiled and said, "That's fantastic. Who is she?"

"She's the CEO of a superannuation company here in Australia. Her aunt's friend has been receiving massages from me, and she heard about it that way. She wants to meet with me next week to talk about investing the kind of money that would mean I could run it full time." *And leave Rachel and her awfulness behind.*

"Really?" Mum asked in the condescending manner she often used on me.

"Really, what?" I actually had no clue what she meant, other than perhaps she was questioning the truth in what I'd said.

Mum put down her cutlery and trained her disbelieving gaze on me. "I keep waiting for the day you come home and tell me some good news. And it never happens."

Her words were like a punch to my gut. In one way, they hurt more than the physical punches I'd received at the hands of Mickey years ago. "What kind of news would you like to hear, Mum?" I was proud of myself for maintaining my cool even when my heart screamed at me to tell her how much she'd hurt me.

"Well, for one, I wish you would give up this silly idea to run a massage charity. I mean, *really*. Why can't you just go back to university and finish the business degree you started? And two, you're thirty, Hailee. Don't you think it's time you started to look for a good catholic man to settle down with?"

My eyes almost bugged out of my head.

Aaron cut in, though, before I could reply to her bullshit. "Jesus, Mum, when are you going to just let her be? She's happy. Isn't that all that matters?" His words came out harshly, and I was taken aback. I'd never once heard him talk to our mother that way. I was also secretly fucking impressed with him. He'd stood up for me often, but mostly he just preferred to keep the peace. This, for him, was going above and beyond.

Mum stared at him like she'd just been slapped. "I will not tolerate that kind of language in my house, Aaron."

I shoved my chair back. I'd heard enough. "Oh for fuck's sake, Mum, you need to move into the twenty-first century. I'm not searching for a good catholic man just so I can improve my social standing by turning my spinster status around. I know you're embarrassed that I'm thirty and not married, but I'm not. I'm actually quite happy being single. Although, I guess you know now from Aaron that I'm dating a biker. The good news, though, is that he's catholic."

She blanched.

"No, I hadn't told her that," Aaron murmured.

I shrugged. "Oh well, she had to find out sooner or later."

Mum's hand moved to her throat while she processed everything I'd said. "Tricia said you'd changed, but I didn't want to believe it."

"Oh God, not this again. When did she say that?" My ex-best friend refused to cut ties with my family, and it pissed me off.

"She came for morning tea this morning, and we discussed your desire—"

I held up my hand to stop her. "I'm not interested in what you two discussed. If you can't see that she treated your daughter badly, then that makes me really sad. Most mothers would want the kind of friend who cheered their daughter on in everything she did in life. They wouldn't want one like Tricia, who was jealous of my new success and new friends." I picked up my bag. "Thank you for dinner, but I'm not hungry anymore."

I didn't wait for her response.

I fled my family home as fast as I could with no intention of going back anytime soon.



By the time I arrived on Devil's doorstep half an hour later, tears streamed down my cheeks, and I was fairly certain it looked like an artist had painted messy black lines down those cheeks.

I'd cried all the way from Mum's house to his. Long shuddering sobs. The worst thing was I had no tissues on me or in the car, so the only thing I'd been able to use was the white T-shirt I wore.

Devil's concerned gaze travelled down my face to my shirt and back up to my eyes. "Fuck, darlin', what happened?" He reached out and pulled me inside to his lounge room where he positioned me on his lap. His strong arms around me were exactly what I needed, but instead of soothing me, it only made me cry harder.

I buried my face in his neck and clung to him. He didn't push me to speak but simply comforted me and waited until I was ready.

I cried for a long time. Decades' worth of tears fell, and when I finally lifted my head to find his eyes, I felt like a weight had lifted. The heaviness that was my mother would never be lifted completely, but these tears had been a long time coming, and it felt good to shed them.

"Thank you," I whispered, barely able to see him through my wet lashes.

"You want some tissues?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

He shifted me onto the couch so he could stand and leave to go in search of the tissues. When he returned, he held the box out to me before sitting and pulling me back onto his lap.

"I take it dinner with your mother didn't go well."

I cleaned my face enough so I could see, and tried to remove some mascara from my cheeks. "Let's just say that I don't think she's going to invite me back anytime soon. And let's also say that I don't give a flying fuck."

"What happened?"

I proceeded to tell him everything that had gone down that night. Even the fact that I thought he'd never be welcome in my mother's home because he was a biker. More tears gushed while I told him, and I wondered if they would ever stop. My relationship with Mum had always been hard, but after that dinner, I was finally facing just how bad it was.

"I really don't want to see her again," I whispered to Devil after I finished telling him everything. "Not ever."

His arm tightened around me. "You might see things differently tomorrow."

I shook my head. "I don't think so. I think I'm done."

He nodded, accepting what I said without trying to make me change my mind. I loved that he simply listened without offering advice.

We sat in silence for a long time. He held me while I thought about everything that had happened again.

When I sighed and rested my head against his chest, he said, "Fuck anyone who doesn't think you should pursue your dreams, Hailee. I'm fucking happy for you, darlin'."

I slid my hand up his shirt to his throat and then to his face. Placing my palm flat to his cheek, I lifted my head and smiled at him. "Thank you. You have no idea what that means to me."

He brushed a kiss across my lips and murmured, "Fuck, you're beautiful. Even when your face is puffy as shit and your makeup is all over the place."

His compliment caused butterflies in my tummy. I shifted to straddle him with my knees pressed into the couch either side of his legs. Taking hold of his face, I said, "How is it that I can be crying my heart out one minute and the next you're making me want to kiss you?"

A lazy smile spread across his face. "I'm just talented like that." His hands cupped my ass. "You should definitely kiss me."

"Should I?" I teased, wanting more than anything to have him help me forget my mother.

Gripping my ass, he slid me closer to him so that my pussy pressed against his erection. His eyes glazed over with desire as he growled, "Yes."

I didn't waste any more time. Lowering my mouth to his, I kissed him for so long I thought our mouths might never come apart again. When he finally dragged his mouth from mine, I was breathless and desperate to be skin-to-skin with him.

"I need you," I begged, my voice husky and my heart fluttery.

He didn't need to be told twice.

Holding me tightly, he stood, taking me with him. The look of determination in his eyes as he carried me down his hallway told me I was about to have some amazing sex. And that he was going to do

exactly what I needed—wipe all thoughts of my mother from my mind.

HAILEE

Devil was blowing my damn mind.

After I'd asked him to fuck me, he'd scooped me into his arms and carried me into the bathroom. He'd then taken his sweet time undressing me with slow, gentle movements.

Once he had me naked, he reached into the shower cubicle and turned the water on. Stepping inside, he pulled me in with him, his hands sliding over my hips and around to my ass so he could pull me against him.

His eyes dipped to my mouth, and he bent to kiss me.

My knees buckled at the way his lips gently deepened the kiss. There was none of his usual dominance. The rough and dirty way he liked to take me with his mouth was nowhere to be seen. Instead, he consumed me with devotion. Worshipping my body and my heart. *Treasuring me.*

Breathless when he ended the kiss, I whispered, "There are so many parts to you, aren't there?" He'd shown me his bossy side, his flirty fun side, and his intense side. This tenderness peeled back a whole other layer.

His fingers dug into my ass. Not answering what I said, he asked, "You want it gentle or rough? My preference is to slam you up against that wall and fuck you six ways from Sunday, but if you want me to keep going slow, I can do that, too."

Oh, God, I wanted it all. Gentle. Rough. Long. Hard. I ran my fingers through his hair and scrunched a handful of it, pulling hard. "I want both."

He hissed. Keeping one hand on my ass, he reached for my hair with the other and yanked my head back, exposing my neck to him. His teeth sunk into my skin near my throat and he bit and sucked me. When he finished, he rasped, "Fuck, baby, I can't get enough of you."

He then turned us so that I stood under the water. Picking up the shower sponge, he filled it with shower gel and started washing me. Gentle strokes cleaned every inch of me, and a couple of minutes later, he kneeled in front of me as he ran the sponge over my thighs.

His breaths quickened as the air surrounding us thickened with our desire. Steam filled the room, and water ran down my body while I watched him take care of me.

He nudged my legs apart before draping one of them over his shoulder. When his tongue flicked against my clit a second later, I reached one hand out to lean against the shower wall in an effort to steady myself while I gripped his hair with my other hand.

I was still recovering from him calling me baby when he began delivering the kind of pleasure that rocked my world. The way baby rolled off his tongue was bewitching. Without realising it, he'd cast a spell over me. I would do whatever he wanted that night. And when he backed it up with his special kind of ecstasy, I was all but owned.

One hand on my ass.

His tongue buried deep inside.

Lips sucking my clit.

Husky sounds filling my ears.

It was sensory overload of the best kind, and I had to work hard to catch my breath because it was almost too much.

Devil stayed on his knees blessing my pussy for so long I wasn't sure I'd be able to hold myself up much longer. Mostly because my legs had turned to jelly, but also because he had blown my damn mind to the point I couldn't think straight enough to continue standing.

When I finally came, after he edged me closer, over and over, I cried out, "Oh, God, fuck!" My body swayed as my eyes squeezed closed and my head rolled back.

I'm going to collapse.

I can't take any more.

It's too much.

As my legs buckled, Devil's arm snaked around my waist, and he caught me. Holding me up, he walked me backwards until I hit the wall behind me.

I opened my eyes right as his lips crashed down onto mine.

He gave me no time to recover from the first orgasm he'd given. Instead, he started working on the second one.

Mouth on mine, hands everywhere, his erection grinding into me, Devil switched from slow and gentle, to rough and demanding.

Our movements soon turned frantic.

Him lifting me.

Me clinging to him.

Nails digging into his skin.

His teeth biting and marking me.

My mouth sucking on his neck.

His hands and mouth all over my breasts.

Both panting.

"Fuck, Devil, I need you in me." I could hardly get the words out in between breaths. When he didn't lift his mouth off my breast, I demanded, "Now! I need your cock inside me now."

His wild eyes finally met mine. "We need a condom."

When he made moves to put me down, I gripped him hard. "I'm clean."

His eyes searched mine, knowing what I was saying. Exhaling a breath, he nodded.

And then he was inside me.

Deep inside me.

Our bodies moved in perfect unison while we both chased our release. I held on tight for the ride and thanked God that he had decided to fuck me the way he always did. I loved slow and gentle, but I fucking lived for the thrill of rough sex.

Devil worked hard to bring me to orgasm before he let himself come. He held on so long that by the time he finally allowed his own release, he roared it out. His legs and back tensed as he thrust inside me one last time and came.

I was drowning in bliss by then. When he'd recovered enough to speak, he tilted my face to his and said, "Jesus fucking Christ, woman, you know how to fuck."

I smiled lazily, unable to give him much more than that. "And you have such a way with words."

He grinned. "How are those legs of yours? You good to walk or do you need me to carry you?"

I tightened my arms around him. "You should carry me. I think you fucked my ability to stand out of me. But I need to clean up first."

He brushed a kiss across my lips as he turned the shower off. "Okay, darlin'."

He let me down and stepped out of the shower, leaving me to clean myself up. When I exited the bathroom, he lifted me back into his arms and carried me to his bed. Sleep was claiming me after a long day and night. I drifted off with my body wrapped around Devil's and him whispering the dirty things he wanted to do to me. The last thing I remembered hearing was him saying, "I'm going to make you the happiest fucking woman on earth."

DEVIL

I watched Hailee sleep from the doorway of my bedroom early the next morning. She'd woken me just after five when she rolled into me, flinging her arm over my chest and gripping her hand around my bicep. She hadn't been awake, but it was as if she was trying desperately to hold onto me. I let her hold me for as long as she wanted, and when she shifted again about an hour later, I'd managed to extricate myself so I could take a piss.

Her fucking mother had a lot to answer for. When Hailee had turned up crying the night before, I'd wanted to simultaneously make it all better for her while going over to her mother's and giving her a piece of my mind. I had no time for fucking parents who couldn't love their children unconditionally.

Hailee stirred, mumbling something I couldn't understand. Moving to the bed, I sat on the edge and ran my hand over her hair. Her beauty blew me away every fucking day. Not only her outer beauty, but also the inner glow she had. I wasn't sure I'd ever met anyone as kind as she was. The way she cared for people and animals amazed the fuck out of me.

"Morning," she mumbled as her eyes fluttered open.

"Morning, darlin'."

She shifted onto her side, curling her legs around me and placing her hand on my leg. "What time is it?"

Fuck, her voice was all fucking raspy from sleep, and it was waking my dick right the fuck up.

"It's early, just after six. I wasn't sure if you had work on today and whether you wanted to squeeze some meditation in before you

went." Fuck knew, she could probably do with some of that after the shit her mother put her through.

She blinked a couple more times before she stared wide-eyed at me. Sitting up, she climbed into my lap and wrapped her arms and legs around me. "You better be careful there, bossman, or you might just make it so that you're stuck with me for life."

"I have no fucking idea what I did to make you climb me like you wanna ride me, but whatever it was, you need to tell me so I can do that shit again."

She shook her head with a devious grin. "Nope, I can't help you out too much. If I give all the secrets away, you'll stop working for it."

"Right," I said as I stood with her wrapped around me. "You need to either fuck me or climb down and let me go take care of business myself. And for the record, I don't plan on stopping working for it anytime soon, darlin'." I really fucking hoped she had time for sex, because my dick was so damn hard for her.

She didn't let go, which I took as a good sign. "I have to start work at eight thirty. I can skip my meditation if you want."

"I think we both know my answer to that." Fuck, I was a bastard. I knew how important her meditation was to her, but damn if my cock didn't need her more.

She moved for me to let her down. Lifting the T-shirt of mine she wore over her head, she threw it on the bed and said, "Just so you know, I'd choose your dick over meditation any day."

Fuck, she was the right fucking woman for me.



"Heard from Dragon this morning," King said to Hyde and me later that day when we were out following up a lead on Marx. "Swears he knows nothing about Marx and told me he'd put the feelers out, too."

Hyde scowled. "I don't trust that motherfucker."

King shook his head. "Agreed."

I didn't trust the president of Silver Hell either.

We were on our way to a bar where Eric Bones would be meeting us to pass on some information regarding Marx. King stopped and

said, "I've got a feeling we're not going to be dealing with Gambarro anytime soon."

Hyde nodded as if he'd had the same thought. "Yeah, I don't think so either. These fucking feds are going to be all over us until they get what they're after."

"Which means we need to tie up all loose ends," King said, "Including Ghost."

I thought about what Ghost had said when I visited him with Nitro. "You need to go see him, King. And I think you're going to have to find a way to make peace with him. At least enough so that he has no reason to talk."

King thought about that for a moment. "Fuck," he muttered. "The last fucking thing I want to do is see that asshole. Let alone offer him any-fucking-thing."

"What the hell would be enough for him to shut his mouth?" Hyde asked.

King's gaze met Hyde's. "I know what it is. But do I want to do it is the question."

King's phone rang then, distracting him from discussing Ghost any further. "Jesus Christ, this fucking woman never stops calling me," he said as he checked caller ID.

"Jen?" I asked. I'd been checking in with her, and she still hadn't seen or heard from him since I mentioned it to him on Thursday.

He put the phone to his ear. When he spoke, his voice was deathly calm. "I'm coming home tonight. I hope to fuck that baby is still kicking." He listened to her and then said, "Stop talking, Jen. Get your shit together and be ready to listen to what I have to say when I get there. And I swear to fucking God, if you push me, it'll be the end of everything."

After he ended the call and shoved his phone in his pocket, he glanced at the both of us, eyes wild, and barked, "First, we get this shit done with Bones. Then, we organise a visit with Ghost. After that, I need to sink my dick into some sweet pussy so I'm calm enough to go home and deal with Jen's shit."

Hyde and I watched for a moment as he stalked away from us. "Fucking hell," Hyde murmured, "that bitch has him so fucking wired that even I'm concerned for her safety."

I hadn't seen King this crazed in a long time and hoped like hell Jen didn't fuck with him anymore than she already had. The club

needed his attention, and we hadn't fully had it this week. Surprisingly, Hyde had stepped up when we needed him and had directed our activities during the week while King drank and screwed his way through it. The tension between the two of them had eased somewhat because of this, so at least something good had come from this whole fuck-up.

Hyde and I followed King, and ten minutes later, we were sitting with Bones in the back of a seedy bar listening to him tell us what he'd heard around the traps about Marx.

Bones leaned forward and lowered his voice, "Word is, someone's out to wipe Storm off the map." His gaze zeroed in on King, and he lifted his chin at him. "Someone with a grudge against you."

Hyde grunted. "Well, fuck, that narrows it down."

He was right; the list that held King's enemies was long.

"Who'd you hear this off?" King asked.

Bones rested back against his seat and spread his arms along the couch. Shaking his head, he said, "Nah, I'm not giving you that, but I will tell you that it's come from a few sources, and their info is usually reliable as fuck."

The scowl on King's face would usually scare most people into giving him what he wanted, but Bones had been dealing with us for long enough that he wasn't as affected anymore. That, and the fact King had gone a little soft on him lately. King's guilt over what happened to Nitro with his uncle mixed with the fact it was Bones who helped save him, led to King going easy on him since then.

"So what the fuck has this got to do with Marx?" King demanded. "Marx is tied up with whoever wants us gone? And they're trying to get to us through our drug trade? That doesn't make sense. We deal far and wide with the coke. They'd struggle to take that from us."

"Plus we have other shit going on that gives us a nice income," Hyde threw in. "There's never a shortage of assholes asking for our help and paying us well for it."

My thoughts were the same as Hyde's. Storm was often called in to clean up the messes that people made. We were the cleaners you called when you wanted to ensure no one ever found out what you'd done. And so long as you had the cash, we took the job on.

Bones shrugged. "I don't know. I'm just telling you what I've heard." Standing, he said, "I've gotta get back to work. I'll call if I

hear anything else.”

King rested his back against the couch and scrubbed his face.

When he didn’t say anything, Hyde said, “You think this is Gambarro?”

King stared into space for a few moments, deep in thought, before glancing at Hyde. “No. This doesn’t feel like Gambarro.”

“Why?” Hyde asked.

“This feels like it’s been set up for a while. The shit with Gambarro isn’t that old. It only began because of Kick and what we did for him. My gut’s telling me this is bigger than that.”

“So we need a list of names of everyone with a grudge against you, and we start working through that list until we figure this shit out,” I said.

King blew out a frustrated breath. “Fuck.”

The meeting with Bones was meant to shed some light for us and help us nail down Marx and his plans. Instead, it only gave us a fuckload more questions and no answers.

HAILEE

I raised my glass and clinked it with Leona's. "Thank fuck this week is almost over," I said before taking a long sip of my cocktail.

Saturday night had finally come around, and after a long day of giving massages, I was ready to let my hair down and dance all night.

Leona hit me with a smile as she sipped her Coke. She was still hoping like crazy that her hubby knocked her up the previous night, so she wasn't on the hard stuff. "You deserve that drink after living through that dinner with your mother."

"Damn, girl, you have the best smile," I said, engrossed in that rather than what she'd said about my mother. Truth be told, I didn't want to think about my mother.

A woman's voice sounded from behind us, breaking into our conversation. "Now that's the kind of chick you wanna keep close. Someone who isn't afraid to give out a compliment to her friends."

I turned and found Monroe behind me. "Oh, God, you're not gonna try and get me to drink another Jägerbomb with you, are you?"

She moved next to us at the bar and placed her purse on the counter. With a quick wave of her hand, she said, "You don't know what you're missing." She watched as I took another long sip of my drink. "Bad day, honey?"

"No, today was good. It was the week that was off."

"Is your band playing tonight?"

"No. I've been sick this week, so we cancelled the couple of gigs we had booked."

Her eyes twinkled. "You really should let me buy you a Jägerbomb. Guaranteed to kill off any lasting germs."

I couldn't help but laugh. "You love that shit, don't you?"

Doug leant across the counter at that point. He'd caught the last bit of our conversation. "She loves that shit almost as much as she loves pierced dicks."

Leona almost choked on her drink. Her eyes widened a little as she said, "Oh, wow... goodness." She wasn't a prude, but she certainly wasn't as adventurous as some in the bedroom.

"Oh, honey," Monroe said, eyeing Leona, "you really should try a pierced cock at least once in your life. I finally found one recently and let me tell you, best sex I've ever had."

"Uh, I'm married," Leona said a little hesitantly.

"You reckon he'd get it pierced for you?" Monroe asked, deadly serious.

Leona's eyes bulged. "God, no. I'm not sure what Jerry would do if I even mentioned it."

Doug placed a Jägerbomb on the counter for Monroe and glanced at Leona. "Babe, just ignore Monroe. She could talk about pierced dicks all day every day, and thinks every man should have one."

I grinned at him. "What do you think, Doug? Would you get a piercing?"

His eyes met mine and he hit me with that slow, sexy smile of his before saying, "What makes you think I don't already?"

Monroe almost spat out her drink. "Fuck, dude, have you been holding out on me?"

Pushing off from the bar, he said, "You'll never know."

Leona sipped her Coke and said, "I think he likes you, Hailee." She'd never been to this pub with me before, so she didn't know our history.

Monroe skulled her drink before saying, "Oh, he does, honey. I've seen the way he looks at her. But then again, Doug's a flirt from way back."

I shrugged. "We nearly slept together once. It was best that it didn't happen."

Arms circled my waist, and warm breath hit my neck as a deep voice rumbled in my ear, "Who did you nearly fuck once? And should I be keeping my eye on him?"

My belly instantly fluttered and my legs swayed. Turning, I looked up at Devil, taking in the dark desire burning in his gaze. "Hello," I murmured, unable to form more words because he had me all tongue-tied.

His gaze pierced me. "You didn't answer my question. Who did you nearly fuck?"

Oh, God, he was jealous. The way he held me like he never wanted to let me go, the burn in his eyes, and the way he demanded an answer, all screamed his jealousy.

Placing my hands against his chest, I said, "Do you really want to know? Or should we just take this home and I'll show you that you're the only man I'm into these days?"

He thought about that for a moment. Shaking his head, he forced out, "I don't want to know."

Taking hold of my hand, he dragged me away from the girls, through the Saturday night crowd and to a corner table in the pub. By the time he sat down and pulled me onto his lap so I straddled him, my breaths were coming hard and fast.

"Fuck, De—"

He cut me off when he pulled my lips to his and kissed me. It was our roughest kiss yet, and it erased all thoughts from my mind except for those about him.

When he ended the kiss, my heart was almost beating outside my chest. "What was that about?" I asked, wondering what the hell had gotten into him.

He moved his hands to my thighs and ran them up my legs and under my dress. "Fuck if I know, darlin'. Jealousy isn't usually a problem of mine, but the thought of another man with you just about sent me fucking crazy."

I didn't love jealousy and was glad it wasn't the norm for him, but I adored what I heard in his voice. The fact he wanted me so much and didn't want to share me made me feel special. No one had ever made me feel that wanted.

Reaching for his jeans, I popped the button and slid the zip down. My fingers worked fast, and I soon had my hand wrapped around his dick.

He watched as I stroked him, his eyes closing for a brief moment before opening again and meeting my gaze. "You gonna give me a hand job in public?"

Lust sizzled along my skin. Bending so my mouth was next to his ear, I said, "No, I'm going to fuck you in public." His sharp intake of breath made my pussy clench. As far as I was concerned, I couldn't get him inside me fast enough. The pub was packed that night, and noisy as hell. We sat in the darkened corner, and I figured most people were too busy doing their own thing to even realise what we were doing.

He ran his hands up my back as our eyes met again. "You're going to fuck me here on this chair for everyone to see?" Disbelief coated his words.

I continued pumping his cock, loving the hiss that escaped his lips. "You should stop doubting me and start getting on board with this. I'm wearing a dress and no underwear. It's the perfect opp—"

"Fuck," he rasped as he ran his hands further under my dress to reach for my ass. When he realised I wasn't lying about wearing no panties, he said, "I'm on fucking board. Never let it be said I ever doubted my woman."

I grinned as I pressed my mouth to his. Half kissing him, I said, "I like it when you call me your woman."

He gripped my ass cheeks. "And I like it when you show me your dirty side like this. There should be more sex in public as far as I'm concerned."

"I've never fucked a man in public before you."

"Baby," he growled, "I never wanna hear those words or any words like them out of that mouth again. The less I have to think about you with another man, the fucking better."

I melted against him. "I like it when you call me baby, too."

"So we've established I should call you my woman and baby a lot fucking more, especially if I wanna get fucked in public. Can we move to the part of this night where my dick finally gets inside you?"

"Such a way with words," I murmured as I positioned my pussy over his dick, making sure my dress covered everything.

"Fuck," he groaned as I sank down on him. His hands left my ass so he could hold my hips, and he bent his head so he could suck my neck.

I held his biceps as I fucked him, my fingers digging into his skin while my pleasure built. This whole fucking-in-public thing was something I could do a whole lot more of. I'd been hesitant when

we'd had sex in the staff room weeks ago, but the thrill of it all made me want more.

"Jesus, Hailee, I want to bend you over this fucking table and pound my fucking dick into you while everyone watches," he rasped.

My breaths quickened. I was coming out of my skin, unsure of how much more I could take. "I'm not sure I won't scream when I come," I panted, my pussy pulsing as I fought my release.

I was so close.

So fucking close.

I never wanted it to end, though. Devil felt too good inside me like this.

He bit my neck and then licked a line along my skin until he met my mouth. "Scream, darlin'. I don't give a fuck if everyone knows you're riding my dick."

"Fuck," I moaned as I dug my fingers into his arms again. "You are so fucking dirty."

He'd been letting me take the lead, but suddenly he stole it back. Gripping my hips, he moved me up and down on him while thrusting his dick in hard. Anyone who was watching would know what we were doing.

His mouth found mine, consuming me with a savage kiss. Between that and him fucking me the way he was, my orgasm shattered through me. I tried like hell to slow it, but Devil was a force that couldn't be stopped. He wanted to make me come. And I fucking came.

I buried my scream in his neck, sucking him hard while I orgasmed.

When we were done, his eyes found mine. "I'll never doubt you again, baby."

I kissed him one last time. "Stop calling me baby, or else I'm gonna wanna go again right here, right now."

His lips spread out in a huge-ass grin and his arms wrapped around me. "You're gonna get us kicked out of this joint, *baby*."

I rested my forehead against his. "You're killing me here."

He tightened his hold on me. "Woman, you killed me the first fucking night I met you."



I stared at my grandmother with wide eyes. "Uh, you do realise this could all go to hell, don't you?"

She flicked her wrist at me as if to say, "Hush, child." She then said, "Aaron needs to understand you're serious about Dominic. Lunch together will do them good."

"I get where you're coming from, but I think a little more time apart might help him come to terms with our relationship. Let him see how strong we grow as time goes on."

She'd just informed me that she'd invited Aaron to lunch at our home that day, after she'd already invited Devil. Aaron had been loud in his disapproval of Devil, and I didn't see him backing down anytime soon. But Gran always had her own views on things, and she disagreed with me on this.

The sound of someone at the front door interrupted us. A moment later, Aaron entered the kitchen, flowers in hand. Passing them to Gran, he pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Lunch smells good."

"She's made your favourite. I'm pretty sure it's to bribe you into being nice."

His eyes narrowed at me. "Are you going to give me bad news or something?"

"Something like that," I muttered.

"Hailee," he said in a warning tone. "What's going on?"

A knock on the front door saved me, and I ignored his question to go answer it.

Devil's eyes trailed down my body as I walked towards him. The screen door was the only thing separating us, and I was fairly sure by the glint I saw in his eyes that it was possibly the only thing stopping him putting his hands all over me.

I didn't open the door straight away. Staring at him through it, I said, "I'm not sure you'll want to come in."

He frowned. "Why not?"

I sighed, frustrated at my grandmother, but more so with Aaron for making things difficult. "Aaron's here. Gran invited him because she thinks you two need time to get to know each other."

He stepped forward, a look of determination on his face. "Open the door, Hailee."

I hesitated. "Are you sure?"

"Open it. No one's stopping me from seeing you. Not even your brother." His voice was forceful, and while I loved his stubbornness, I also feared the fireworks that could erupt when he and my brother were in the same room.

Reluctantly, I let him in. His hands moved straight to my waist so he could pull me close for a kiss.

"What the fuck is he doing here?" Aaron bellowed from the other end of the hallway. As he stalked our way, I felt Devil's body tense, and I silently prayed for peace between these two.

My grandmother appeared in the hallway. "I invited him." She took the Gran tone she'd liked to use when chastising us as kids.

Aaron slowed, shock registering on his features. Turning back to face her, he said, "You support this relationship?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"You do know he's a biker, right? And that his club is tied up in some bad shit."

"Fuck," Devil swore under his breath.

I held him next to me when I sensed he was about to move towards Aaron. Anger vibrated off both of them, scaring me a little. I hoped Gran knew what she was doing.

"I know all of that, Aaron, but I also know that Dominic is the best man I've ever seen with my granddaughter. Hailee's smiling like I've never seen her smile, and confident in a way she's never been. He makes her happy. And as far as him being a biker, since when do we judge people? I thought I helped raise you to be better than that."

"You would judge bikers the same way I do if you were in the line of work I'm in."

Gran's voice softened a little when she said, "And you've been perfect your entire life, then? Never done something you weren't proud of?"

Aaron had turned to look at Devil right before she said that, and he froze at her questions. His face paled, and instead of answering her, he stalked back into the kitchen.

"Way to go, Gran," I whispered.

"She sure has a way of getting her point across," Devil said softly enough so only I heard him.

I looked up at him. Touching his cheek, I said, "Okay, you good to do this? I don't think it's gonna be fun."

He nodded. "Nothing worth anything in life is easy, darlin'."

He led me into the kitchen while I held my breath a little.

God, please don't let this turn to shit.

DEVIL

Bronze and I managed to make it through most of dinner without trying to take each other's heads off. And then Hailee's asshole neighbour happened.

Jean had just served dessert, and I'd taken my first bite of the best pavlova I'd ever tasted when the fight next door started.

"God, does he ever lay off her?" Hailee muttered, pushing her chair back to stand.

Bronze quickly stood, too. "Sit back down, Hailee. I'll go over and see what's happening."

Screams came from the house next door. The kind that signaled a woman was terrified for her safety. It was the first time I'd heard them since hanging out at Hailee's home.

I pushed my chair out. "I'll come with you."

Bronze scowled. "I'll go on my own."

"You should both go," Jean said. "He's been drinking today, Aaron. You might need the help this time."

The guy sounded like a real piece of work.

I followed Bronze outside and across the yard to the neighbour's house. We didn't exchange words until we reached the front door. The screams had stopped, so Bronze took a moment to say, "You think you can control your urge to punch him? Because the last fucking thing I need here is you letting loose and him filing a report against us."

My fists clenched by my side. Lifting my chin at the door, I said, "Let's just get this shit over with so we finish lunch and then you can go home."

"I can go home? You think you're staying or something?"

"Jesus, Bronze—"

A scream from inside drew our attention back to the job at hand, and Bronze banged hard on the front door. "Police! Open up!"

Silence.

And then the front door was yanked open and a pissed off guy stood glaring at us. "Yeah?"

Bronze pushed his way inside, and I followed behind while the asshole protested after slamming the door shut.

We found a woman cowering in the corner of the kitchen with a bloody nose and bruises on her face. Bronze crouched next to her. "He hit you again, Maria?"

She stared at him with fearful eyes that darted from Bronze to the asshole who'd hit her. She didn't appear to want to tell Bronze what had happened, and when the asshole started yelling at us, she ducked her head and covered it with her hands.

"We don't fucking need your help," the asshole yelled.

Bronze stood. "Yeah, see I'm thinking you do. Just like every other fucking time you get your drink on and lose your shit with her."

The asshole snarled. "What you need to do is mind your own damn business. She's fine, and I just want to watch the fucking television in peace without any of you fucking interrupting me."

My carefully controlled temper snapped, and I stepped forward to get in the guy's face. "She interrupt your peace, did she, asshole? Is that why you punched the fuck out of her?"

His eyes glinted with hate. "Yeah, matter of fact, she did. What's it to you?"

Without a second thought, I swung my fist straight into his face, knocking him flat on his ass on the hard tiles of the kitchen.

"Fucking hell, Devil, I told you to keep your goddam shit together," Bronze roared.

I ignored him and stepped over the guy so I could grab his shirt and reef him up. Once I had him standing, I spun him around and slammed him hard against the pantry door, taking care to smash his head hard against it. I then punched his face again. Twice. When he hit the floor for the second time, I crouched down next to him and said, "That's what it is to me, motherfucker. I'm practically living next door to you now. If I so much as *think* you're taking to her with

your fists, I'll be over here. And that pain you're feeling now? It's fucking nothing compared to what you'll get off me next time."

I left him and stalked outside, barely able to stomach being inside his house. When I was almost back to Hailee's front door, I stopped and bent, resting my hands on my knees. Taking some long deep breaths, I attempted to get myself under control. I didn't want to go inside while in this state of anger.

"What the fuck was that shit?" Bronze yelled.

"I was just doing what you can't," I snapped. "And besides, that kind of cunt only responds to fists and threats. He's hardly gonna listen to anything you have to say."

Hailee ran outside, her face and body displaying the stress I heard in her words when she asked, "Did everything go okay?"

Ignoring her, Bronze looked at me and said, "As far as you practically living here, you know where I stand on that, so I suggest you reassess that statement."

He left us alone, stalking inside.

Hailee looked up at me with a frown. "What did he mean by that?"

Fuck.

I hadn't told her how I knew her brother, and I sure as fuck hadn't told her about his ultimatum. I wasn't about to, either. Snaking my arm around her waist, I said, "Nothing, darlin'. We'll sort our shit out soon."

Shaking her head, she said, "Devil, don't lie to me. I know he's got a problem with me dating you. Has he said something to you about it?"

"He's made it clear he doesn't want us to date, yes. But, Hailee"—I strengthened my hold on her—"I'm not walking away, okay? Your brother will have to either come around or learn to live with us being together."

She nodded like she believed me, but I saw the doubt in her eyes. I resolved to do whatever it took to get Bronze on side. No fucking way was he coming between me and the woman I wanted by my side.



Monday rolled around, and so did Storm's problems.

"Got a job for you and Hyde," King said, coming out of his office when I hit the clubhouse first thing. He looked as tired as I felt.

"What?" I said as I yawned.

His forehead creased with a frown. "You get any sleep last night, Devil?"

"Some." Hailee had kept me up half the night so I couldn't complain. But a later alarm would have been appreciated. She always set her alarm for 6:00 fucking a.m. to do her meditation. I needed to find a way to still get as much sex in as we did, but with more sleep. Possibly getting her naked much fucking earlier would do it, but then again, we'd probably just fuck for longer and still not get much sleep.

"Devil! Are you fucking hearing a word I'm saying?"

I blinked and yawned again. "No, but I was wondering how you went with Jen on Saturday night? Did you go home and talk to her?"

"Yeah, she's sorted."

"As in?" It felt like I cared more about her than he did at this point, and that was saying something because I cared almost nothing for her.

"Fuck, Devil, what is this? Monday fucking sharing circle?" He rubbed the back of his neck. "I told her she can stay with me while she's pregnant and then until she finds her feet. After that, I want her gone. Now, can we please get back to club shit?"

"What's on for today?" I was more than happy to get back to club shit.

"I need you and Hyde to collect cash off a few assholes today."

"Where's Kick?" It was usually his job to do collections.

"Evie's in hospital. They're having some complications with the pregnancy, so I've told him to take whatever time he needs with her."

I nodded. "Is Hyde in already?"

"Yeah." At my stunned expression, he said, "Surprised the fuck outta me, too, brother."

After months of Hyde being off the rails with his moods, and being MIA more often than not, he'd finally gotten his shit together over the last couple of weeks and was back to putting the club first.

"You ready to go?" Hyde joined us, no sign of his usual morning grumpiness at all.

"Be back by lunch. Devil, you're with me for my visit with Ghost this afternoon," King said.

As we walked out to our bikes, I wondered what the hell had happened with Hyde to change his mood so drastically. In the end, I decided it had to be pussy. I couldn't think of anything else that would change his asshole ways in such a short amount of time.



I glared at the motherfucker giving us the fucking run around. My mood had turned foul as the morning progressed, and no fucking way did I have the patience to deal with his shit. On top of that, the heat had grown unbearable. We were dealing with fucking forty-plus degree heat, and we were doing that inside this motherfucker's tiny tin shed of a fucking house.

"Look," I snapped, "have you got the cash or fucking not?"

He grimaced, and I knew we weren't going to get very far, very fucking fast. "Well, I do, but it—"

Hyde had been patient up until that point, again surprising me, but he'd found his breaking point, too. Stepping forward, he scrunched a handful of the guy's shirt in his hand. "There's no room for any butts in all this, asshole. If the next words out of your mouth aren't that you've got the cash, you're gonna meet my fists."

The guy continued to shake his head and plead his case. "I can bring it to you in a few days."

Hyde grunted as he let the guy's shirt go and punched him hard in the face. His mouth spread out in a satisfied expression as he watched the asshole slump to the ground.

Glancing at me, he said, "Best part of the fucking day so far."

"We need to hurry this along, Hyde. The heat in here is fucked."

Hyde looked back at the guy. "You want a finger or a whole hand, Devil?"

The guy's eyes just about popped out of his head. "What?"

Hyde pulled out his knife and ran it down the asshole's face. "You didn't think we'd leave empty-handed, did you? We have to take something back to our president, and if it's not cash, a body part will do for now."

Right as the guy was about to get into it with us, shots rang out and bullets sprayed the house, smashing through the front windows.

Hyde and I ran towards the front door, ducking to avoid being shot. A car had screeched to a stop outside, and as we shot at it, the driver slammed his foot to the floor and took off.

"Forget the asshole inside," Hyde yelled. "I wanna know who the fuck that was."

I agreed with him, and a couple of minutes later, we were in pursuit on our bikes. Adrenaline spiked in my veins. Fucking getting shot at wasn't something I appreciated, and the urge to deliver pay-back roared so loudly I felt like it would bleed out of me.

Weaving in and out of traffic, we quickly caught up to the car. Hot, smoggy wind whipped around me while horns blared and brakes squealed as we disrupted the traffic. Fury at having to deal with this shit crashed into the irritation the fucking heat had caused me. When I got my hands on these motherfuckers, they would regret aiming their guns at us.

From what I could work out, there were two men in the car. Hyde was ahead of me and signaled for me to take the driver side while he took the passenger side. I sped up to do as he'd indicated, but as we approached, the car abruptly turned right into a side street, almost causing me to come off my bike.

Fuck.

We adjusted course and followed them down a narrow street with bends all through it that tested any patience I had left. Taking advantage of this road having little traffic, the guy in the passenger side stuck his head out the window and shot at us.

Motherfucker.

I gripped the bike harder while doing my best to avoid getting fucking killed while also navigating around parked cars.

The end of the street came into view, and I watched as the car took the corner too sharply. It smashed into an oncoming car, and I figured we would get the chance to find out who we were dealing with. *And the opportunity for vengeance.* However, as we drew closer, the driver revved the engine and sped away from the crash scene.

We followed as best we could, but the traffic was a fucking shit-fight, making it difficult for us to weave in and out. Lunchtime foot traffic didn't help either, slowing us, too. The dirty white car we followed soon became a speck in the distance. We didn't give up easily,

but when we found ourselves stuck at a red light in gridlocked traffic in the middle of Sydney, I knew we were done. I also knew that when we finally did figure out who tried to kill us, I'd take great fucking pleasure in my revenge.

Once we got through the city and out of the heavy traffic, I followed Hyde's lead and pulled over to the side of the road.

Ripping his helmet off, he muttered, "I've got no fucking idea who that was. You?"

I shook my head. "No, but we've got a number plate we can run. I doubt it'll do us any good, but it's worth a shot."

"I'll get onto that while you head out to see Ghost. I'm gonna make it my fucking mission to find out who those motherfuckers were."



Ghost's eyes held more suspicion than I'd ever seen in any person when he faced King and me that afternoon. He refused to sit. Rather, he stood and watched us with his arms folded across his chest.

King's lips curled up in annoyance. "For fuck's sake, sit, Ghost," he barked.

Ghost's body tensed. If we hadn't been in a prison with guards' eyes on us, I was fairly sure he'd take a swing at King. "I stopped listening to you a long fucking time ago. I'm hardly gonna start again."

"You will when you hear what I've got to say."

A flicker of interest flared in Ghost's eyes. He attempted to hide it, but if I'd seen it, King wouldn't have missed it. "How about you spit it out and then I'll decide whether I sit or not?"

King's hands landed on the table, and he shot out of his seat. In a low, menacing voice, he said, "How about you fucking sit or else I'll make sure your stay in this shithole is extended."

I had no doubt he would, too. King had that kind of power, and if someone pissed him off he didn't hesitate to use it.

Ghost scowled, but he sat.

King followed suit before saying, "You seen the feds again?"

Ghost's stubborn side kicked in. "I'm not answering that until I know what's on the table."

King leant forward and dropped his voice to speak quietly. "Your parole is coming up."

Ghost took in the full meaning of what King meant and blew out a pissed off breath. "You're a fucking cunt, King."

"Yeah, that might be, but I do what I do for the club." He stopped for a moment before adding, "Except when an asshole tries to step in on my territory. The shit I do to him for that is solely for my benefit." Fuck, we were going to dredge up the Jen shit from years ago.

"Jesus, are you ever gonna let that go? I was fucking drunk. And Jen wasn't into it, anyway."

King's eyes darkened as he shook his head. "I'm not talking about Jen."

I sat up straighter and looked at King. This was news to me.

Ghost stared at King for a long silent few moments, recognition all over his face. He knew what King was talking about. "Fuck, man, that was a long fucking time ago. I was young and dumb as shit. And so was she."

King's body snapped back as anger flooded his face. Violent, raging, lethal anger. "Don't ever fucking talk about her like that again."

I blinked. I'd seen King in a murderous rage many times, but this... this was off the fucking charts. The venom laced through his words revealed the level of hatred he had for Ghost. If I were sitting on the other side of the table being asked if I wanted parole, I'd say fuck no. Because the minute Ghost got out, he'd need to take cover from King. And there weren't many places in this country that anyone could be safe from my president. His reach was that far and wide.

Ghost's face whitened. "Look, Ivy was—"

King punched the table. "Don't fucking say her name!"

"Jesus, King," I muttered, eyeing the guard watching us. "You're drawing attention."

He ignored me. "You thought I'd never find out, Ghost? What I can't figure out is why you even thought Ivy would be into you? And don't try to feed me some bullshit about her saying yes to you. Jen told me everything you told her about that day."

Ghost looked down at his hands resting on the table. He didn't answer King straight away, and I wondered where this would all end up. I joined the club a long time after Ivy left, so I didn't know what had gone on. But I'd heard the stories about the love King had

for her. Apparently when she'd left, it had ripped him apart, and he'd spent years getting over her. I was beginning to think he'd never gotten over her, because I'd never seen him like this over Jen or any other woman.

When Ghost finally looked back up at King, the fight had gone out of him. I couldn't be sure, but I thought I saw guilt flash in his eyes when he spoke. "I was twenty-three then, King, and all I ever seemed to do was fuck shit up. I was drunk every damn day, and half the time I had no idea what I was doing."

"So that makes it okay to try and fuck someone else's woman? The thing is, Ghost, it wasn't just my woman you tried it on with. You screwed anyone who stepped on your path. And because of the power you had in the club, you got away with it. Over and fucking over."

We all sat in silence after that. Ghost had nothing to come back with, and it seemed that King had said all he would on the subject.

Finally, King stood and said, "You keep your mouth shut when the feds visit and move your sister back home so I know where she is, and I'll help push your parole through. You don't do any of those things, and we're done for good. I'll happily ensure you rot in this hellhole."

On our way out to our bikes, after King had secured Ghost's agreement, I said, "You didn't strip him of VP because of Jen, did you?"

King slowed, his eyes meeting mine. "No." His gaze drifted off somewhere behind me for a beat, before coming back to me. "I didn't fight hard enough for Ivy back then. The minute I could, I fucking did."

I didn't understand his meaning, but that was the thing with King—most people often didn't. He talked in riddles half the time, and his mind sometimes worked in ways that made no sense to me. But if you needed someone on your side who was loyal as fuck, King was your man. I couldn't even begin to imagine a time when he wouldn't fight hard for someone he cared about, and I wondered what had gone on back then for that to have happened.

HAILEE

I pulled my car into the driveway and killed the engine. Rummaging in my handbag, I found what I was looking for at the very bottom. Pulling a tissue from the packet, I wiped the tears from my eyes.

No one needed to see me like this.

It had been the Monday from hell, and I'd cancelled all plans for the night, including our usual Monday performance at Flirt. I'd also texted Devil to say I was going home to bed. I just wanted to curl into a ball and forget the world for the night.

My phone buzzed with a text on the seat beside me.

Dylan: You need me to go see that bitch and give her a piece of my mind?

Me: Did Leona tell you what happened?

I hadn't told a soul. The only ones who knew were my workmates who had witnessed my meltdown.

The phone rang, and I answered it with a sigh. "I'm okay, Dylan. Really. I'm sorry I cancelled tonight's gig, but I just don't have it in me to smile and sing."

"Babe, I couldn't give a fuck about the gig. Do you want me to come over? You could give me a massage, and I could tell you what a bitch Rachel is."

He never failed to make me laugh, even when I was down for the count. "I'm gonna have to find you a girlfriend who knows how to massage, just so you quit begging me."

"Could be a good idea. I'm not thinking your boyfriend would be happy if your hands were always on me."

"Yeah, you might be on to something there."

"Okay, so I'm going to come over. No massage required."

The rumble of a bike distracted me, and I glanced out the window of the car to see Devil pulling his bike in behind me.

"No, don't come over. Devil's just turned up." I softened my voice when I added, "But thank you. Love you, Dylan."

"Love you, too, babe. I'll call you tomorrow to make sure you're okay."

I ended the call and threw my phone in my bag. Exiting the car, I smiled at Devil as he approached.

"Fuck, darlin', you look like hell." Concern etched lines into his face as he reached for me.

I placed my hand in his and allowed him to pull me close. He was right—my face was black with wet mascara from all the tears I'd cried on my way home from work. "Thanks, it's always good when your boyfriend tells you that you look like shit."

He ignored my sarcasm. "Leona called and told me you got into it with Rachel."

My eyes held his. "So you just dropped everything and came straight over?" I asked softly, my heart beating rapidly at that thought.

"Yeah." He said it like I'd just asked the dumbest question ever. Like, *of course* he would drop everything and come to me.

I reached up to run my fingers lightly over his lips. "You better be careful, Dominic Ford, because I might just be falling in love with you."

He took hold of my hand. "I'll never be careful if that's what it'll get me."

I moved so my body was flush against his and pulled his mouth to mine. Before I kissed him, I said, "Only you could show up here,

when I feel the way I do, and make me feel like life is so fucking good."

"What happened with Rachel?"

"She gave me a choice—my job or my charity work. We argued over it for a bit, and then I told her to shove her fucking job. I still don't know for sure my investor is going ahead, and I really can't afford to be out of work, but I can't stay there another day." I felt ill over my decision, but at the same time, I felt deep in my bones that it was the right choice. At this point, I was putting my trust in the universe for it to all work out okay.

Devil nodded and pressed his lips to mine. His kiss was gentle, loving. He always seemed to know just what I needed. When he ended the kiss, he said, "You made the right choice, darlin'. I've watched you deal with her shit for weeks now, and that bitch doesn't deserve you. We'll get through this. It'll all work out."

I smiled up at him. "*We'll?*" My question was almost a whisper. I was hesitant to fully embrace what I thought he meant by that word, but God, I wanted to.

"Yes, *we*," he said with conviction, making this whole shitty day so much better.

I hooked a hand around his neck while also sliding a leg around him so I could lift myself into his arms. "Okay, so I'm thinking we should have dinner here with Gran tonight—she's making my favourite—and then you should take me back to your place so you can fuck me in ways that will make me scream so loudly it might cause the roof to cave in."

He lifted a brow. "You don't want me to do that to you here?"

I grinned. "Smart-ass." Gran didn't need to hear me calling out his name over and over.

"What's your favourite dinner?"

"Sticky pork spare ribs." My mouth watered just thinking about them. "God, you are going to love them. Gran makes them the best I've ever had."

"I'll have to get that recipe off her if it makes you this fucking horny."

I tightened my arms around his neck. "Careful," I warned. "I'm falling." Truth be told, I'd already fallen for him. Hard.

"I'm counting on it, baby."

At the sound of a car pulling up, he turned, and I saw Aaron parking on the street in front of the house. He stalked our way, his face an angry mask.

"We're done, Devil!"

Devil put me down and stepped forward to meet Aaron, his shoulders tense.

Aaron's eyes met mine. "Go inside, Hailee. This is between us."

I straightened. "No, anything you've got to say to Devil, you say to me, too."

He shook his head and swore under his breath before turning back to face Devil. "I've just chased up that number plate from today. Those guys are tied to Marx." His voice hardened as he added, "They're the kind of guys who don't fucking mess around, Devil. They'll be back."

"And when they come, we'll be ready for them." Devil's tone was just as hard.

"Exactly how do you see that playing out? Because from where I stand, I see my sister being put right in the middle of danger here." He jabbed his finger in the air at Devil. "And that is the reason why I told you to walk away."

I frowned. "Wait. You two know each other?" A vague memory of the day we met in the back of Aaron's car drifted into my mind, and I realised that they must have known each other back then. I wasn't sure why I hadn't connected the dots.

"Yeah," Aaron said, "we do."

My mind was a jumbled mess of thoughts. I looked at Devil. "Why is he running plates for you?"

Devil scrubbed a hand over his face. "Fuck, it's complicated, Hailee."

My eyes widened, and I turned to Aaron. "You're running plates to give Storm information, aren't you?" The sinking feeling I had in my stomach made me feel ill.

"Yes," Aaron admitted, and everything I knew about my brother was suddenly muddy.

He's a dirty cop.

"How long have you been dirty?" I demanded, as I wondered what else I didn't know about him.

"That's not important. What *is* important is that you stay away from Storm."

He reached for me, but I pulled my arm away. "I don't need to stay away from anyone, Aaron. All I need, right now, is for you to answer my question. How long?"

"Hailee—"

"No!" I yelled, not wanting to hear his excuses. "You stood there the other day and judged bikers as if you were better than them. I have no issues with bikers. What I have an issue with is someone pretending to be something they're not, and then lording that over others." I took a step away. "I need a moment to get my thoughts together."

With that, I left them to it and stalked inside. I needed a quiet space to think. I was so damn disappointed in Aaron. I loved him unconditionally, but sometimes he managed to do shit I really didn't agree with or understand. I hated that he'd treated Devil so badly, acting as if he were the better man because he was a cop. I believed everyone was equal and found it hard to fathom people who didn't think the same way. I also found it really fucking difficult to like people who discriminated against others.

Damn you, Aaron.

I raked my fingers through my hair as I worked hard to reconcile my feelings towards my brother.

"Hailee," Gran said, a frown on her face as she found me sitting alone in the lounge room. "What's wrong?"

"I just need a moment, Gran, and then I'll tell you." I had to get my thoughts under control, otherwise I'd be shooting my mouth off and potentially say things I'd later regret. "Can you please go and make sure Aaron and Devil aren't trying to kill each other out the front?" They'd been projecting that vibe when I left them. I hoped they could both be man enough not to act on it.

She nodded and did as I asked, leaving me alone again. I'd been sitting there for a good five minutes or so when I heard shouting from the front yard.

Aaron's voice.

I made my way out there again, horrified to find them fighting. Punches were flying thick and fast. Both of them seemed determined to inflict as much pain on the other as possible. My own anger flared while I watched them. Why couldn't the two men in my life find a way to get along? "Gran! Why are you just standing there doing nothing?"

She grabbed my arm as I tried to push past her to go to them.
“Leave them be, baby girl.”

I spun around to face her, just as horrified at her response.
“*Really?* You want us to just stand here and watch as they try to kill each other?” My heart rate sped up at that thought. I couldn’t do it. I wouldn’t.

“You’re being dramatic, child. This is what men do. I don’t understand it either, but it seems to work for them. Maybe after they get it out of their systems, they’ll be able to move forward and leave each other alone.”

Confusion crashed all around me.

Was she right?

Would this actually fix anything?

In the end, I realised one thing—me trying to get in the middle of them would be a waste of time. They were both hell-bent on seeing this fight to the very end. So, I stood with my grandmother and watched in horror as they beat each other up. I struggled to take it all in, and often had to turn away. By the time they were finished, they both lay on the front lawn battered and bloodied, and I wasn’t sure either could be called the victor.

DEVIL

I sat outside Bronze's house on my bike early the next morning, contemplating exactly what I would say to him. I'd woken when Hailee did for her meditation, and had gotten ready for the day, intent on getting to Bronze's before he left for the day. Hailee had decided to skip her meditation and had asked me to drop her home on my way out. She knew where I was headed, and seemed concerned that we'd get into it again, but I assured her we wouldn't.

We needed to fix this shit between us. Our fight the day before had been brutal. I'd been left with swollen eyes I had trouble seeing through, cuts, and bruises. I didn't think anything was broken, but my body hurt like a motherfucker. Bronze had fared about the same. We couldn't keep doing this, and I suspected we would if we didn't get our shit together soon. Either that or he would make good on his threat to walk from the club. That was something I needed to stop from happening.

But what the fuck could I say that he would listen to? He hadn't taken in anything I'd said up to this point, and I really wasn't sure he would at all. Bronze was a stubborn asshole.

"Fuck," I muttered as I closed the distance between my bike and his front door.

I knocked on the door a few times, but he didn't answer. Figuring he could still be asleep, I pulled out my phone and called him. His phone rang, but it sounded like the noise came from just on the other side of the door. If that was the case, why the fuck wasn't he answering it?

"Bronze!" I called out, banging harder on his door this time.

My gut churned with concern when he still didn't answer, so I headed around the back to see if he had any windows open. The unease I felt turned out to be justified when I discovered the back door kicked in. A few moments later, I found him tied up and gagged in his bedroom.

"Jesus fuck," I said as I pulled the gag from his mouth. "What the fuck happened?"

"Three guys happened. They were all wearing balaclavas, though, so I don't know who they were." He grunted while I worked the rope off his hands and feet.

His face was a bloody mess where they'd beaten him, and when he moved from the chair, hunched over, I knew they'd taken to his body, too.

"Fucking assholes will pay for this when I find out who it was," he said.

I followed him down the hallway into the kitchen where he pulled ice from his freezer. "You got some enemies at work who'd do this?" I asked.

Scowling at me, he wrapped the ice and held it to his face. "Clearly I do."

"Don't be a motherfucker. I'm trying to help you here."

"Yeah, well, I don't want your fucking help, Devil."

Ignoring that, I said, "I don't get it. They came here and roughed you up, and that was it? Did they threaten you?"

He hissed as he repositioned the ice on his cheek. "All they said was that I'd screwed them over and I'd pay. They said they'd be back when it was done. Fucked if I know what that meant."

Ice slid down my spine. "Fuck, Bronze." I yanked my phone out of my jeans and dialed Hailee. "Do you think they would have gone after Hailee?"

His jaw clenched, but before he replied, Hailee picked up.

"Hey, you," she said, and I could tell by her voice that she was smiling.

Relief coursed through me. Letting out a long breath, I said, "Thank fuck."

"What's wrong? You sound stressed."

"Darlin', I need you to do something for me, and I need you to do it as fast as possible, okay?"

"Devil, you're scaring me." Her fear bled through the phone, and I cursed silently that she had to go through this.

"Get Jean in the car and drive to the clubhouse. I'll text you the address, and I'll let the boys know you're on the way in case I'm not there by the time you arrive. I'll tell you everything when I get there."

"Shit." Silence, and then—"Okay." Her voice was shaky, but determined. *That's my girl.*

I'm going to hang up now so you can go."

Without waiting for her to say anything else, I ended the call and texted her the address of the clubhouse. I then phoned through to the boys on the gate that she was on her way.

"Thanks."

I glanced up to find Bronze staring at me in what could only be described as begrudging thanks. Nodding, I said, "Yeah."

"I'm gonna head out and try to figure out who it is and what they want," he said.

"Call me if you figure it out. I'll get the boys onto it as well."

As he walked back down the hall towards his bathroom, he said, "This doesn't change anything, Devil."

I was under no illusions. It'd take a lot more than me helping his family for Bronze to come around.



I was on my way out of Bronze's place when King called.

"I heard what happened to Bronze," he said. "And I know you're on your way to Hailee at the clubhouse, but I need you on something first."

"What's up?"

"I'm supposed to be meeting Dragon with Hyde and Nitro in half an hour. He's got news for us on Marx. Hyde can't make it, so I need you with us."

"Where?"

"That old warehouse on Jezebel."

I frowned. "Seems like a strange meeting place."

"Yeah, that's why I want you and Nitro there. This whole meet feels off. He's just called it in the last half hour and seemed keen to

make it happen straight away.”

“Okay, I’m on my way.”

I hung up and sped off in the direction of the warehouse he’d mentioned. I had that churning in my gut again. Thank fuck Hailee would be safe at the clubhouse soon.



King and Nitro were waiting when I arrived. They stood at the back of the old warehouse that was eerily quiet that morning. It wasn’t so much the warehouse that was quiet; it was the street. It was like a fucking ghost town, which was unusual because it was generally filled with traffic.

“What time’s Dragon scheduled to be here?” I asked.

King checked the time on his phone. “Now.”

Irritation crawled all over me. It came out of nowhere. All I could put it down to was my frustration with being at the warehouse instead of the clubhouse making sure Hailee was safe. But it manifested as anger towards Hyde. “Where’s Hyde? This seems like something he shouldn’t miss.”

“Yeah, was wondering the same thing,” Nitro said.

“He didn’t give me an explanation except to say it had something to do with his family,” King said.

“His family? I’ve never heard Hyde mention them before,” I said.

“Fuck, Devil,” King muttered. “Can we stop fucking going on about Hyde.” He was jumpy as shit. In an effort not to piss him off further, I nodded my agreement. But I’d make a point of confronting Hyde about his no-show. I was done with letting his crap slide.

“I think we need to up our club security again,” I said. “After what happened yesterday with me and Hyde, it might be a good idea to put more eyes back on our families.” We’d pulled back a little over the last couple of months, but I felt an unease I hadn’t in a long time. With everything being thrown at the club, I felt like we were being closed in on. It also felt like we were slowly losing control. And I’d be damned if Storm went down without a fucking fight.

“I agree,” Nitro said.

King nodded and lifted his chin at Nitro. “Take care of it.”

Ten minutes passed, in which time King grew increasingly more agitated when Dragon didn't show. After he spent a good chunk of that time pacing and swearing, he called him, but Dragon didn't answer his phone.

"I don't know what his fucking game is, but I'm done with waiting," King snapped. "I've gotta take Jen to the doctor. I'll be back at the clubhouse after that."

"Jesus, I haven't seen him this ugly in a long time," Nitro said as we watched King head to his bike.

"Jen's really fucked him up."

"Yeah, betrayal's a cold bitch."

My phone rang, and I scrambled to answer it, hoping it was Hailee.

"Hey, you," she said, making my fucking day. "We made it to the clubhouse okay, but I forgot to bring Gran's medication with us. Are you able to collect it when you come?"

"Yeah. Where is it?"

"I got it ready to bring, so it's in a bag on the kitchen counter. I can't believe I left without it."

"I'll head over there now. I should be at the clubhouse in about an hour or so. You okay there?"

"Yeah, one of the guys introduced me to Kree. She's lovely. Gran's talking her ear off."

Thank fuck.

Some of the tension in my shoulders eased once I knew she was safe. The rest wouldn't disappear until I saw her for myself.



The goddam traffic was a bitch all the way to Hailee's house, and the heat had stripped any patience I had. This all meant I was in a mood by the time I turned into her street.

And then I saw Hailee's home, and fury vibrated through me. It was the kind of anger I didn't know what to do with.

Her house was burning to the fucking ground.

I slowed my bike as I approached. A crowd had formed outside as the fire department worked hard to control the flames. From what

I could figure, though, the fire was too intense. Hailee's home and all her belongings would be ash soon.

It fucking killed me that she would have to go through this. And that Jean would have to as well. Hailee had so much on her plate. Adding more shit to deal with would only cause her distress she didn't deserve.

I found a place to leave my bike and made my way through the crowd so I could talk with the firies. As I surveyed the damage, I clenched my fists. *The motherfuckers who did this would fucking pay.*

DEVIL

Hailee burst into tears when I finally arrived at the clubhouse a couple of hours later. After I'd spent some time talking with the furies, I tried to salvage anything I could from her house. In the end, though, nothing had been salvageable. I'd turned up at the clubhouse with nothing but bad news.

Clinging to me, she said, "Who would do this?"

"I don't know, darlin'. I suspect it's tied to what happened to your brother this morning." I'd filled her in on everything while watching the fire destroy the house. I was fucking thankful I'd told her to leave earlier that morning.

Nitro joined us. "Have you heard from King yet? I thought he'd be back by now. Or at least that we would have had a call."

I shook my head. "No, nothing."

"What about Hyde?"

"No." My anger and frustration with him had morphed into concern. With everything that had happened that day, I fucking hoped Hyde was okay.

"Fuck." He rubbed the back of his neck, and I saw the concern he held, too. "Okay, I'm gonna take care of upping our security. Let me know the minute you see or hear from King or Hyde, yeah?"

"Will do, brother."

Hailee stepped out of my embrace after Nitro left. Wiping her face, she said, "Gran's devastated. All our family photos and things are gone. I don't care about my stuff, but I hate that she's lost everything."

I curled my hand around her neck and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I'm sorry, baby." There wasn't anything else I could say to ease her pain. "Where is Jean?"

"Kree organised for her to lie down in your room. I hope that's okay. She didn't think you'd mind."

"Yeah, that's good." I frowned. "Have you heard from Bronze?"

"Bronze?"

"Shit, Aaron."

"You call him Bronze?"

"Yeah."

She stared at me in silence, and I couldn't get a read on her. Not since she'd discovered Bronze was dirty. She'd been quiet after he and I fought the night before, but thank fuck she hadn't pulled away from me.

Finally, she placed her hand on my chest and said softly, "I feel like the biggest bitch."

That came out of left field. "Why?"

Tears fell down her cheeks again, and she madly wiped them away. "I was awful to him last night. It's none of my business what he chooses to do with his life. I mean, that's what I hate about my mother—the way she thinks she has a right to judge my choices in life."

I smoothed her hair. "I didn't think you were judging him so much as trying to come to terms with learning something new about him."

She swallowed a sob. "What if"—her hand flew to her mouth—"he'd been beaten to death this morning? I wouldn't have had a chance to tell him I love him always, regardless of what he does."

I moved one hand around her waist and the other around her back, and pulled her close. "He knows that, baby."

She buried her face against my chest, nodding while the tears flowed. I heard her sobs. Deep in my fucking bones, I heard them. She might have struggled at first to understand her brother's choice, but that she'd realised his choice in life wasn't a reason to withdraw her love was something about her I fucking respected. I fell for Hailee even more than I already had because of the way she loved unconditionally.

The moment was broken between us when King's voice bellowed from the doorway of the clubhouse bar. "This is fucking war!"

I turned to find him stalking my way, a look of complete fury on his face. "The motherfuckers set fire to my place, too. And Bronze's." His face softened a little as he glanced at Hailee and said, "We've also had word that the place you worked at was targeted. Bronze is working to get me more info, but so far he's advised me that a few of the staff members have been taken to hospital."

Hailee's eyes widened with worry. "Are they okay?"

"I don't know."

Her body sagged against me as King's gaze met mine. "We need to talk, brother." His meaning wasn't lost on me. We had to talk privately.

I nodded, my own fury still churning. "Give me a minute."

After he left us, I tipped Hailee's face up to mine. "We're going to find who did this. And I promise you, they will regret what they've done." I meant every fucking word. No stone would be left unturned as far as I was concerned. And it seemed like King was on the same page.

"I need to call Leona."

"I've gotta go talk to King. You good here on your own?"

"Yeah, go."

I bent and kissed her before I left, wishing like fuck again, that I could take this burden from her.

I found King in his office, barking orders into his phone. He had his back to me. When he ended the call and turned to face me, I sucked in a breath at the level of crazy I saw in his eyes.

"That was Bronze. He's just talked with one of his informants," he said, and I knew by his deadly tone that I wouldn't like what he was about to tell me next. "It was Silver Hell. They discovered he's working with us and helped us against them. Their goal today was to target his family and me. Word is they're coming for the rest of us soon."

My insides twisted with hatred and a deep desire for vengeance. Heat burnt my skin and squeezed my heart, crushing it inside my chest. It twisted and clawed at me, leaving a toxic and bitter taste on my tongue. "They'll pay, King. For everything they've done to our club and our families, this time and all the other fucking times. If it's the last thing I ever do. They will fucking bleed for what they've done."

“Fuck.” He hissed as he clenched his fists. “We’ve got a problem with that, brother. The fucking feds have eyes on us 24-fucking-7.”

I stepped further into the office. “I know, but I’m telling you, I give no fucks. That’s my woman’s family they’ve messed with. And my club family.” Hell wouldn’t even be enough for anyone who fucked with my family. I wanted to destroy them. I wanted to fucking slaughter them, and I didn’t fucking care what it took to do that. “I will fucking lay down and die for my family.”

His breathing turned ragged as he nodded. “Okay. But you don’t do this on your own. And we make sure there’s no fucking survivors.”

I exhaled a long breath. “Agreed.”



The rest of the day passed in a blur. I set Hailee, Jean and Bronze up at my place. I’d been surprised when he agreed to stay with me, but he’d made it clear he was only doing it to make sure his family was safe.

Hailee had finally located her friend Leona late that afternoon. She’d been admitted to hospital with burns to her arms. Hailee had been worried about her friend having a miscarriage. Turned out, though, that Leona wasn’t pregnant, which had been a huge fucking relief. Surprisingly, no one had died. Five of Hailee’s work mates had been hospitalised, including Rachel. Hailee showed me how fucking big her heart was when she spent time visiting Rachel, even after Rachel had treated her so badly.

Just after midnight, Hailee fell asleep, giving me some time to think over the plans King and I had set in motion late that afternoon. Silver Hell wouldn’t fucking know what hit them when we got started.

DEVIL

"Scott fucking Cole!" King greeted the president of the Brisbane chapter with a slap on the back early the next night when he entered the clubhouse bar.

"How are you, brother?" Scott asked, a look of concern in his eyes.

"Ready to get to work," King answered.

He'd called for reinforcements yesterday afternoon when we sat down with Hyde and Nitro to work out our plan of attack. After being MIA in the morning, Hyde had turned up when shit went down. I still had no fucking idea what was going on with him, but when all this was over I'd find out. With the feds' eyes on us, we knew we needed numbers. Scott had jumped at the chance to bring his members down to help.

"I managed to round up twenty-six members. That gonna be enough?" Scott asked.

"Yeah, that should do it," King said. "You bring Havoc? That crazy motherfucker gets shit done."

Scott nodded. "He's outside."

King motioned for Kree to pour drinks as everyone filed into the bar. Soon the room was chaotic as we all greeted each other. I hadn't seen some of the members in years.

Jason Reilly's gaze met mine with a grin. "Devil, brother. Long fucking time."

"Heard you got married," I said.

Before he could reply, King bellowed, "Drink up. We've got shit to do." He raised his glass and then drained it.

Drinks were passed around the room, and we all followed suit before breaking apart into the groups we'd been designated.

Each group consisted of about eight men, and we had six groups in total. Each would be leaving separately in an effort to distract the feds assigned to trail us. There were only so many cops to go around; our goal was to send them out with the first few groups of members who left. The last couple would be the members who would head over to Silver Hell's clubhouse.

Night had fallen by the time the first group left in a van just after nine. We'd received information from different sources that Silver Hell was celebrating what they deemed a victory at their clubhouse that night. We figured the party would be in full swing by the time we got there and that they'd be distracted enough for us to achieve our goal.

The next three groups left on their bikes. The last two groups were in vans, similar to the first one that left. Our plan worked when the feds followed the first three groups, leaving the last few to ride out undetected.

I was in the second van with King, Hyde, Nitro, Scott, Havoc and Kick. We travelled the first fifteen minutes in silence, until Havoc spoke.

"You're confident we can pull this off? With the helicopter."

Hyde, who was sitting across from him in the back of the van, nodded. "Yeah. Our pilot knows his shit."

"You've used him before?" Havoc asked.

"A few times for drops. Jacko's brother served with him. He's never let us down," Hyde said.

Havoc seemed happy with that answer. After that, we sat in silence again for the rest of the hour trip.

When we drew near the Silver Hell clubhouse, Kick slowed the van to ease it into the bush where we'd worked out we would park until the helicopter pilot had completed his task. It was far enough away to prevent us being injured.

Griff's voice crackled over the handheld radio. "We're in position. You?" He was with the other group of members in the third van positioned on the other side of the clubhouse.

"Good to go," King spoke into his radio.

The helicopter pilot's voice filtered through. "Two minutes for me."

Adrenaline flooded my body as I gripped my rifle.

I was ready.

Ready to finally annihilate the club that had caused us so much pain and loss.

Time ticked by slowly while we waited out the two minutes. My breathing slowed when the helicopter finally came into sight. I followed its lights and watched, with deep satisfaction, as it dropped a satchel bomb over the clubhouse. I couldn't see the bomb, but I knew it was there. And when it detonated forty-five seconds after it was dropped, I almost held my breath waiting for the fire that was our goal to blaze through the building.

"Go, go, go!" King roared into the handheld radio, and Kick drove the van out of the bush where we waited.

He planted his foot, driving like a mad-man to get us closer to the clubhouse. When he skidded to a stop, Scott yanked the back door open, and we all jumped out, rifles in hand.

Fanning out into a line, we stormed the perimeter, ready to shoot anyone who exited the building. The team led by Griff were doing the same thing on the other side.

Fire consumed most of the clubhouse and had begun to spread. We didn't have long before the police and fires would arrive, but the short time we did have would be spent making sure there were no survivors. Leaving with any Silver Hell members still breathing would not be fucking acceptable.

I met King's gaze as he raised his hand, giving the signal we all waited for.

It was time for vengeance.

My preference would have been to kill every last member by hand. I craved the deep fucking satisfaction that would give me. But our options were limited, and this was the best one. Burn the motherfuckers and riddle them with bullets to finish the job.

I stared at the fire engulfing the clubhouse. The lick of the flames, the smoke, the burning smell of our enemy and the scorch of heat that reached for me were all fucking gratifying. Knowing we were ridding the earth of these assholes and keeping our families safe from them was the best kind of knowledge. It would mean the difference between sleeping at night and tossing and turning at night with worry.

Once King had given the signal, we all lifted our rifles and fired into the clubhouse. Bullets sprayed the air, the sound deafening.

Taking them down was like a fucking hit of cocaine.

A rush.

A high unlike any other.

Euphoric.

The only thing that would kick that high into overdrive would be to hear their screams and to look into their eyes as their nightmares came to life.

Time slowed as we chased death. The hunt helped satisfy my desire for retribution, but it would never sate my hunger for their blood on my hands. I needed to touch it and see it ooze from their wounds. To know it would never run through their veins again. *To know it would never give them life again.*

Chaos played out in front of me. Members tried to flee the chaos we'd inflicted on them, but as fast as they sought escape, we took it from them.

Bullets, fire and blood collided.

Death beckoned.

And the sweet, sweet taste of victory was ours.

By the time Kick sounded the van horn letting us know we needed to get out of there, no more members stumbled from the wreckage of the fire. That should have felt good, but it didn't. I wanted more. A whole lot fucking more.

"Devil!" Scott's voice penetrated my thoughts.

I stopped firing my weapon and glanced at him. As I did that, I caught sight of someone running from the clubhouse. I ignored Scott and took aim again. As he came closer, I realised it was Dragon.

Fuck, yes.

I tasted blood.

I fucking felt it on my hands.

My body took over, and I moved towards him. I ran on automatic pilot, lowering my weapon as I got closer. He appeared unarmed and injured to the point of almost being unable to stand.

His clothes were torn and dirty.

Cuts and gashes covered his skin.

Blood painted his face and one arm.

He was fucked.

But not completely.

Not enough.

He had to die.

No fucking way was I leaving the Silver Hell president alive.

"Devil!" Scott yelled again, but I ignored him.

"You fucking cunts will pay for this!" Dragon roared as I drew close.

I pointed my rifle at him. "How do you figure that, asshole? Your club is all dead, and I'm the one standing here with a fucking rifle."

"You didn't kill everyone."

"Just fucking shoot him!" Scott called out from behind me, getting closer.

My finger hovered over the trigger, ready to squeeze.

The rush of victory shot through my veins again. The high was greater this time because I could see up close the devastation we'd caused.

My chest pounded with anticipation.

Dragon's death was so close.

And still it wasn't enough.

I needed my hands around his neck.

I hungered for the feeling of his bones crunching and snapping.

I wanted to make sure, with my bare hands, that he'd never hurt my family again.

I lowered my rifle as the first cop siren sounded in the distance.

"For fuck's sake," Scott yelled. "Fucking take him out, Devil, so we can get the fuck out of here."

The urgency and the frenzy and the rage in the air all smashed into me as I stared at the man who had caused so much of our pain. Wrath roared in my ears. It was time to end this madness.

"You're a fucking pussy." Dragon tried to provoke me, but I maintained focus.

He would die.

More sirens rang out in the night air.

I dropped my rifle and met Dragon's gaze. "You ready to meet your maker, Dragon?"

Evil glinted in his eyes. The kind of evil that would cause most people to shudder. I wasn't most people. I would fucking go to battle with evil and win. "Fuck you," he spat.

Red blurred my vision and I snapped.

I embraced my own evil.

I let it unfurl and roar out of me.

My fist connected with his face, knocking him backwards. He lifted his arms to defend himself, but my crazed need for his death meant his defence was useless. I kept the punches coming while he stumbled back a few times before I finally knocked him to the ground.

My breaths came hard and fast as I stood over him. He struggled to remain conscious and his head fell to the side. I slapped his face and barked, "Open your fucking eyes, motherfucker. I wanna see them when I take your last breath from you."

His eyes fluttered open and he stared up at me. "Fuck you," he said again, but he was fading.

I placed my feet either side of his body and crouched over him. Punching him hard in the face, I growled, "No, fuck you!"

I punched his face again.

And again.

Over and over.

Bone shattered.

Crunched.

And I finally had his blood on my hands.

I finally had the vengeance I thirsted after.

King's voice filtered into my consciousness as he shoved my rifle at me. "He's almost dead, Devil. Take your fucking rifle and finish him off so we can get the fuck out of here before the cops turn up."

I stayed crouched over Dragon's body, committing his mutilated face to memory. I traced the wounds with my eyes before splaying my hand over his face and storing the feel of his ruins in my mind.

When I was done, I stood and took a step back. Lifting my rifle, I squeezed the trigger and ended his shitty life.

HAILEE

I stared silently at the burnt remains of my home late the next afternoon, willing the tears not to fall. But as Devil put his arms around me and pulled me against his body, they cascaded down my cheeks.

"Fuck," I muttered, wiping them away. "I swore I wouldn't cry again today."

"Baby," Devil murmured against my ear, "cry. Let it out."

Gran joined us. She'd left to circle the property, but there really wasn't much to see. "It's just a building, child, and a few belongings. They're not the important things in life."

I sighed. "You're always so practical. Those things meant something to you. I'm sad you lost them."

She shook her head, dismissing what I'd said. "You mean something to me. Aaron means something to me. If I'd lost either of you in that fire, then I'd be sad. Things can be replaced."

It had been a long two days, and my emotions were all over the place. Between Aaron being beaten, losing our homes and belongings to fire, and Leona and my old workmates being hurt, I was close to tears all the time. My anger at the men who'd done this to us overwhelmed me, and I was thankful to have Devil and Aaron by my side helping me function. They'd explained why we'd been targeted and had also assured me that we were safe from it happening again. I didn't care what that meant—that those men had been dealt with, biker style. I only cared that we didn't have to worry about them ever again.

"You ready to leave?" he asked.

I nodded. "Yeah. You ready, Gran?"

She hobbled in the direction of the car, calling out, "Yes," as she went. I loved how she seemed to always be able to just get on with life. Some days I wished I was more like her.

Devil drove us back to his place, all of us lost in our own thoughts. I knew he had a lot on his mind, too. He'd told me that the people who burnt our houses down had been taken care of. I hesitated to ask him what that meant, but I had a good idea. And it didn't bother me. It felt just.

I wasn't hungry that night, but Devil insisted I eat. He cooked spaghetti, and I picked at it while he watched me with concern. After dinner, we set Gran up in the lounge room with her favourite TV shows and then did the dishes together.

Reaching for his hand once we finished the dishes, I said, "I'm sorry I'm so low today. I just need a day or two, and then I'll be back to my usual self."

Before I knew what was happening, he lifted me and sat me on the kitchen counter. Moving between my legs, he wrapped his arms around me and said, "Darlin', there's no rush. You take your time getting your head together. I'll be right here for whatever you need."

I wasn't sure what I'd done to deserve someone as amazing as Devil in my life. Smiling at him, I said, "You never did tell me how you got your nickname."

He grinned. "Weren't you meant to give me something in order to get that out of me?"

I returned his grin. It was infectious. "I've held up my end of the bargain. You wanted a drink with me, and I gave you that, so spit it out, bossman."

"King gave me my nickname. He said I could lead someone into temptation just as easily as I could cause destruction."

"The devil," I murmured.

He brushed a kiss across my lips. "Yeah." He let me go and placed his hands on my thighs. He then slid one hand under my dress, down to the inside of my thigh and along my leg towards my pussy. Meeting my gaze, he said, "I want you in a dress every day."

His demand caused an ache between my legs, and I spread them to allow him access.

He shook his head. "Not here. Jean might come in."

I lifted a brow. "And here I thought you loved sex in public." Not that I wanted my gran to walk in on us. In the heat of the moment,

I'd forgotten that was a possibility, but I liked to play with him as often as I could.

"Darlin', there's a difference between fucking you in public and fucking you in front of your grandmother. I do have some standards."

My lips curled up into a smile as I slipped my arms around his neck. "In that case, we should move this to the bedroom."

He scooped me up and carried me into his bedroom, laying me out across his bed. He grabbed hold of my legs and pulled me towards him so that my ass was on the edge of the bed with my legs resting over his shoulders while he knelt in front of me. After he pushed my dress up, he slid my panties off and dropped them on the floor after pressing them to his face and inhaling my scent.

Bending his face to my pussy, he said, "I could live off your smell. It gets me so fucking hard." Taking hold of my ass, he licked along my pussy before sucking on my clit.

I threaded my fingers in his hair and scrunched a handful of it as I cried out, "Yes!" My back arched up off the bed, and I closed my eyes when his tongue slid inside me.

He groaned as he tasted me, pushing his tongue deeper inside while his mouth sucked me. Wave after wave of pleasure consumed me, and just when I thought I couldn't take any more, he stopped and growled, "Fuck, Hailee, I want to live between your legs."

I lifted my head and reached down so I could hook my hand around his neck. I pulled him to me, and he slowly made his way up my body, tasting my skin everywhere as he moved.

I was greedy for him, and as soon as he was close enough, I dragged his mouth to mine and kissed him. He grabbed one of my boobs and squeezed it hard enough that I cried out in pain. It was the kind of pain that felt good, though, and I begged him for more.

"You like that?" he demanded while squeezing my other breast.

I nodded, desperate for more. "Oh, God, don't stop," I pleaded.

Suddenly, he stopped everything and moved off me. Reaching for his button on his jeans, he undid it and yanked his zip down as fast as he could. His eyes never left mine while he did this. Moving back on top of me, he rasped, "Wrap your legs around me, darlin', and hold on tight. This is gonna be rough and dirty."

I did as he said while he sucked one of my tits into his mouth. I hardly had my legs secured around him before he slammed his cock

as far into me as he could.

"Fuck," he roared, pulling out. Pushing back in, he forced himself deeper the second time, groaning as he did.

"Keep going," I urged when he stopped, resting inside me.

He sucked one of my nipples into his mouth and nipped it with his teeth before looking up at me. "Tell me how you want me to fuck you."

Running my fingers through his hair, I said, "I want you to let loose. Forget everything in the moment and be an animal. I want it to hurt a little, but the kind of hurt that feels so fucking good."

"Fuck, woman." He drew my other nipple into his mouth and bit it harder, eliciting a cry of pain from me. Meeting my gaze again, he said, "You want it to hurt like that?"

I nodded. Oh, God, how I wanted it to hurt like that.

He moved fast then, rearing back so he could flip me onto my stomach. Scooping his hands around my hips, he pulled my ass up so I was bent at the waist with my head down, elbows on the bed holding me up. He gripped my hips tightly and positioned himself behind me, then pushed his cock inside.

Fuck.

I loved it when he took me from behind. And he knew it. He especially knew how much I loved him pulling my hair. But this time, he didn't stop to reach for my hair. He did exactly what I'd asked him to do, and fucked me like a savage while holding my hips, his fingers digging in hard.

After we were finished, I collapsed on the bed. Unable to move and fighting to catch my breath, I was spent. Devil crashed next to me, his body curling around mine, his arms holding me close. We fell asleep like that, and while I was emotionally wrecked by the events of the last two days, I felt protected by him.

I felt like I was exactly where I was meant to be.

DEVIL

"From what I can work out, and from what Bronze has reported back to me, we got every last one of those motherfuckers last week," King said during Church the week after we destroyed the Silver Hell clubhouse and everyone in it.

"So that means we're down at least one enemy," Hyde continued. "Next on the list is Marx. After that, when the feds are done with him, we take down Gambarro." He glanced around the packed room. "People need to be reminded that Storm isn't to be fucked with."

Cheers erupted at that, but King kept the meeting moving. "Ghost has also been dealt with, so he won't be an issue going forward. And"—he eyed me—"I've sorted Bronze out, too. He's committed to the club again."

Once he'd caught everyone up, he discussed other club business that needed taking care of. Twenty minutes later, everyone filed out except for Hyde, Nitro, and me.

Looking at King, I asked, "How the fuck did you get Bronze back on side?"

"I pointed out that he could walk away from the club all he liked, but it wouldn't sort his problem out with you dating his sister."

I was still confused. "How?"

"He's got no dirt on you, Devil, no evidence of anything you've done. So even if he tries to bring the club down, you're still free to be with his sister."

"Jesus, he must have been pissed off about that."

"Yeah, he wasn't too happy, but it's sorted out now."

"How's Kick?" Nitro asked. "You heard any more from him about Evie?"

"Yeah, the doctors are keeping her in hospital. Possibly for the rest of her pregnancy depending on her blood pressure. Kick seems to think they might deliver the baby early. But he said she's doing well besides that. He's coming back tomorrow."

"Thank fuck," Hyde murmured, as if it was important to him that Kick was returning.

King picked up on it, too. "What's going on, Hyde?"

Hyde took a moment to reply. He seemed reluctant to answer the question. "I'm going to need some time off."

"Why?"

"I've got some family stuff I need to take care of."

King rubbed the back of his neck. He appeared frustrated. "What family stuff? I've always been under the impression you didn't have any family, Hyde. You've been all over the fucking—"

"It's my wife."

We all stood in shocked silence. I was certain none of us had seen that coming.

"You've got a wife?" King asked. "I've known you for fourteen years, and you've never once mentioned a wife."

"Yeah, a wife. A daughter, too."

"Fuck, Hyde. Why haven't you ever told us about them?"

Hyde seemed uncomfortable discussing this, but he forced himself to continue. "I haven't seen them for fourteen years." His voice dropped when he added, "But they need me now, and I need to do this. I know the timing is shitty, but—"

King cut him off. "No, you should go. Family is important. When will you be back?"

"I don't know. It depends on whether they accept my help."

"Okay, now I'm really fucking confused," King said. "Why wouldn't they?"

Hyde took a deep breath, and when he answered King, I heard emotions in his voice I'd never heard from him before, mostly regret and anguish. "They think I'm dead."

EPILOGUE

DEVIL

3 months later

“Kylie! Adam! Uncle Dom is here,” Sonya yelled out as I stepped through the front door of her house, before I’d even had time to say hello to her.

I chuckled. “Are they giving you hell today?”

She made a hand movement to signal she was pulling her hair out. “Like you wouldn’t believe. Thank God you two are here now.”

Hailee followed me in, laughing, too. Moving to Sonya, she embraced her and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “You’re looking good, babe,” Hailee said.

“I’ll be looking a whole lot better after you and I get to the hairdresser next week, that’s for sure. Is Leona coming with us? And how did your day go?”

“No, she’s got an appointment with her doctor. She’s finally pregnant! And my first day on the job was perfect.” Hailee’s investor had come through for her, and that day had been the grand opening of her massage charity.

The past three months had been tough on Hailee as she dealt with the fallout of the fire. She and Jean had moved in with me—temporarily at first, but then permanently when I pushed the point

—but sorting out her work had been much harder. I'd felt the change in her today. The tension she'd been holding in her body had finally eased, and she seemed at peace with life again.

"That's fantastic news," Sonya said.

Hailee opened the fridge and found room for the caramel mud cake she'd made Sonya for tonight's dessert.

Sonya spotted it, her eyes lighting up. "Did you make me what I think you made me?"

Hailee grinned. "Yeah, your favourite."

Sonya made her way to where Hailee stood and threw her arms around her. Looking at me, she said, "The best day of my life was the day you met this woman. Don't ever make me have the worst day of my life, okay?"

"Fuck, no. I'm not planning on it."

From the minute I'd introduced the two women in my life, they'd bonded as if they were sisters. They had so much in common it wasn't funny. Some days I felt like I had to fight my sister-in-law to get time alone with my woman. But fuck, it was good to have family like this. Campbell still didn't have much to do with me, and I'd decided to finally face that my parents would never be what I wanted them to be, so Sonya, Hailee and Jean had become my family. I was still working on Bronze, but I was confident we'd bring him around one day. He loved Hailee too much not to accept me eventually.

The kids came running out, both of them throwing their arms around Hailee. I wasn't the favourite anymore. Not unless I turned up with presents.

"Auntie Hailee, come see my room!" Adam exclaimed, trying to drag her down the hallway.

As he pulled her away from us, Sonya mouthed, "Sorry."

My brows pulled together. "Why?"

She moved closer so she could speak softly. "I know you're always telling me to tell them not to call her that, but they love her so much they want her to be their aunt."

"It's all good. And it's not that I don't want them to call her that. I just never wanted her to feel pressured into it."

Sonya's eyes narrowed at me. "You say that like times are changing. Are they?"

I grinned as I pulled the ring out of my pocket and showed her. "Let's just say that I'm all for pressuring now. Four months together

is long enough for a marriage proposal, right?"

"Since when does Dominic Ford care what anyone else thinks? And by the way, good fucking job on that ring. She's gonna love it."

"You reckon?"

She paused for a moment, assessing me. "What? Are you concerned she won't say yes?"

I scrubbed my hand over my face. "Fuck, I don't know. No. Yes. Fuck it, maybe."

She burst out laughing. "I never thought I'd see the day you were so pussy-whipped that you were actually nervous about what your woman would say."

"What is pussy-whipped?" Adam asked as he and Hailee stepped back in the kitchen.

Hailee's lips twitched, but she remained silent.

"Well," Sonya started, not seeming to know where to go after that.

Fuck it.

"It's me. I'm pussy-whipped, but you can't tell anyone, okay? It's our secret. Only we can know," I said.

His eyes glittered with excitement. Adam loved secrets. "Okay, I won't tell anyone."

Sonya started laughing again and muttered, "Oh, God, that's a classic, Dom."

My eyes found Hailee's. Unable to wait another second, I jerked my chin at her and said, "Get your ass over here, woman."

She lifted a brow. "Really? You're going all bossy on me today, Mr Pussy-Whipped?"

"Hailee," I said in the low warning tone I used on her when she was about to get her ass spanked. "I want to ask you something."

Sonya's head whipped around and she stared at me in surprise.

"Okay, how about we meet in the middle," Hailee said. "I'm not in a mood to be bossed today."

I took the few steps to meet her in the middle. Sliding my hand over her ass, I growled, "Always making me work for it."

Her smile lit the whole fucking room up. "Like I told you months ago, I've gotta keep you on your toes, bossman."

I bent my mouth to her ear. "And like I told you, I live on my fucking toes."

Her eyes sparkled. "Okay, what did you want to ask me?"

I shook my head. "No, I've changed my mind. I'm not asking. I'm bossing. And you're not saying no to me."

"Oh, really?" She gave me the look she reserved for when she was about to dig her heels in on something I wanted that she didn't want to give.

I pulled the ring out of my pocket again and reached for her hand. Sliding it on her ring finger, I said, "We're getting married. At the end of next month."

I heard her sharp intake of breath.

I saw her eyes water.

And then I felt her mouth on mine, kissing me in the way she did when I'd done something she really liked.

When she ended the kiss, she squealed louder than I'd ever heard anyone squeal. Flashing her ring at Sonya, she screamed, "We're getting married! You're stuck with me now, Sonny!"

I watched in amusement as the two of them hugged for much longer than she kissed me. Crossing my arms over my chest, I said, "Should I be jealous of my own sister-in-law?"

Hailee moved back to me and threw her arms around me. "I love you so damn much. In fact, I think I fell in love with you on our first date. I have eyes for no one but you, not even for Sonya."

I tightened my hold on her. "Baby, I fell in love with you in the back of that cop car. You were sitting there yabbering on about fucking greyhounds and gambling and fuck knows what else, and I knew you were the woman for me."

"How did you know?"

I grinned. "Because for the first time in my life, I wanted to talk to a woman more than I wanted to get in her pants. I would have sat there all fucking day listening to you talk about dogs."

Her face lit up. "And I would have jumped your bones if you'd have asked me to."

I brushed a kiss across her lips and said, "Marry me, darlin'."

She smiled. "I thought you'd never ask, bossman."

HYDE'S ABSOLUTION

HYDE'S ABSOLUTION

Possessive biker alert

Monroe Lee is a handful.
She fights me, challenges me and tries to resist me.

Where I'm jagged, she's smooth.
Where I'm dark, she's pure.
Where I'm broken, she's whole.

I am not a good man.
I've hurt everyone I've ever loved.
I should walk away before I ruin her too.

But fuck, we are fire together.
And I've been out in the cold too long.

At a time when everything is falling down around me, she might
just be my saviour.

To My Mother

You taught me that there can be beauty in pain.

I love you xx

PROLOGUE

*Hyde
Twenty Years Old*

Do babies ever stop crying? That was the only thought running through my head while I watched my wife struggle with our one-and-a-half-week-old daughter three days after we brought her home. Charlotte hadn't stopped crying in those three days, and I was certain Tenille was about to have a mental breakdown. I'd watched her steadily withdraw since giving birth, and between the never-ending crying and the fussy feeding, the vacant look I dreaded seeing in Tenille's eyes had returned. The look that she'd had back in school when we'd first started dating. *The look I'd worked hard to erase.*

Reaching for Charlotte, I said, "Here, let me take her. You go lie down."

She stared at me for a long moment before doing as I said. "I'll just have an hour or so."

I shook my head while ignoring the cries coming from my child. "You need longer. You're fucking exhausted."

The frown that crossed her face highlighted that exhaustion. "She needs to be fed soon, Aiden."

Fucking breastfeeding. It was the thing coming between us more than Tenille's tiredness. Charlotte didn't want a bar of it, but after a nurse had lectured Tenille at two fucking a.m. one morning in the

hospital about the importance of breast milk, my wife had been adamant that our child would be breastfed.

I took a deep breath to calm myself. We'd had a few arguments over this, and I didn't want another one. I just wanted Tenille to get some sleep. "There's enough milk in the fridge for one feed. I can give that to her, so all you need to focus on is lying your ass down on that bed, closing your eyes, and not waking up for hours."

Charlotte stopped crying at the same time that Tenille's eyes widened. "I haven't heard that bossy tone from you in a few weeks," she said quietly, a slow smile touching her lips. Dropping her gaze to the baby, she murmured, "I think Charlie likes it, too."

I held Charlotte close to my chest with one arm and wrapped my spare one around Tenille's waist, settling my hand on her ass. "Charlie, huh?"

Her smile grew, and my dick twitched. Nearly four weeks of not being inside her was far too fucking long. "Yeah, Charlie. It was on your list of possible boy names. I think it makes a great nickname for her."

Glancing down at my daughter, I took in the way her eyes fluttered closed as her chest rose and fell before she finally drifted off to sleep. Looking back up at Tenille, I said, "It seems she likes that, too."

Tenille shook her head. "No, I think what she really likes is being in her daddy's arms, which I totally get. It's the best place in the world to be."

"Jesus, woman, you need sleep, and here you are turning me on so fucking much that I want to keep you awake all night."

"Uh-uh, no sex for six weeks. Doctor's orders."

I raised my brows. "You think I give a fuck what the doctor says? And besides, I don't need my dick inside you to keep you awake all night."

She was silent for a few moments, just watching me intently before cradling Charlotte's head and bending to place a kiss on her forehead. "Are you sure you'll be okay with her while I sleep?" The smile on her face and in her eyes disappeared.

I frowned. One minute we were in the moment together, the next she'd fucking exited without stopping to take a breath. I moved my hand to her waist and pulled her closer to me. "What the fuck just happened there?"

Blinking, she shifted her gaze to the floor. "Nothing. I'm just really tired and want to go to bed, but I want to make sure you—"

"No," I cut her off, "something happened in your head, Tenille, and I want to know what it was."

She kept her eyes down for far too long before meeting mine again. "Can we please just leave it for now?" Her question came out more like a plea.

"No. Tell me." If there was one thing I'd learnt in the four years we'd been together, it was that when she retreated like that, it was always something that needed to be talked about. Tenille was the queen of avoidance. Her shitty family had taught her that. But it did her no favours.

"God, you're a pushy bastard sometimes," she muttered as she attempted to move out of my embrace.

I tightened my hold on her. "Yeah, welcome to the rest of your life, but you already knew that about me."

"Fine," she started before snapping her mouth shut as if she had changed her mind. But she knew from experience that there was no way I was dropping this, so she finally blurted out, "Sex with me isn't going to be the same. I just need you to know that."

I frowned again. "How do you figure that?"

She stared at me as if I was the crazy one. "How do you figure it *won't* be? I mean, I birthed an eight-pound baby out of my vagina, and my stomach is stretched and flabby. And I was already overweight. And on top of that, I don't even feel like having sex or sucking your dick or doing any of the shit you like to do. Everything has changed!" Tears trickled from her eyes, and a moment later, they fell in gushing streams.

"Fuck, baby, that's a lot of shit to be carrying around in your head and keeping to yourself. You need to be talking to me about this stuff."

She madly wiped her tears away, not having much success because as soon as she wiped them, more fell. "This isn't stuff I want to discuss with anyone, let alone with you."

Always my strong girl, trying to deal with everything on her own.
"Okay, so let's go through it all, starting with your pussy. I don't care if it's pushed ten babies out, there will never be a day I won't want my dick inside of it. As for your curves, I fucking live for them. I wake up thinking about them, and I count down the hours during

the day until I can get my hands all over them at night. If you ever try to starve yourself to get rid of them, you're going to have a huge fucking fight on your hands with me." I let go of her so I could place my hand on her cheek. Stroking her jaw with my thumb, I added, "If you never want to suck my dick again, I'll deal with it. I won't love it, but I love you, so I'll fucking deal. But I read some of the shit your doctor gave you to read, and it's normal for you to not want sex straight away, so I'm fairly fucking sure that the time is going to come soon where you won't be able to keep yourself off my dick."

"You read that stuff?" She forced her words out between sobs, and it fucking killed me that she was so upset over this. She was supposed to be on a high after having Charlotte, and yet the last week had been nothing but tears and anxiety.

"Of course I read that stuff. I'm your partner in all this, Tenille. You've done the physical stuff. Let me help you with everything else."

Something I said clicked with her, and she sagged against me, her arms tight around my body. The three of us stood together for a long time while she cried and allowed me to comfort her. We'd been together for a while, but I knew she'd always held a piece of herself back. It was in the way she refused to cry in front of me, and the way she clammed up when we talked about certain topics, and the way she was guarded about her dreams for the future. I'd always vowed to break those walls down; I'd just never known how to do it. Maybe this would be the beginning of those walls shattering.

After I'd settled her in our bed and Charlotte in her cot, I headed into the kitchen to find something to cook for dinner. My mother's voice drifted from the lounge room. "You're just like your daddy. Smooth with your words. I hope you don't turn out like him when it comes to sticking around long term."

I stilled in the hallway, her words cutting through me like sharp blades. Turning, I entered the lounge room and found her sitting in the corner, taking a swig from her bottle of scotch, watching me through eyes that betrayed so many toxic emotions. My mother and I had always had a hard relationship, but the birth of my child had stirred some nasty shit in her, and I'd dealt with nine months of this bullshit.

"How long will you be staying with us this time?" I asked, choosing to ignore what she'd said.

"What? You don't want your mother staying with you?"

Not particularly. "Answer my question."

She narrowed her eyes at me as she stood and walked my way. "That right there, that's your father coming out in you. Refusing to answer my question, but demanding I answer yours."

My patience frayed at the edges, and I couldn't hold my asshole side back. She'd turned up on our doorstep three days ago, and if her history was anything to go by, she'd still be with us in three weeks. Tenille didn't need her around, and I sure as fuck didn't need to listen to shit about my father for another minute. "I never knew my father, so I wouldn't know if I was like him or not."

She stiffened. She hated being reminded of the fact the only man she'd ever loved had walked out on her when their child was seven months old. The sting I'd intended hit its mark. Pushing her shoulders back, she said, "Take my word for it, you have plenty of your father in you. I've never felt as abandoned as I did when I was quitting the coke. The way you chose Shane Gibson over me hurt in a way I'll never forget. And that was true McVeigh style."

Fuck. She liked to throw out the shit about "McVeigh style" as often as she could. It was the surname I shared with my father—the one he never gave her but that she made sure to give me in her desperate effort to keep him. "What the fuck are you going on about? I was there for you when you quit the drugs." Hell, I was seventeen at the time and knew more about surviving in this shitty world than most adults. I'd made sure my mother made it through the detox, and I kept our home running while finishing my last year of high school and holding down a fucking job.

"Shane Gibson offered you a job and you jumped at it. You did everything to help that man, and I was the one who suffered. You might have been around a few hours a day, but I needed you more than that. It was the only time I ever really needed you, and you let me down." She paused for a beat. "I hope your wife and child never know the coldness of your back to them or the despair of you deserting them."

Before I had a chance to reply, she exited the room, leaving me alone with my thoughts. I had no desire to go after her. This was the way our interactions tended to go. She unleashed her mean streak on me when she'd been drinking, only to take it all back the next day. It was our vicious cycle.

But her words clung, and I spent far too long thinking back over that time in our lives when she'd finally kicked her drug addiction. It hadn't been her first attempt, and perhaps there was something to what she'd said. I hadn't had faith in her. Not after all the other times she'd half-heartedly tried. And I'd been tired of dealing with her crap. So when Gibson offered me that job, I'd taken it and given him 200 percent. I'd wanted to escape the hell of my life. So I had to admit to myself that there was some truth in my mother's words. But the shit she'd said about me abandoning my wife and child? That would never happen. Tenille and Charlotte were everything to me. There was no way I'd ever turn my back on the two people I loved more than life itself. I was not that kind of man. I was not my father.

CHAPTER 1

Hyde
Current Day – Sixteen Years Later

Removing my sunglasses, I met Sully's gaze. "So you're telling me that her bank account is down fifty grand, and you can't track where it went?"

He nodded. "Yes. The cash was withdrawn a week ago, and they've made no significant purchases that I can see. I've been tailing all three of them and nothing seems out of the ordinary in their behaviour. Tenille and Craig go to work the same as usual, Charlotte goes to school, mostly, and the way they spend their free time hasn't changed. Like I mentioned on the phone, though, Charlotte has started smoking, cutting class, and fighting with her mother a lot more. And Tenille and Craig have had a few fights in public that bordered on violent. She appears to be drinking heavily. The bank statements verify that, as does her public behaviour."

I glanced around the pub as I sifted through his information. Two in the afternoon was a time you saw the dedicated drinkers, and there were a few there that afternoon. I recognised them just as easily as they recognised me. But none of us acknowledged the other.

Turning back to Sully, I said, "Something's not right with the family."

"Agreed. You want me to do some more digging?"

I drained the glass of whisky in front of me. "No, I'm going to pay them a visit and find out for myself what's going on."

"You think that's a good idea, son?"

I wasn't his son, but he was the closest thing I had to a father. Sully had been working for me, reporting back on my wife and daughter, for fourteen years. He knew my history, and over time, we'd developed the kind of friendship that resulted in the occasional meal together. Outside of Storm, Sully was the only person who showed any interest or care in my life. That interest wasn't requested, but I'd grown to tolerate it.

"No, it's a really bad fucking idea, Sully, but I don't see that I have any other choice. I walked away from my family once. I won't do it again. Not when they need me."

"And Gibson?"

I clenched my jaw. "Fuck him. He wants to come at me? Let him fucking come."

"You'll take some club members with you for backup?"

I shook my head. "No. I'm doing this on my own."

His forehead creased. "Now *that's* a really bad fucking idea, Aiden."

I pushed my chair back and stood, my tolerance for his interest having met its limits. "We're done here. I'll call you if I need any further information."

As I watched him leave, a voice filtered through my thoughts. "You want another drink?"

I turned to find Jilly, the waitress, waiting for my answer. Her eyes ran over my body in the same way they always did. I ignored the heat in those eyes. "Yeah, another whisky."

She finally met my gaze. "I finish up in an hour. You wanna come back to my place? We could have some fun like we used to."

My irritation flared. I'd made it clear to her on numerous occasions that I wasn't interested in more time between her legs. "No, just the whisky."

She opened her mouth to speak, but King cut her off when he joined me. "I'll have a whisky, too." His eyes met hers. "And some privacy."

After she threw a pout my way, she left us alone, and I directed my attention to King. "I thought we were meeting later at your place."

"Something's come up that I need to take care of, and I figured I'd find you here."

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah, just some family bullshit." He settled into the seat across from me and crossed his arms over his chest. "You leaving tonight?"

I nodded. "I want to get there early tomorrow morning."

King remained silent for a few moments. "I don't fucking get why you never told me about your family, brother. Not after the shit we went through together years ago."

I hadn't told anyone about my family, but I'd come close more than once with King. Staring at him, I thought back to the night he saved my ass the first time. "Do you remember how fucked up I was the night you saved my life?"

Jilly placed our drinks on the table, and King reached for his. After drinking some, he said, "The night you decided you could take five assholes on and win? I'd seen you at that pub a few times, always jacked up on something, and I remember thinking you were one crazy motherfucker. The way I recall it, though, is that you didn't really need me to help you that night. I was just looking for a fight, and yours seemed like a good one to get in on. I didn't save your life, that's for fucking sure. You were capable of doing that yourself."

"No, I wasn't. And you know that. Saving my life had nothing to do with that fight." I knocked back some whisky, savouring the burn as it slid down my throat. "If I'd never met you that night, I'd have been dead within weeks. I wanted to fucking die back then."

"I know. But no one wants to die in a filthy back alley with a needle stuck in his fucking arm or beaten to death by a bunch of assholes he doesn't even know."

"I did. I didn't want to deal with life. And I sure as hell didn't want to talk about it or my family. Not to you. Not to anyone." I threw back some more whisky. "Fuck, King... you're always saving the fucking strays. What the hell possessed you to save me from myself?"

He didn't have to think about his answer. "I knew you'd make a fucking good VP."

I stared at him, processing that. King had been twenty-three at the time, seven years off becoming president. I was twenty-two and a man with no future. King had helped me win that fight, and then

he'd given me a reason to live. He'd also spent months making sure I kicked my drug habit. "How the fuck did you figure that?"

He held my gaze, his eyes hard. "You were almost as crazy as me, but every now and then you hesitated and thought shit through. And you never failed to tell me when you thought I was wrong. I knew I'd need someone like that." He glanced around the pub for a moment before looking back at me. "Turns out I was right to fight for you. Some of the shit you've done for me...."

I shrugged. "It's what we do."

He lifted his drink to his mouth. "You gonna tell me why your wife thinks you're dead?"

I ran my finger around the rim of the glass in front of me. "There was a fire, and our home burnt to the ground. My remains were supposedly found in it."

King didn't blink, didn't show any reaction at all. He simply said, "Why?"

I emptied my glass and signalled to Jilly to bring us another. Getting into this with King wasn't something I had the patience for without more alcohol. "Let's just say I was young and made a fatal error about where to put my loyalties. The guy I worked for, Gibson, was being investigated for all sorts of shit, but mostly they were desperate to pin two murders on him. I was the guy he called on to handle any problems in the business, so the cops hauled me in for questioning. After I was released, Gibson gave me an ultimatum—fake my death and walk away or he'd get rid of me his way. Part of the choice involved Tenille and Charlotte's safety. If I didn't choose to walk away, he'd kill us all."

King frowned. "Walking away doesn't sound like your style, Hyde."

The guilt I'd carried with me for fourteen years roared to life, squeezing the fucking air out of my lungs and coming dangerously close to flipping the switch that sent me from controlled to crazed in under a second. "Jesus, King, I was a fucking twenty-two-year-old with no family and no fucking resources. They caged me in and threatened me, beating the shit out of me and almost killing me in the process. It wasn't like I had much fucking choice. And back then, I wasn't the man I am today, that's for fucking sure."

"Why didn't you use Storm's resources once you had access to them? I would have helped you get your family back."

I scrubbed my hand over my face while my gut churned with regret. "I was damned if I did and damned if I didn't. In the end, though, I didn't want to put Tenille through that. She remarried within a year and was happy. I've kept an eye on them, and the guy seems to have done right by Charlotte. Me going back would only have stirred shit up for them."

"So now you're ready to deal with this Gibson asshole?"

"No, now I'm simply heading to Melbourne to find out what shit my family is in and help get them out of it. Then I'm back here."

King stared at me like I had two fucking heads. After drinking more of his whisky, he said, "Who the fuck are you today? Because you aren't the Hyde I fucking know."

I scowled at him. "You know much about Gibson Transport, King?"

His movements slowed as understanding dawned on him. Whistling low, he said, "Fuck me. Shane fucking Gibson is the asshole you used to work for?"

"Yeah."

The hard determination King was well known for returned to his eyes. "Storm is behind you, brother. Whatever you need, you have."

Fuck. No. Not what I was looking for. "It's not as clear cut as you think. I need to think about how anything I do could affect Tenille and Charlotte." *And how it will affect Storm.* No fucking way was I involving King or any of the club in this shit.

King was smart, but he always proved you didn't know the half of it. Leaning forward, he said, "I don't give a fuck who he is or who he's connected to. And I sure as hell don't give a fuck that you're trying to protect the club. Storm doesn't let a brother handle shit on their own, especially not when the stench of that shit comes from the places I suspect it comes from. You go see what your family is dealing with. I'll give you enough time to do that, and then I want you checking in with me so we can figure out how to take this mother-fucker down."

I pushed out a harsh breath. "Fuck, King, this isn't something Storm needs at the moment. Not with all the heat we're under. That *you're* under."

His chair scraped against the floor as he abruptly stood. "I won't leave you out in the fucking cold on your own, Hyde. That's not

how I operate. And if it brings me more heat, so fucking be it.” He threw some money down on the table before stalking out of the pub.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Shane Gibson was not a man that Storm wanted to cross. Any power that King had, Gibson had it ten-fucking-fold. I threw back the rest of my whisky as I resolved to make it my mission to find a way to keep King out of this shit.

CHAPTER 2

Hyde

My wife was a beautiful woman. Even half drunk, stumbling across her front lawn screaming at her husband, she was stunningly beautiful. Fourteen years after I'd last laid eyes on her, she still took my breath away.

Tenille had made some changes, though. The long black hair I'd loved had been replaced with a shorter cut that hit her shoulders. Still looked good, but not my preference. And the curves I'd loved on her had been ditched. Her body was stick-thin instead, and that was a fucking shame as far as I was concerned.

I stood in the shadows of her neighbour's house watching her argue with her husband, Craig. It was just after nine at night, and he'd come home late. She'd started in on him immediately, until they'd brought the fight outside. He'd exited their home first, and she'd chased after him. Her drunken state didn't help her. She'd almost tripped in her haste to catch him before he got in his car. He'd caught her before she fell, but had pushed her away while they continued arguing about her drinking and the money missing from their bank account.

I'd arrived in Melbourne late that afternoon and had intended to get eyes on Tenille's place, suss out the area and then crash at my motel before going back to see her in the morning. I didn't want our

first conversation after fourteen years to be late at night when everyone was tired. However, my plans changed when their fight became physical. No fucking way would I stand by and watch a woman get hurt. Especially not my wife.

I covered the distance between the three of us fast but not fast enough to stop his palm from connecting with her cheek. Everything that happened in the few moments after was a blur. Between them yelling at each other, Tenille trying to hit him back, me trying to intercept, and Tenille's shock when she realised who I was, I wasn't sure how it all went down. But I would never forget the look on her face as recognition set in.

"Aiden?" My name fell from her lips on a strangled cry. I felt every ounce of her pain and confusion in that cry. And the knowledge that I'd caused her any kind of agony cut deeper than it had in the past fourteen years.

"What the fuck?" Craig's confusion mirrored Tenille's. We'd never met, so he had no way of knowing me, but he knew my name.

"No... it can't be. You're dead," Tenille said as she lurched my way, bewilderment splashed across her face.

"Tenille," I started, but stopped when she gasped.

"Oh my God!" She stood in front of me, eyes wide, and placed her hand against my cheek. "You look different, but I would know that voice anywhere," she said as she brought her other hand to my face also.

I did look different. I'd packed on a fuckload of muscle, inked half of my skin and grown a beard. I sure as hell wasn't the scrawny kid she'd married.

She madly moved her hands over my face, as if she was trying to feel for something she recognised. I gave her a few moments and then reached for one of her hands to stop her. "It's me."

Her breathing slowed at the same time her hands did. Her body stilled also. And then she slapped me, right about the same time her eyes flashed with anger. "You fucking bastard! Where the fuck have you been?"

I deserved that slap, so I took it. But when she started in on me by punching my chest, I shut that shit down fast. Grabbing both her hands, I pulled them away from my body. "I see some things haven't changed," I muttered. Tenille had often used physical violence in an attempt to get her point across.

"Yeah, well when I discover my husband didn't really die, but rather just left me without another word, you can bet your fucking ass I'm going to react this way."

Craig took that moment to step in. Finally. If I were him, I would have involved myself from the beginning. "You've got a fucking nerve showing up like this. I dragged Tenille from the shit you left her in. If you think I'm about to let you back into her life, to screw her over again, you're seriously mistaken, asshole."

I'd held my temper in check because I owed Tenille the space to be angry and hurt. But I didn't fucking owe this asshole a thing. My shoulder's tensed as I met his gaze. "I don't want a fucking thing. But let's get something straight here, Craig. You didn't drag Tenille from any-fucking-thing. I made sure she was set up financially before I left. I made sure she had everything she needed. By the time you came on the scene, she wasn't in any shit. But you've sure as fuck put her here now, haven't you, motherfucker?"

"Fuck you!" he spat as he threw a punch at me.

I'd seen that coming and blocked it by grabbing hold of his arm and shoving him with enough force to knock him flat on his ass. Ignoring Tenille's shocked gasp, I stepped over his body and pushed him so he was on his back. Pinning his hands to the ground, I said, "A lot of shit has gone down in this family, and I'm here to sort it out for you. I may have walked away from Tenille and Charlotte once, but I'll be fucked if I'll stand back and watch them suffer again. I suggest you get on board with that or else you and I are gonna have trouble. And trouble with me is the last fucking thing you want." Men like Craig—small men who paraded as big fucking men—were best dealt with fast. He needed to know where we both stood. And although he was married to Tenille, that meant very little to me. As far as I was concerned, it was my job to make sure she was okay.

"Mum, what's going on?"

The air in my lungs disappeared at the sound of my daughter's voice. It felt like a hammer had hit my chest, causing my heart to beat in erratic, painful throbs that roared in my ears and screamed through my body.

I stood hunched over Craig, frozen to the spot, unable to look up. Fourteen fucking years without that voice in my life, without *her* in my life, had caused me more torment than anything else had ever come close to causing me.

I desperately wanted to look at her, but my greatest fear stood between us, almost suffocating the life out of me. I hadn't expected that, and it threw me. I didn't fucking acknowledge fear in my life, but this one had haunted me for so long that it had rooted itself deep inside.

What if Charlotte refused to accept me?

Fuck.

"Go back inside, Charlotte," Tenille urged.

"Not until you tell me who that is and why he's threatening Dad."

Dad.

That word slashed right through me as the world began to spin. Jesus, I was losing my shit. And still struggling for fucking air.

It was Craig who snapped me out of it when he pushed me away and yelled, "Charlie, for fuck's sake, go back inside! This has nothing to do with you."

Charlie.

She was *my* fucking Charlie, not his.

My head snapped up, and I finally caught a glimpse of the child I'd missed every single day since I'd left. If I thought I'd been frozen a moment ago, I was completely and utterly rooted to the spot now. Every inch of my skin shivered with a sensation I hadn't felt in sixteen years. It was as if I was seeing her for the very first time again. This was the same feeling I'd felt when I'd laid eyes on her at birth.

Wonder.

Awe.

Disbelief.

Love.

As I stood staring at her long dark curls that were an exact replica of my mother's, and lips that were the same as Tenille's, she placed her hands on her hips and snapped, "God, you can be such an asshole!" With a huff, she spun and stomped back into the house.

I tracked her movements until I couldn't see her anymore. Craig took the opportunity to attack while my attention was elsewhere.

His fist smashed into my face hard, leaving the kind of pain that usually sent me into a rage. This time, however, I locked that shit down tight. The last thing I wanted to chance was Charlotte seeing that from inside the house. Instead, my hard glare met his as I

moved directly in front of him. "The only thing holding me back from knocking you the fuck out is my daughter. You do that—"

"She's not your daughter, asshole. You gave up that right the minute you left town and never looked back."

I took a deep breath as I clenched my fists by my side. "She *is* my daughter. Yeah, I left town, but I never stopped watching over her. You think you and Tenille have been getting by on your own all these years? Think back to the time you lost your job because you smashed your boss's face in at the pub that Friday night. You ever wonder how you had a job offer on the Monday morning? And the time you blew through five grand at the casino? You never stopped to ask how that money magically appeared back in your account the next day?" At the shock lining his face, I nodded. "Yeah, you get the idea. We won't rehash every single time you fucked up and I fixed it before Tenille ever had to know."

Craig didn't have a comeback, but Tenille delivered one that did the work of a thousand armies deployed to destroy. "A man who isn't there to kiss their child's fears away, and bandage their wounds, and help with homework, and tuck them in at night while telling them monsters don't exist, and teach them that they are enough is *not* a father, Aiden. He's simply the guy that donated some fucking sperm. Don't get the two mixed up." I met her hard gaze right before she added, "Helping me and Craig get by certainly doesn't make you a father. Whatever help you think we need right now, we don't, so just go back to wherever you came from and leave us alone."

I watched in silence as she stalked back inside, her earlier drunken wobble almost gone completely. The sound of the door slamming closed behind her filled the night air with a reminder that I was going to have to work hard to gain her trust back. I had expected that, but reality was always a harsh bitch compared to expectations.

CHAPTER 3

Hyde

Tenille and I met when we were sixteen. She was the chick who stood up for the underdog whenever given a chance, and I fell for that trait long before I fell for her beauty. I loved her fire and the fierce way she lived her life—always giving anyone who criticised her the middle finger.

She was fiery back then, and stubborn as hell. Convincing her to marry me at nineteen took over a year to do. She held strong views on marriage after watching her father control her mother. Tenille wanted to stay single; she didn't see the need to declare our relationship with a piece of paper. What she didn't count on was my determination to make her mine. I'd been fucking relieved, though, that talking her into having a baby was a lot easier. I'd always wanted lots of kids, and it turned out Tenille was down with that. Both of us came from shitty families; replacing them with our own was a dream we'd shared.

As I sat on my bike in the undercover car park of the shopping centre where she worked, the day after she slapped me and told me I was merely a sperm donor, I realised she hadn't changed much. She exited the shopping centre after work, at the time Sully informed me she would, and began the short trek to her car. Right before she arrived at her old beat-up Corolla, a guy had almost reversed into her.

An honest mistake because the 4WD next to his car would have blocked his vision. Still as fiery as ever though, Tenille let loose on him, giving him a piece of her mind.

I left my bike and approached them as the guy lost his cool.

He ripped his sunglasses off, demanding, "Fuck, are you this bitchy to everyone you meet or just us unlucky bastards?"

She placed her hand on her hip and raised her brows at him. "Just the assholes who don't watch where they're driving."

His glare deepened. "Yeah well, lady, I told you I couldn't see shit because of that 4WD in the way, so back the fuck off, okay."

I moved next to Tenille. "This is done," I directed at him before turning to her. Wrapping my hand around her forearm, I said, in a tone that asked for no arguments, "Let's go."

The guy nodded his agreement and turned to leave. Tenille, on the other hand, didn't take heed of my tone. Her wild eyes met mine as she pulled her arm from my grip. "What the fuck, Aiden? What are you doing here? And since when do you get to tell me what to do?"

"Just helping you make a better decision, Tee."

"I don't need your help. I could have done with it fourteen years ago, but not now. And don't call me that. You don't get to call me that anymore," she snapped.

Her anger was justified. I'd give her that. But letting her make the mistake of riling this guy up any further wasn't something I was about to do. Hooking my arm around her waist, I lifted her and walked both of us away from him before she could continue her tirade. She fought me all the way, legs kicking and arms swinging, but I managed to keep hold of her until he was settled back in his car.

When I finally let her go, she straightened her clothes and shot me a filthy look. "Is that how you get women to do what you want these days? Just manhandle them however you please?" Her voice wobbled on the last few words she spat my way, letting me know a softening was coming.

I remembered clear as day how Tenille's bursts of anger went. First, the passionate outburst that she didn't put much thought into; then a moment of confusion when her brain kicked into gear; and then the softening as she came around and realised there might be more to the argument than she first saw.

Pushing a flyaway strand of hair out of her eyes, I said, "I don't get women to do what I want these days, Tee."

She stilled and her breathing slowed. Understanding dawned on her face, and her mouth fell open. Lastly, a frown wrinkled her forehead. "You're not with anyone?"

I shook my head. "No."

Confusion riddled her face. "But you have been, right? Like, I can't imagine you not being with a woman since you left me."

I scrubbed my hand over my face. This was not what I came here to discuss. "Out of everything we could be talking about right now, you want to discuss my sex life?"

The confusion on her face gave way to the shitty look she'd given me earlier. And the hand that landed on her hip told me I'd said the wrong fucking thing. Story of my life with Tenille. She blew hot and cold as easily as she breathed. "Do you know how it makes me feel knowing that you walked away from me and faked your own fucking death? Besides being upset and angry that you could do that to your wife and your child, it makes me, as a woman, feel like shit. Like I wasn't good enough for you. So yeah, I want to discuss your sex life, because I'm kind of wondering whether you found better out there. Whether you found what you were looking for." She worked herself up into such a state that her breaths came out unevenly as she tried to swallow her hurt. There was no hiding it, though—I'd wounded her horribly.

I stared at her, my mind splintering with a hundred different thoughts as I took in everything she said. It had never occurred to me that she would assume I left because she wasn't good enough. That I was looking for some tits and ass somewhere else.

Fuck.

Reaching for her, I said, "Tee, me leaving had nothing to do with not being happy with you or looking to get laid elsewhere."

She shrugged away from me. Wrapping her arms around her body, she said, "Why else would you leave? It doesn't make any sense."

I'd known this question would need to be answered when I decided to come back, but I still wasn't sure how much information to share with her. The need to make her understand clashed with my commitment to keeping her and Charlie safe, leaving me with a tough decision. On top of that, I'd sheltered Tenille from the harsh

truth of working for Shane Gibson all those years ago. As far as she knew, he was simply the father of our old schoolmate, and a nice guy who cared enough to give me a job when I'd needed one. He was also the man who looked out for her when her husband died and gave her second husband a job when he needed one. She didn't know that he'd happily put a bullet in a man as naturally as he'd hold a newborn baby.

"I got tied up in some bad stuff at work. The cops started investigating, and Shane told me to get out of town to save us all going down. He was the one who organised the fire at our house—"

"Bullshit." She cut me off. "Shane would never do that." The fierce way she defended him was like a knife twisting in my chest. The motherfucker had clearly won her over while helping her pick up the pieces of her life.

"It's not bullshit. You don't know half the truth about Shane."

"I know more than you think I do, Aiden. Remember, it's been a long time since you left. A lot has happened in that time, and Shane has been a good friend to me."

I narrowed my eyes at her. Something she said, or the way she said it, triggered a warning deep in my gut. "What did he tell you after I left?" I kept a firm grip on my temper while waiting for her answer, but I was dangerously close to losing it. Not at her, but at the situation that Gibson had put me in.

"About what?"

My shoulders tensed as I took a long, calming breath. It didn't do much good, though. "About me, Tee. What the fuck did he tell you about me?"

She blinked a couple of times at my raised voice. "Don't yell at me!" At my silence that smacked of anything but pleased, she added, "Nothing. He didn't tell me anything about you. All I know is that he misses you. Still to this day, he goes on benders when he thinks about you and Brad too much."

Stunned, I tried to process that. Brad was Shane's son and had been my best mate in high school. He'd died in a freak accident just before Charlotte was born. I could believe that Gibson still mourned his son's death, but what I could never believe was that he still cared for me. Not after what he'd done to me all those years ago.

"So you're close to Gibson?" Sully's information over the years painted a picture of Gibson helping her out, but I wasn't sure just

how close he'd become to my family. It wouldn't have surprised me if he'd stayed near to keep an eye out for my return.

She didn't answer me straight away, just kept her eyes firmly on mine while she stayed silent. Finally, she blinked and glanced at her feet briefly before looking back up at me and nodding. "Yeah, kind of."

Something felt off here. I couldn't put my finger on it, but Tenille seemed to be acting strangely. She was hiding something from me. I guessed, though, that she had no reason to trust me these days. I'd have to rebuild that. However, in the meantime, I needed answers, and I also needed to make sure she understood a few things about the situation we were in.

"I'm telling you the truth, Tee, but I get it if you can't trust me on that for now. All I ask is that you don't tell Shane I'm back."

"Stop calling me that!" She rummaged in her bag for a moment, pulled her keys out, and added, "I'm going home now. To my *husband*. I don't want to see you again, and as far as keeping secrets from Shane Gibson, I'm not sure that's even possible. He's the kind of man who seems to know everything that's going on."

The displeasure written all over her face, coupled with the wariness flashing in her eyes and the bite in her words, hurt more than I ever thought it would. Where was the girl I'd loved more than anyone before or after her? I'd at least assumed she'd still be in there somewhere, giving me a sliver of an opportunity to show her the truth of the situation.

I reached for her, curling my hand tightly around her forearm. As our skin connected, a spark blazed through me, jolting long-forgotten memories to the surface. Or maybe they were buried in an effort to move on. Her eyes sliced to mine. I ignored the warning in them, in much the same way I'd done many times during our relationship. It was what Tenille and I were good at—ignoring signals and pushing our way in or out of situations. It didn't always work in our favour, but that never stopped me from trying.

"Do you remember the day we were married? I promised you forever that day, and you cried as you promised me the same. It was the first time I ever saw you cry, and it made me understand how deep you were in with me, because getting you to that point had taken me some hard fucking work, and I hadn't always been sure you really wanted to marry me." I paused for a moment, searching her

face to make sure she was still with me. She was. In fact, she held her breath while she took in everything I said. “I fucked up our forever, Tenille. I’m sorry for that. But I’ll be damned if I’ll sit back and watch any more of your life get screwed over. When I tell you that Gibson isn’t who he shows to the world, I need you to remember the trust you used to have in me and trust what I’m saying now, too. I need you to know that even though you and I don’t have a forever anymore, I never stopped loving you. And anything I’m trying to do now to help you is because of that. Dig deep, Tee, and think back to who I used to be before I left. For you, I’m still that person.”

I laid myself out in a way I hadn’t had to in over a decade, hoping like hell that she’d respond and give me an inch.

But she didn’t.

Reefing her arm out of my hold, she shook her head like a mad woman. “You took all my trust, Aiden, and threw it in my face. And it makes me question everything about you and who you were before you walked away. You knew everything about me and all the shit I’d been through, so I feel like if you really loved me like you say you did, you would never have left me alone to raise Charlotte and deal with shit on my own.” She drew a long breath as her fight faded. Staring at me with eyes that revealed her turmoil, she added, “Just leave again. We don’t need you here.”

No fucking way was I backing down. She’d just have to find a way to deal with me being around.

“No, you do need me here, Tenille. I’ve had a guy keeping an eye on you and Charlie since I left—”

She frowned as her fight flared up again. “What the fuck? Like a stalker watching over us?”

I kept my own fight in check. I’d forgotten just how argumentative my wife could be. Sometimes, it had been like going to war every day with her irrational thoughts and emotions that she flung at me. “No, like a private investigator who made sure you guys were okay. He checked in with me regularly, letting me know how you both were.”

“Jesus, Aiden, that’s a little extreme, don’t you think?”

“Clearly not, if the shit you and Craig are in at the moment is anything to go by.”

She straightened, pushing her shoulders back. I remembered this move—it was what she did when she tried to appear confident.

What it told me, though, was that whatever came out of her mouth next would be a lie. "If you're talking about the fights we've been having, they're nothing. We love each other and are working things out."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "I'm talking about that, along with your drinking, Charlie's school grades going down, and the money missing from your bank account. Are you working all that out, too?" My last words came out a little too harshly, but fuck, this wasn't shit to be avoided.

She stilled. "Your PI is a nosy bastard. None of those things are your business."

"I would argue with that. They are all my business because you and Charlie are my business, and I plan to get to the bottom of every single one of them. With or without your help."

Silence for a beat. And then—"You know what would have been nice? If you'd been this intent on getting to the bottom of shit fourteen years ago when you and I were having problems. When you tell me to think back to who you were then, and to know you're that same man for me now, it doesn't mean much, because back then all you focused on was working. You were hardly home, and when you were, you and I spent most of that time arguing." She jabbed a finger against my chest. "So don't come back here now and tell me you know all about my marriage to Craig and the shit my family is in, and that you're going to fix it, when you couldn't even fix your own shit years ago." She turned to get in her car, leaving me staring after her with no comeback.

She was right. I hadn't been there for her when she'd needed me. I'd been so fucking focused on providing for our family that I'd ended up neglecting them. And as the weeks and months passed, and the small wounds between us had turned to gaping ones that I didn't even know how to begin to fix, it just became easier to fight with her or to retreat completely. At the end, we'd both been like casualties of war who stared at each other through vacant eyes, hurling words intended to hurt the other because that felt like the only way to allow the pain out.

The guilt I carried over that and over leaving them never eased up. It was like a hammer chipping away at me all the fucking time. I was certain that the only way I'd ever get rid of it was to make

things right with Tenille again. We couldn't go back, but we could sure as fuck go forward. But only if I could convince her to let me in.

CHAPTER 4

Hyde

Four hours after seeing Tenille in the car park outside her work, I made my way up the path towards the front door of her house. This wasn't the home we'd lived in. I hadn't seen the inside of it yet, but if the outside was anything to go by, this house was much nicer than the one we'd rented. The well-maintained garden with colour everywhere was only the first clue. The recently painted wood was another. On top of that, the neighbourhood was respectable. I'd been relieved when Sully had told me Tenille had chosen to raise our daughter here. I may not have been around to help her do that, but at least the money I'd left her ensured she could afford to give Charlie a good start in life.

As my boot landed on Tenille's front porch, I slowed and took a moment to get my head together. Not something I was used to doing. My usual method for getting what I wanted was to charge in and do whatever it took, regardless of the consequences, because they meant very little to me. But in this situation, the consequences were everything. They would never be anything less than that when they involved my daughter.

Taking a deep breath, I knocked on the door and waited. Raised voices coming from inside told me that Tenille and Craig were most

likely arguing again. The way Craig ripped open the front door a couple of minutes later, confirmed that.

He scowled as our eyes met. "What the fuck are you doing back here? I thought we made it clear last night that you aren't welcome."

Not waiting for an invitation, I forced my way into their home. "I obviously didn't make it clear enough that I don't give a fuck."

I didn't wait for his reply. Instead, I walked the length of the hallway until I found Tenille in their kitchen. The smell of roast filled my nostrils in much the same way the homely feel of their house filled every cold part of me. Family photos, plants, warm light, books, the television running in the background, a cat that rubbed up against my legs, and Tenille chopping potatoes in the kitchen—it was all there.

She'd done it.

Tenille had created the family we always wanted.

I'd always known it, but now I fucking *felt* it.

The ache in my chest came out of nowhere as I watched her. Really, it was so much more than an ache, but that was all I would acknowledge it as. I'd spent years figuring out ways to avoid this kind of pain; I wasn't going to let it in now. I just needed to get through this conversation and then I'd drown that fucking pain at the nearest pub.

Tenille stopped chopping and placed her knife down. "You just don't give up, do you?"

Before I could answer, Craig stormed into the kitchen. He'd been yelling at me as I walked down the hall, but I'd shut him out. "Motherfucker! You can't fucking come into our house and—"

"Craig," Tenille hissed. "Charlotte can hear everything you're saying."

I faced him, doing my best to ignore the way my chest tightened knowing that my daughter was so close. I hadn't been sure if she'd be home. Figured she might have been out with friends or at the ice skating rink where I knew she spent a lot of time.

Fury riddled his body, and I wondered how close he was to punching me again. "You need to get used to the idea that I'm back in Tenille's life now. And Charlie's."

His nostrils flared. "Tenille told me you cornered her after work today. And that you want to play Good fucking Samaritan and fix

our problems. We don't need you, Aiden. We're already working on our own shit."

"I'm here for a lot fucking more than that."

Tenille's sharp intake of breath filled the room. "I knew it. You want Charlie."

Fear laced her words, and that fear sliced into my heart. I never wanted her to fear me. Fuck, me being back was supposed to do the opposite.

My gaze found hers. "I'm not here to take Charlie, Tee. But she is mine, and I would like to get to know her."

She paled. "Do you realise the impact that might have on her, Aiden? She thinks you're dead. All these years, you've let her think that. And now you want to come back, when she's sixteen and already going through so much shit in her life with school and friends. She doesn't need you to add to the stress she's already under." Her voice trembled as her anxiety increased.

I moved closer to her, surprised that Craig hadn't. His wife was visibly upset, but he made no move to console her. "We can go slowly. I don't expect to just come back and to suddenly be deep in your lives. She and I can find our way to each other over time."

Her eyes narrowed at me. "Have you had anything to do with teenage girls in the last fourteen years?"

I frowned, not understanding where she was going with this. "No."

Shaking her head, she muttered, "Fuck, I didn't think so. Let me tell you, sixteen-year-old girls are a handful. And while they slap on a mask for the world, underneath that bullshit they're vulnerable and sensitive. This kind of news will confuse the hell out of Charlie, and I don't want to put her through that at the moment."

"So when do you propose, Tee?" My question was genuine, but I couldn't hide my impatience.

"Never!"

Craig finally manned up and stepped around me to pull Tenille into his arms. In a hushed voice, he said, "Can we at least agree to make a time to meet to discuss this? I don't want Charlie to come out and meet you without us preparing her first."

His use of *Charlie* grated again, but I bit my tongue in order to keep the peace. "Agreed."

Craig and I may have come to an agreement, however forced, but Tenille didn't appear to want any part of it. "I'll meet you to discuss this, but I'm not promising anything will happen soon. I want to make sure Charlie is more settled at school before we do this. She's been having problems so far this year."

Charlie had just started her second last year of high school. It was an important year, so it concerned me to hear she was experiencing difficulties. "Okay, we'll meet tomorrow and talk more about this. The last thing I want is to cause more issues. You'll guide me on this."

Her eyes widened at my acceptance of what she said. When they softened a little, I knew I'd made the right step. "Thank you."

I held her gaze for a moment as I gave her a nod, before looking at Craig again. "I also want to discuss the money that's missing from your bank account."

"Jesus, you're a fucking asshole, aren't you? I'm beginning to wonder what Tenille ever saw in you. For the fucking record, that money is sorted, and I'm not fucking discussing it with you."

His voice grew louder as he spoke, and Tenille placed her palm against his chest as she said, "He's right, Aiden. The money is back in our account and all sorted out, so you don't need to worry about that anymore."

I lifted a brow as I glanced between the two of them. "You miraculously found fifty grand?"

Craig stiffened as he continued to glare at me. "Because I know you're not gonna fucking let this go, I'm doing some extra work for Gibson. He's paid me in advance."

I whistled low as I crossed my arms over my chest and planted my feet wide. "Must be some hard-core work, Craig. Tell me, what kind of work does Gibson ask for these days to pay someone that amount of money?" I knew from Sully that Gibson had hired Craig about a year ago to drive trucks for him after Craig lost his job. Driving trucks, however, didn't earn you fifty grand fast.

Tenille slid out of her husband's embrace. "Don't be a prick, Aiden."

I probably was being a prick, but I gave no shits. I'd watched Craig gamble away their cash for years. I refused to watch any longer. And Tenille needed to see Gibson for the person he truly was. If she thought he'd advance Craig that kind of money out of the

goodness of his fucking heart, she lived in fantasyland. And I fucking needed her to understand that fairy tales didn't exist when Gibson was involved. Maybe then she'd realise the truth of why I left her all those years ago.

I jerked my chin at Craig. "I know what kind of work you used to have to do for Gibson to earn good money. I'm wondering if it's the same these days."

Craig swallowed hard, and I knew I was right. Gibson had him getting his hands really fucking filthy for that cash.

"Mum, is dinner nearly ready? I've got a stack of homework to do tonight, and I want to get started."

I spun around to find my daughter watching me warily. The sounds of Tenille and Craig cursing behind me faded away until all that surrounded me and Charlie was silence while we took each other in.

I committed her face to memory—every perfect curve of it—while I tried to ignore the fear rushing at me. *Fuck*. I needed to get this shit under control. Fast.

Her forehead wrinkled slightly. "You're the guy from last night. On the front lawn."

I nodded, unable to form an answer. I wanted to wrap her in my arms and take the fourteen years of hugs I'd missed out on in one go. Wanted to take her pinky in mine like I did when she was a baby. Hell, I wanted to tell her exactly who I was, but I reined in my own desires and upheld my end of the bargain I'd just made. Finally, I managed to grind out, "Yeah."

Tenille pushed past me and took hold of Charlotte, guiding her out of the kitchen as she murmured something I couldn't make out.

As I stood staring after them, Craig said, "You need to go now. Come back tomorrow morning at nine, and we'll talk more." He shoved my back as he added, "And if you ever fucking say a word to Tenille about the work I do for Gibson, I'll make sure you never have anything to do with Charlie."

Every ounce of control I'd worked hard to maintain while in his presence snapped. I turned to him, curled my hand around his neck and rammed him against the pantry door. A storm raged in me as I squeezed his neck. This man had everything that should have been mine. It wasn't his fault, though, and I needed to remember that. It was *my* fucking fault. But it didn't give him the right to threaten me.

No one fucking threatened me and got away with it. The only reason he was still standing was because my daughter was somewhere in this house.

"Don't ever threaten me again," I snarled. "I'm playing this the way Tenille wants to. For now. But don't fucking mistake my acceptance for weakness. I am not a weak fucking man, Craig, and I won't hesitate to show you exactly who I am if I need to. As for Gibson, we both know the level of shit you're in with him. I just hope you have a fucking clue how to get yourself out of it, because trust me when I tell you, he is not a man to stay involved with." I knew I'd hit my mark by the way his face whitened and his breathing slowed.

As I exited their home, I wondered just how deep Craig was in with Gibson. From the information Sully had given me over the years, I hadn't thought they were close. I guessed, though, that a year working for him had drawn Craig closer. And that was how Shane Gibson got blood out of a stone. He sucked you in and gave you everything until the day he started slowly demanding some of it back. He moved with stealth, so that you didn't even realise what he was doing until it was too late and you were handing your life over to him.

CHAPTER 5

Hyde

Motherfucker.

I blinked my eyes a few times in an effort to open them, while at the same time reaching for my phone. As the sunlight blinded me, I muttered, "Fuck."

What fucking time was it anyway? Whoever was calling had better have a good fucking reason for waking me up.

Swiping my phone off the bedside table, I barked, "What?" and immediately regretted it when the headache I'd woken up with intensified

"Late night, brother?" King's voice boomed through the phone. Fuck, could he talk any fucking louder?

"What time is it?"

"Time to get the fuck up."

I slowly swung my legs over the side of the bed and sat on the edge. Cracking one eye open, I took note of the time blaring from the clock in the motel room. Almost seven.

I scrubbed my face. "Why are you calling me so fucking early?"

"We've got a situation here. Might need you to come home sooner than planned, so I wanted to see where you were at with everything down there."

"Just getting started. What's going on with the club?"

"Marx is fucking with us. He just drowned Sydney in cheap drugs. I need to find him fast before he kills our business, but the fucking feds are making that a little hard."

Figuring out who was backing Marx was Storm's top priority, but after we'd taken down the entire Sydney chapter of the Silver Hell MC, Detective Ryland had upped his surveillance of our club. In particular, he had eyes on King every minute of the day and also kept a close watch on Nitro, Devil, and me. Kick had managed to slip through his net somehow.

"I lost my tail on the way down here. They still all over you?"

"Can't shake the fuckers. How long do you think you're gonna need with your family?"

For the first time since I'd joined the club, I felt conflicted. My loyalties were divided. Letting King down was the last thing I wanted to do, but the unwavering certainty I'd felt for over a decade that I would never do that wasn't there anymore. Truth be told, I'd been fighting this for around six months. The pull to my family had grown stronger, until I couldn't ignore it any longer. Fucking shit up with the club like I'd been doing seemed to be my way of not facing it. At least that was Sully's take on this shit. He'd wasted a lot of fucking breath on telling me to get my head out of my ass.

"Hyde," King snapped when I didn't answer him. "How long?"

"I don't know. When you get to the point that you really need me, let me know. I'll be there."

"Yeah." He paused for a beat. "How's your kid?" The demanding tone he'd been using disappeared with his last question. This didn't happen often, but I knew from experience that kids were a trigger for him. They brought out a side to him we hardly ever witnessed. I had to wonder whether having a kid of his own one day would soften him at all. I'd lay bets that it wouldn't, but there were moments where I caught a glimpse of him that made me question that.

"Not sure yet. My wife's playing hardball."

"She won't let you see your daughter?"

"Not yet, but she will. I'll make sure of it."

"I have no doubt, Jekyll."

"Fuck you, brother," I muttered. He liked to call me that when referencing my moods. He'd given me the name Hyde for the same reason, but his use of Jekyll as an alternative stemmed from an argument we'd had way back when. He'd been right during that argu-

ment, but I'd refused to budge. Every now and then he threw this name at me to remind me of what an asshole I was.

He chuckled. "You reckon she remembers what a prick you can be?"

I reached for the painkillers I'd dropped beside the bed the night before. "I was a different man back then."

"So she has no idea what's coming for her?"

My headache increased its efforts to destroy me, and my chest tightened as I listened to him. This conversation irritated me.

As I shook two pills out of the bottle, I snapped, "I've got shit to do, King. Are we done here?"

His easy mood disappeared as fast as it came. "Yeah."

I exhaled my relief when the line went dead. I hadn't told anyone about Tenille for a good fucking reason. Talking about her and Charlie stirred feelings I didn't want to have to deal with.

I dropped my phone on the bed and grabbed the bottle of whisky that sat next to the bottle of painkillers. A moment later, I washed the two pills down. Before I screwed the cap back on the bottle, I guzzled enough whisky to get me through the morning. Fuck knew I was gonna need it.



"Where's Craig?"

Tenille finished stirring the coffees she'd made us, threw the dirty spoon in the sink and slid my mug across the kitchen counter to me. Lifting her mug, she wrapped both hands around it and drank some while looking at me over the rim. As she placed the drink back down, she said, "He got called into work last minute. He's on his way to Perth now."

This news was the best thing I'd heard in a couple of days. Now she and I could start working through some shit. "Good."

She eyed me silently for a few moments, and I wondered what thoughts ran through her mind. Tenille had never been an easy woman to read, but I'd usually managed to have some clue as to what she'd come out with next. Flying blind with her put me at a disadvantage. One I'd rather not have.

"Why did you leave, Aiden? And what's the real reason you're back?" All the fight she'd had the day before was gone. In its place, was a simple plea, and it seemed to me that she'd finally come to the place in our journey where she was ready to listen.

I moved my hand to hers and held it. Surprisingly, she let me. Trying to figure out where to start to answer her question took me a minute. I had to get this right if I had any hope of convincing her to give me what I wanted. I wasn't opposed to being more forceful if I had to, but things would be a lot easier if she came around willingly.

"Do you remember the times I came home from work with blood on my shirt? You used to ask me why, and I used to—"

"You used to avoid my questions and try to distract me with sex. Yeah, I remember."

"Did you ever wonder what the hell I was keeping from you?"

I expected her to throw something snarky back at me, but she didn't. Instead, she pulled her hand from mine and said, "At first, yes, but by then we weren't in a good place. We were both keeping so much from each other and just trying to get through the day. I did anything to avoid an argument with you, including turning a blind eye to whatever you were getting up to outside of work."

"The blood on my clothes was from work, Tee."

She blinked a couple of times, but other than that, she gave no other reaction that what I'd said shocked her. Tenille had seen a lot in her life as a teen, so I knew not much surprised her, but I'd expected more than what she was giving me. Hell, some nights after work, I'd come home almost soaked in blood.

When she didn't say anything, I demanded, "Did you hear what I said?" No way was she not going to take this in. By the time I was finished, she would have some idea of what Shane Gibson was capable of.

"Yes, but I'm not sure where you're going with this. I asked you two questions, and this doesn't seem to have anything to do with those."

"This has every-fucking-thing to do with those questions." It suddenly felt like we were back where we were fourteen years ago. Snapping and snarling at each other, and not getting anywhere. "Look, I didn't come back here to argue with you—"

She cut me off, her eyes flashing with that wild anger I knew all too well. "I don't know what you expected then, Aiden. You don't

get to walk out on your family and come back years later to smiles and fucking gratitude."

Fuck it. I'd been trying to ease her into it, but I could see that wasn't going to work. She appeared closed off to any talk of what Gibson had me doing. Maybe shocking her would be the only way. "Gibson made threats against our family to get me to leave." She blanched at that, but didn't say anything, so I kept going. "He demanded I fake my death and leave town. The fire was his idea, not mine. Fuck, none of it was my idea or what I wanted. I tried to find another way, but there wasn't anything else he would agree to."

"Why would he ask you to do something like that? It doesn't make any sense to me."

"The Gibson you know is not the one I knew. He didn't build his business by smart decisions alone; he used ruthless tactics, and he wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty to make money. I was the person he called on to help him do that."

She swallowed hard a couple of times. "What kind of threats did he make against us?"

"The cops obviously had something on me about what I'd done for him, and he knew it. He threatened to hurt you and Charlotte if I didn't leave and also if I ever came back. That's why I've stayed away. But I never stopped caring about you and Charlie. And like I told you yesterday, I always made sure you were both okay."

She sat back in her chair and ran her fingers through her hair the way she used to when she was nervous. "Jesus, Aiden. I don't know.... This doesn't even sound like something Gibson would do."

"Does it sound like something *I* would have done?"

"No."

"Well there's your answer. I *did* do it, and only because he taught me to."

She frowned. "What do you mean he taught you to?"

"I'm fairly sure that he always intended for me to do his dirty work. He took Brad and me out shooting from about the age of fifteen, and he also made sure we knew how to fight. At the time, I thought he was the kind of dad I would have loved to have, but now I see that he wanted us familiar with guns and able to handle ourselves. He encouraged the darker side of me, Tee."

"So, what, you just happily did all this stuff for him?"

I kept my irritation in check and reminded myself that she had every right to ask these questions. "What I'm trying to say is that I did shit for Gibson that led to him forcing me out of town. And yes, I'm not a good man, Tee. I'm not the man you thought I was, but neither is he. *That's* what I need you to understand here."

She moved off the stool she sat on and commenced pacing her small kitchen. I didn't speak again because I wanted to give her the space to process this new information. Even when the silence became deafening, I kept my mouth shut.

Finally, she met my gaze again. "I'm finding it hard to believe all this, but I can't think that you'd make something up like this just so I'd believe you didn't want to leave me."

I heard the confusion in her voice and knew I'd succeeded in helping move her closer to the truth. She wasn't quite there yet, though, so I needed to do a little more work.

"Do you remember your twenty-third birthday?"

Her eyes narrowed as she thought back to that day. Nodding slowly, she said, "Yeah, kind of. Why?"

"You worked that day, and while you were at work, flowers were delivered. The note said—"

Her memory kicked in and surprise flickered across her face. "Holy fuck, I didn't even put it together. They were from you."

Moving to where she stood, I ran my finger lightly down her cheek as I nodded. "Yeah, they were from me."

The card had read *Happy birthday. It's time to move on and live again. If you fall, I'll be there.* It referenced a sappy quote that I'd found about six months after we started dating. She'd been going through some shit with her family, and I'd told her if she fell, I'd be there for her. She'd made fun of me for it because she hadn't thought a dick-head like me would say something like that. She was right; they weren't words I would have ever said, but I'd been young, dumb, and in love, so I'd gone out of my way to impress her. It'd worked. After she'd made fun, she'd fallen harder for me and gave up her virginity about a month later.

She stared up at me, seemingly lost in her memories. A moment later, a tear slid down her cheek. Only one, but I'd never known Tennille to be a crier, so this was significant. "It took me so long to get over you. Even after I married Craig, I still wasn't over you," she whispered, her voice full of raw emotion. "I loved you so damn

much, but we were in such a bad place, and I hadn't said all the things I wanted to say to you. I hated that the most. I really fucking hated that the last time I saw you, I yelled at you for being a fucking asshole to me, because even though that was true, I still loved you, and I'd wished that the last thing you ever heard me say was *I love you.*"

I nodded, not taking my eyes off hers for even a second. "I knew you loved me. I never cared when you called me an asshole, because at least you were still communicating with me. There were months after Charlie was born that I doubted we'd ever make it out of that black hole. I'll never forget that first huge fight we had when you started to find yourself again. It was one of the best fucking days of my life, because I knew I was getting you back."

Her breaths came faster. "I'm sorry that I fucked it all up back then."

I gripped her cheek and shook my head. "No, you have nothing to apologise for, Tee. You had no control over that depression, and when you worked out what it was, you did everything in your power to fight it. So don't you ever fucking apologise for it again."

She placed her hand on mine as another tear fell. "Where have you been living all this time? What have you been doing?"

My chest squeezed with regret and hatred towards Gibson. He'd taken this woman from me. And everything we might have been able to build together. I fought the urge to kiss her. It wasn't that I was still in love with her—I'd had to find a way to move past that over the years—but the familiarity I felt pulled me towards wanting a taste of her again. I knew she felt it too by the way she was looking at me. Maybe we never got over our first love, regardless of what we went through with them.

I let my hand fall away from her and took a step back. While I would always think of her as my wife, she wasn't mine anymore, and I needed to remember that. I wouldn't drag her through any further heartache with me. "I moved to Sydney."

We sat talking for close to two hours. I filled her in on what I'd been doing with my life since she'd last seen me. Not that there was much to tell, because mostly I'd been taking care of club shit and doing anything to avoid thinking about the way my life had turned out. Those things involved drinking and sex—two things I was sure

Tenille wouldn't want to hear about, so I did my best to steer the conversation away from me, to her and Charlie.

Our conversation would have lasted longer, but I received a call from King. Excusing myself, I went outside to take the call. I knew instantly that something was up. King's hard tone gave that away. "Hyde, need you back here now. Sorry, brother. Got a situation that calls for you."

"What?"

"Jacko was killed last night. And when I say killed, I mean fucking executed. I need you to help me figure out who it was because Kick's dealing with baby stuff, and Nitro and Devil are busy with other shit. And at this point, you're the only other person I trust for this job."

"Fuck," I muttered. Not because this would drag me away from Charlie and Tenille, but because it was just one thing after another with the club. And, fuck... Jacko. We hadn't been close, but I'd always liked him. "Give me an hour to leave. I'll tie up some shit here first." That'd put me back in Sydney by ten tonight, maybe earlier depending on traffic.

"Call me when you get back." With that, he ended the call.

"Everything okay?"

I turned to find Tenille watching me hesitantly. Her new acceptance of me seemed a little shaky. I'd need to get back to Melbourne soon so I could strengthen that.

"No, some club business has come up. I need to go home and sort it out."

She wrapped her arms around herself, and I sensed her retreat. "Okay."

"I'll be back as soon as it's dealt with. I want time with Charlie. I figure me going home will give you a chance to talk with her and help prepare her for seeing me."

Taking a deep breath, she nodded. "Yeah, I guess."

I stepped closer to her. "You're not going to change your mind on this, are you?" Not that I would let her, but I wanted her to be comfortable with it.

She shook her head. "No. But it's complicated, you know? I've gotta get Craig on board with it, too. And God knows how Charlie will take the news. I'm just worried, is all."

I stopped myself from telling her that if Craig had a problem with it, I'd settle that fast. Taking shit slowly wasn't how I usually ran my life, but on this occasion it was called for. "I'll give you my number. Keep me updated."

We exchanged numbers and I gave her my address before leaving her to head back to the motel so I could grab my gear and make the trip home. Disappointment that I hadn't had any time with Charlie sat heavy in my gut, but it was a feeling I was old friends with, so I simply carried it with me like I always did.

CHAPTER 6

Monroe

“Did you end up getting any last night?” Savannah asked me as she handed the bowl of potato salad over. It was our weekly dinner at our parents’ house, and we were all in attendance—my sister, Savannah, my brother, David, his wife, Nikita, and me. I’d also dragged Tatum along because Nitro was busy with work.

“No.” She was talking about the guy I’d met at the club where we’d danced all night. “Which was a crying shame because he had it all going on. I bet he was even pierced under all those clothes.”

“You mean you didn’t check?” Mum asked.

I turned to my mother who had cocked her head to the side while she waited impatiently for my answer to her question. Laughing, I said, “No, Mum, I don’t go around randomly checking men’s cocks for jewellery.”

“You may as well with the addiction you have,” my brother muttered from across the table.

I drank some of my wine and caught David’s eye. “It’s a good addiction. Better than drugs, don’t you think?” David was the prude in our family. Hell, even my parents talked openly about sex with us, but David always found the sex talk a little too much. I liked to mess with him as often as I could.

He shook his head at me in mock exasperation. "It's not the kind of addiction I would choose."

I rolled my eyes. My brother was the complete opposite of me. Where I was impulsive, he had everything in his life planned down to the finest detail. Where I was what you could call a little dramatic, he was calm. And while I was the dreamer in the family, he was the sensible one.

"You'd prefer to be addicted to checking the stock market, right?"

A smile touched his face, but only fleetingly, because God forbid he express his emotions for longer than necessary. "I'd prefer to have no addictions, Roe."

I returned his smile. I did love him, even though he wore me out sometimes with his dry personality. David was the kind of man you wanted in your corner when the shit hit the fan in your life. He'd never failed to come through for me when I needed him. He was solid and always did right by those he loved. Truth be told, I wanted to find a man like him. I just wanted said man to live on the wild side a little and know how to have fun. A little spontaneity never killed anyone.

I raised my wine glass. "I would give up all my addictions to food and clothes and make-up and shoes and bags if I could just have a pierced cock in my life regularly."

My father laughed from the other end of the table. Raising his glass, he said, "Cheers to happiness, baby."

I flashed him a huge smile. My dad was my biggest champion. "Cheers, Dad."

David groaned as he leant back in his seat. "Jesus, don't encourage her."

Dad looked around the table with a smile. "I encourage all my girls."

"Yeah, and look at what you've created," David said. "Three women who walk all over you and spend all your money."

My mother waved her hand dismissively at him. "Pooh to you, too. So we like to live a little. Your father understands the needs of a woman." She threw a wink at Nikita as she tacked on, "And it seems you've followed in his footsteps. Nikita is a woman after my own heart."

David took after Dad in a lot of ways. Both men were quite serious and anal in the way they ran their lives, but Dad had wisdom

when it came to women that my brother at thirty-two was yet to learn. David's analysis of my father allowing the women in his life to walk all over him was off base. It probably seemed that way to most, but Dad had learnt how to handle his wife and his daughters. He knew when to push and when to ease off in a way that still got him everything he wanted in life.

Nikita sent Mum a smile. I loved the relationship they'd nurtured since David started dating her four years ago. They were close in a way a lot of women in their positions weren't. "I think Colin could teach his son a few things."

David muttered something under his breath, but at the same time, he looked at his wife with eyes that told everyone how much he loved her. Sliding his arm around her shoulders, he pulled her close and kissed her. They shared the kind of intimate moment that caused my heart to constrict with jealousy. I wanted that kind of connection with a man. I was a thirty-one-year-old single woman with no men in my life that I would even consider sleeping with, let alone dating.

Tatum leant close. "What are you thinking, Roe? I saw the way you just sighed."

My cousin knew me so well. "Why is it so hard to find a man? I feel like it shouldn't be this hard."

"Maybe it's time to take a break. You've been going at it pretty hard for a long time."

She was right—I had dedicated years to my search. And when I did something, I did it well. I left no stone unturned. But besides a two-year relationship that ended badly a few years ago, I hadn't found a man who held my attention for longer than five months.

"I'm not ready to give up yet."

"I'm not talking about giving up. I'm suggesting you ease up, because I think you're getting a little disheartened with it all, and I don't want that for you."

"Tatum's right," Mum said, listening in on our conversation. "Finding a man has become your sole focus lately, and to be quite frank, I'm missing my Monroe time. We haven't been to the spa in months. And do you remember the last time we went shopping together? I don't."

"Right," Savannah said, joining in. "We're hitting the spa this Saturday. All of us. No excuses."

"I'm in," Tatum said as she drank some of her wine. Her eyes sparkled with fun, which was odd for her, but then again, dating Nitro had changed her. She was all about the fun these days.

"Me too," Nikita agreed, smacking David as he muttered something under his breath again.

Mum's face lit up with happiness. She eyed Dad. "Looks like you've got some peace and quiet on the agenda for this weekend, Col. I'll pick up a roast tomorrow. You can cook it while we're all at the spa on Saturday. Family dinner twice in one week is exactly what Monroe needs."

"And some shoe shopping on Sunday," I said. "That's the other thing I need."

Dad chuckled. "Of course it is. I've heard shoes fix everything."

They didn't fix everything, but I didn't tell him that. I didn't want my family to know just how disappointed I was becoming over being single. I wasn't the kind of person to get down, but lately I'd felt every bit of being single, and it sucked.



"Nitro's been really busy with the club lately. Is everything okay?" I asked Tatum a few hours later at the pub after dinner.

Shaking her head, she said, "No, they've got a lot of problems at the moment. I'm hoping they can figure them all out soon, because he's so tense and hardly ever at home."

"How's the wedding preparations going?"

"Don't ask. We've got less than two months to finalise it all, and I feel like I'm drowning in plans."

"That's because your man was so bloody adamant that he wanted that ring on your finger fast. Maybe you should tell him you're pushing the date out."

She lifted a brow. "You think Nitro is going to go for that? I'd have more luck telling him I was knocking our house down and pitching a tent for us to live in."

I smiled. "I love the way he's changed you."

"He's changed me in so many ways. Which one are you referring to?"

"All of it. If there was ever meant to be a couple, it was you two. And I actually don't know if you have changed each other or if you've just changed yourselves so you can love each other and yourselves better."

She finished her glass of wine. "You're just a big old romantic, Roe. I don't know anyone else who loves love like you do. You're going to find your man one day, and he's going to love you so hard."

"Yes, and until then, I'm going to buy shoes and hit day spas with my mum." *God help me.*

Tatum laughed. "I do love your mother, but there is no way I'll ever allow you to spend all your weekends with her."

"Thank fuck. I was beginning to think I'd turn into a crazy old cat lady living on my own."

She grinned. "With all your shoes. Don't forget them."

"Fuck. I need another drink. And then maybe I'll just take a quick peek around the club and see if there are any men I wanna talk to." At the shake of her head, I added, "Just a really quick peek. Like, five minutes max."

"Five minutes!" She tapped her imaginary watch. "I'm counting those minutes."

I left her and headed towards the bar, checking the pub out for men as I walked. It was Wednesday, not a busy night, so I lucked out on finding anyone that matched my list of requirements.

As I handed Tatum her drink a few moments later, she said, "That was quick. Let me guess, none of the guys in here were a fit."

I ignored her sarcasm. She made fun of my list, but I held fast to it. And the longer it took me to find *the one*, the more items were added to it. "I don't think there are any men in here taller than me, Tatum. That's an automatic strike."

"Yeah, I don't blame you. I couldn't imagine being with a man shorter than me." She placed her drink down on the table. "Okay, enough talk about men. Tell me how the gym's going."

I pulled a face. "How the fuck do you think the gym is going? You know of my hate affair with the fucking gym." I'd joined for the fifth time in my life two days ago in my latest attempt at shifting some weight. And it was still the home of horror as far as I was concerned.

"What are you doing there?"

"They've written me up a weights programme and recommended some classes, including a pilates one that I'm dreading. It starts next Tuesday, so I have almost a week to psych myself up for that one."

"I was surprised when you said you were going back to the gym. I thought you were done with that place."

"Yeah, I was. But I got caught at the shopping centre the other day at one of those bloody stands where they talk you into all kinds of shit. I signed up for three months. I was proud of myself for resisting the guy's charms when he tried to convince me that I was made for a year's membership. I mean, do I fucking look like I'm made for twelve months of horror?"

"You know those agreements have a cooling off period? You can get out of it if you want."

"Yeah, I know." I fell silent for a moment before admitting the truth to her. It was a truth I struggled with, because honestly, I would have preferred to be completely confident in my body, but I wasn't. "I think I actually want to do this, though. I act like I don't care about my curves, and mostly I do love them, but there's this tiny part of me that secretly wants to know what it's like to be your shape. I want to know how it feels to be able to walk into any clothes shop and choose a sexy dress knowing it will definitely fit me. And then to wear that dress out and receive the kind of attention you do when you enter a room."

Her face softened. "Oh, babe, you do realise that you attract a lot of attention, right? And when I say a lot, I mean a fuckload. I see guys ogling you from miles away."

A wolf whistle and then a lot of cheering from a group of guys cut through the noise of the pub, breaking up our conversation. Turning, I saw a guy down on one knee making what looked like a marriage proposal to his girlfriend. When they quietened down, Tatum said, "Okay, I don't have to work tomorrow, so I'm gonna have a few drinks. You in?"

"Fuck yes!" I pulled out my phone. "I'll text Fox. He can open up at work for me tomorrow so I can go in late."

"Perfect."

It was just what we needed. Between our hectic schedules lately, we hadn't managed Friday drinks together in weeks. And I needed my drinks with Tatum to keep my sanity. Well, the drinks were op-

tional, but she was the keeper of my sanity. I wasn't sure what I would do without her in my life.

CHAPTER 7

Hyde

I watched from where my bike was parked on the other side of the street as the redhead stumbled down the path to her front door. She was clearly drunk, which meant she was of no use to me tonight.

I'd arrived back in Sydney an hour earlier, and King had given me instructions to come here and get as much information out of her as possible about the guy she worked with and who he bought his drugs from. She'd just arrived home in a cab, thank fuck. I'd started to think she was out for the entire night. King was on the warpath trying to figure out who was behind Jacko's death, and for some reason, he thought she would have information that'd help us.

Monroe—the redhead—tripped just as she almost made it to her front door. It wasn't a surprise. The heels she wore were so fucking high I wasn't sure how she even managed to stand in them, let alone walk in them.

"Fuck," I muttered when she landed on her ass. Moving off my bike, I crossed the street and jogged to where she sat.

"Why the fuck do women insist on wearing heels like that?"

Her back was to me when I asked my question. She swiftly turned her upper body to look at me. "Jesus, do you always sneak up on women near midnight?" I didn't miss the panic in her eyes before she realised it was me. Couldn't blame her—it was fucking late.

I'd tried to talk King into putting this visit off until the morning, but he'd been forceful in his desire to see it done tonight. I guessed the fact she'd met me once helped ease some of her concern.

"Can't say it's on my regular list of jobs, no." I watched as her eyes traced every inch of my body. Monroe appeared to be a woman who wasn't afraid to show her healthy appreciation for men. I crouched next to her. "See anything you like?"

My question didn't even come close to interrupting her appraisal. She continued to silently check me out before slowly bringing her eyes back up to meet mine. A smile danced across her lips. "How tall are you?"

My lips twitched with amusement. She was fucking drunk. And that was the strangest fucking question I'd ever been asked by a woman. "Six foot five."

The lazy smile on her face grew into the kind of smile that could knock a man on his ass. "Well look at that," she murmured, making absolutely no sense to me.

"Look at what?"

"A man who is taller than me. I vaguely remember that about you, but I wasn't sure if my memory was right."

She moved in an effort to stand, but her drunken state didn't allow that to go too smoothly. She'd almost made it off her knees when she started to go down again. I reached for her and helped her up. By the time we were both standing, my hands were firmly around her waist and her tits were pressed up against my chest.

Her face lit up and she hit me with that dazzling smile again. "I'd say it's a good thing you dropped by unannounced so late. Otherwise I would have probably had to sleep out here tonight."

I jerked my chin at the door. "How about you unlock that door so I can get you inside before you pass out."

"Oh good lord, not only are you tall, but you're helpful, too. It's not often a girl can tick two items off her list in such a short space of time."

I let her go so she could turn and take the last few steps to the door, but made sure to keep my hands close in case she fell again. "What list are we ticking items off?" I'd expected to cop an earful for waking her when I arrived at her place, not this.

She stopped abruptly and turned back to face me. I hadn't been expecting that, so I collided with her. She wobbled on unsteady legs,

but my arms were around her in an instant, holding her up.

"What list do you think?"

"I've no fucking clue. That's why I asked."

Her hands landed on my chest and she pressed herself closer against me.

Fuck.

This was getting dangerous. *Monroe was dangerous.* Those curves called to me. Fuck, everything about this woman called to me. I remembered the first time I'd laid eyes on her. She'd been in her kitchen rambling on about broken doors and religious shit or something. I'd copped one look at those curves and I'd been fucking lost for words for a minute. It wasn't just her body that did it for me; it was everything about her. From that red hair, to her voice, to the way she'd handled herself when Devil and I had come over—she had something I couldn't put my finger on or describe. But whatever it was, I wanted a taste.

"You had much experience with women, tiger?"

Tiger?

Fuck, though, I'd answer to that.

"Depends on your definition of much."

"Mmm, I'm betting that by your definition, you probably have. I can't imagine a man like you not getting your fill. But I'm asking about your experience with dating and relationships, not purely sex."

"A man like me?"

"Yeah, tall, hot with muscles for miles, and a voice that makes me wanna beg you to take my vibrator away and replace it with your cock."

I raised a brow. "Is this the alcohol talking or do you talk to all men this way?"

She ignored that question. "So, do you have much experience?"

I gripped her waist and moved her away from me. "Can't say I do."

"I figured. It's a damn shame you're not into dating. But I'm taking a break anyway, apparently. If you listen to my mother and Tatum. They think shoes can make up for cock. Pfft. That's what women with cock in their life say. Us singles girls would give up shoes in a heartbeat."

I stared at her, no clue what she was going on about. But then, that seemed to be how most of this conversation was going down. "Okay, let's get you inside."

She placed a hand on her hip. "You trying to tell me to stop talking?"

I chuckled. "I doubt any man could tell you that and get away with it."

My answer seemed to work for her. She finally turned, unlocked the door and entered her house. I followed close behind, steadying her when she stumbled. We walked the short distance to her kitchen where she threw her bag on the counter, kicked off her shoes, and poured herself a drink of water.

Eyeing me, she said, "What are you doing here? We never did cover that."

It had surprised me that she'd allowed me into her home so easily, but I figured her drunken state had a lot to do with that decision.

"King sent me to ask you about the guy you work with and who he gets his drugs from."

"You think I know that kind of information? I don't do drugs, so I'm not up on who the drug dealers are in this town."

It was what I'd suspected and had said as much to King. "Yeah, I figured. I'll need to talk with your guy tomorrow. You know where I'll be able to find him?"

"He's working." She reached for one of the pens she had stashed in a mug on the counter, and a piece of paper. Scribbling an address down, she said, "He'll be here from about nine until three."

I took the paper when she offered it to me. "You good from here?"

She smiled and cocked her head. "You offering to help me some more?"

I was far from a fucking saint, but taking advantage of drunk women wasn't something I did. Even when that was *all* I wanted to do. "I think it'd be best if I didn't help you too much tonight."

She continued to watch me with appreciation. "You sure do know how to make a woman feel good. I'll let you off the hook since you appear hell-bent on not touching me. But let the record show that I may not let you walk away a second time if, say, you were to show up here again."

Jesus, it had been a long fucking time since I'd wanted to flirt with a woman rather than simply fucking her. I pushed off from the counter I was leaning against. "Is that an invitation?"

She shrugged drunkenly. Her body moved with an easy and natural sexiness that sucked me right in. Even when she was intoxicated and not trying to be sexy, she fucking was. "I'll leave that up to you."

Not a smart move. If shit were up to me, I'd be back to fuck her tomorrow. But with all her talk of dating, I figured Monroe was probably looking for a relationship rather than what I had to offer. And again, for the first time in a long time, I wasn't sure I wanted to chance disappointing a woman.

CHAPTER 8

Monroe

“You wishing you hadn’t had all those drinks last night yet?” Fox asked me as I dropped my head into my hands and groaned for about the hundredth time. Well a hundred was an exaggeration, but not by much.

I cracked an eye open to look at him but didn’t lift my head. It hurt too much to move, so I restricted that to only when it was absolutely necessary. “You think if I promised God I’d clean up my act, he’d wipe this headache?”

“You don’t believe in God.”

“Just because I don’t go to church, doesn’t mean I don’t believe.”

He glanced towards the front door of the shop as a guy entered. “You reckon you’ve got it in you to clean up your act, Roe? Like, I don’t see that happening at all.”

He was right. I didn’t. But a girl could pretend.

I straightened because we had a customer. Thank God for Fox—he’d opened up this morning and had taken care of almost all the customers so that I could rest and feel sorry for myself over how damn hung-over and sick I was.

“You okay on your own for a bit while I do this tat?” Fox asked after chatting with the guy about what he wanted.

"Yeah." I didn't even have it in me to talk much. Everything I did or said exacerbated the headache.

He narrowed his eyes at me. "You sure? It looks like you're getting worse rather than better."

I waved him away. "It's a slow day. I'll be fine."

With some hesitation, he left me, and I sighed with relief as I settled into the chair we had at the front counter and rested my head again. The day had been a waste. I'd achieved none of my goals, but at that point, I didn't have it in me to care.

Fifteen minutes later, my headache eased a little thanks to the silence. I was beginning to drift off to sleep when a deep voice rumbled, "How's that head, sugar?"

I'd know that voice anywhere. It was the voice of sin and sex. Well, at least, that was what it made me want to do. However, it was also the voice of danger, and it set alarm bells ringing all over the place. Hyde was a biker and best to avoid when it came to sex.

Without lifting my head, I mumbled, "How do you think?"

His chuckle filled the room, and I cursed him silently for being so damn sexy. "Gotta say, I'm surprised to see you here. Figured you'd stay home and sleep it off."

I was beginning to wish I had, too, as my memory reminded me of what I'd said to him last night. Not to mention the fact I'd fallen on my ass and stumbled all over the place. Sure, I was a woman who liked to flirt with men, but I usually refrained from doing that with men who could bring trouble into my life. It was okay to have Storm around in the form of Nitro, but I didn't want to invite one of them into my life on a regular basis. And yet, I'd pretty much invited him to pop on by for a quickie when he was next in the neighbourhood.

Reluctantly, I met his gaze. The heat I found there caused my legs to squeeze together. *Shit.* "Look, about last night, I was so drunk I hardly remember any of it, but I do remember you helping me into my house. Thank you for that." I prayed hard that he'd let me off the hook and not bring up anything I'd said to him.

His eyes firmly held mine, but his face gave nothing away. I couldn't tell what he was thinking. Finally, though, he nodded. "No worries." Then, glancing around the shop, he said, "Is your work-mate in?"

I could have kissed him for not pushing the point. But, kissing him was off the table. *Must remember that.* "Yeah, but he's with a cus-

tomers. He'll be a while. I could get him to call you when he's finished."

Those dark eyes of his found mine again. With a shake of his head, he said, "No, I need to speak to him now."

I lifted a brow. God these bikers could be pushy. Nitro sure as hell was, and it seemed Hyde had the same bossy streak. "So when I said he's busy, I meant he can't speak with you now."

"I won't be long." With that, he walked away from the counter and towards where Fox was working.

Oh no he didn't.

"Hey, this is *my* business, dude. And when I say that one of my staff members is busy working and can't see you, I mean it. So back the fuck up and turn your ass around." My headache returned full force, which only made me crankier. I wasn't sure exactly what caused me to snap at him, but it was probably the fact I felt so ill combined with the fact that it annoyed me when men didn't listen to me.

He came to an abrupt halt and turned to face me. The heat in his gaze had disappeared completely. In its place was a dark expression that, along with the hard set of his shoulders, told me I'd pissed him off. Well, fuck him. He was the one in the wrong here. Not me.

Taking a step towards me, he said in a low voice, "You care to repeat that?"

I crossed my arms in front of me. "No, not really. I'm fairly certain you heard what I said."

"I heard it, but I didn't fucking like it."

"Do I look like I care whether you liked it?" This conversation was going downhill at a rapid rate of knots.

"You should care."

"Yeah, so I've heard. But I've had a long day and am in too much pain to even think about caring. All that matters to me at this point is that my guy finishes the tattoo he's working on and that my customer is happy with the work. I've got bills coming out of my ass, so I kinda need the cash from that job so I can pay them. You barging in there demanding Fox's time could piss my customer off, which may mean I can't pay my bills. You see where I'm coming from?"

He watched me in silence for a few moments. I couldn't tell if he was calming down or getting more worked up. He still looked angry, but his body language told another story.

Just when I was beginning to settle in to go another round with him, he said, "I'll leave my number. Get him to call me."

"God, could you be any more bossy?" I muttered before stalking back to the front counter. Locating a pen and paper, I shoved them at him when he joined me there, and said, "And just so we're clear on something, that invitation to come back to my place for sex no longer stands."

I couldn't be sure, but I would have sworn he almost smiled. He jotted down his number as he said, "I see you remember something from last night."

I snatched the paper from him when he was done. "It just came back to me, so I wanted you to know I'm actually not interested. It was all that damn alcohol I drank that made me say shit I didn't mean."

Resting his hands on the counter, he leant over it so our faces were close. "Just so *you* know, that vibrator of yours has got nothing on my cock." He tapped the piece of paper with his number on it. "You change your mind, you use that."

Without another word, he exited my shop, and I stared after him, unable to process the thoughts rushing through my mind. He had me so worked up and so damn confused. On the one hand, I never wanted to see him again. The absolute nerve of him to come to my business and try to tell me how things were going to go down. But on the other hand, the man was hot as hell, and I was more attracted to him than any man I'd met in a long time.

I looked up at the roof, towards the heavens.

Why God?

Why is the only man I want to sleep with a moody asshole?

CHAPTER 9

Hyde

Women.

Fuck.

Dealing with them was fast becoming the norm in my life. And after all these years of *not* having to deal with them, it was doing my fucking head in.

For what felt like the fiftieth fucking time that day, I checked my phone for a text from Tenille. It had been over twenty-four hours since I'd left Melbourne, and I was yet to hear from her. My natural instinct was to call and demand to know what was happening with Charlie, but the rational side of me won out, so I shoved my phone back into my pocket and blew out a long, frustrated breath.

"Fucking women," I muttered under my breath. I was sitting at the bar in the clubhouse waiting for King. Being mid-afternoon Thursday, it wasn't busy, but the few guys there were fucking noisy. I turned to face them and called out, "Can you assholes keep the fucking noise down?"

They scowled at me. I wasn't anyone's favourite person, but at least when I wanted something it was usually given. As they quietened, I turned back to my drink and took a swig, my eyes meeting Kree's.

"Rough day?"

I didn't like many people. Not easily, anyway. But Kree was someone I did like. Probably because she knew when to involve herself in something and when to back off. She was smart as hell, too, a trait I valued in a person.

I drained my glass, the second whisky I'd had that afternoon after returning from Monroe's shop. "Tell me something, Kree. You've got kids, right?"

She stopped what she was doing and put down the glasses she was clearing away. Kree had this way of giving her full attention when she had a conversation. You knew she was fully in it, and that was another thing I liked about her. "Yes."

"If you had a teen daughter who hadn't seen her father since she was a toddler, how do you think she'd take the news that he was back?"

"My daughter is only young, so I have no experience with teens yet, but I can tell you how I reacted when my dad came back into my life when I was fifteen. I desperately wanted him around, but he'd walked out on us when I was five, so I was angry with him. Ten years without him built enough anger to cause some explosive fights. And fifteen was an age where I liked to express my anger a lot. So I took it out on him." She rested her elbows on the bar and leant closer to me. "I'll tell you this, though—if he'd been man enough to stick that anger out, I would have forgiven him and accepted him. But he didn't. We haven't seen each other since."

"And your mum? How did she deal with all that?"

She straightened. "She hated him more than I did, so it wasn't pretty. Maybe if she hadn't shared that anger with me, it might have been different with my dad. I may not have been so mad at him. But at the end of the day, my father was a weak man. A child—especially a teen—needs strength from their parents." She paused for a beat before adding, "I presume we're talking about your daughter here. You show her even a fraction of the grit I've seen in you, and you'll get through to her. But you may need to curb that temper of yours. Teens don't respond well to your kind of impatience and moods."

I gripped the empty glass in front of me and then slid it towards her. A headache screamed at me, and I did my best to ignore it. Depending on what King had on my agenda for the rest of the day, whisky would do the trick.

Kree took the glass. "The same?"

I nodded, and she left me to my thoughts. It was only a few moments, though, before I was interrupted.

"You get anything out of Monroe?"

I glanced up to find King taking a seat next to me. He jerked his chin at Kree, indicating he wanted a drink, and then looked back at me.

Did I get anything out of Monroe? The answer to that was nothing but hell, and a hard-on that she'd never wrap her lips around. She'd fired up at me fast earlier and given me a tongue-lashing that had tripped my own temper. The surprise in it all, though, was that she'd managed to ease my mood swing almost as fast. That wasn't something that happened often, if ever.

I'd had a foul temper for as long as I could remember. Apparently it ran in my family. Over the years, I'd just accepted it, but it had dragged me into some shitty situations. Tenille and I had spent half our marriage fighting over shit because of our temper clashes, and I often found myself in fights I usually refused to back down from with my brothers. Backing down wasn't in my personality, so it had surprised me when I did so with Monroe.

"She's a fucking handful, King, but yeah, her guy called me this afternoon and gave me some info. Not sure that it's useful, though. Turns out the kid he buys the drugs from has a dad who forces him to sell them. I've got his address, but he's out of town for a few days. Fox thinks he'll be back either Saturday or Sunday."

"Get one of the prospects to watch the address and let us know when he returns. I talked with Max James and Calvin Ryan today. Neither seems to know anything about Jacko's murder. I would have thought if anyone would know something, it'd be one of them. Whoever is behind this, is keeping a low fucking profile." Max and Calvin had their fingers in a lot of pies. It surprised me, too, that they didn't know anything.

King's phone rang, and he was silent for a few moments while he listened to what was being said. His face morphed into a scowl before he said, "Let him in. I'll deal with him." After he had shoved his phone back in his pocket, he said, "Ryland's here. Wants a chat."

"Has Bronze heard any more about the investigation?" The last I knew, he was having trouble digging up any info for us as to what Ryland had on the club. Unusual for Bronze, which made me think the feds were working hard to keep shit under wraps.

King shook his head. "Haven't heard from him for days. I'll call him after I hear what Ryland has to say."

The detective entered the bar, drawing our attention to him. King's body tensed as he watched Ryland walk towards us. With everything going on in the club and with Jen, he was wound tighter than I'd ever seen him.

"Ryland," King greeted him, "What the fuck do you want now? I'd have thought keeping your eyes on me twenty-four-fucking-seven would be enough for you."

Ryland was good at his job. I'd give him that. His face remained blank, not registering any reaction to what King said. "I thought we had a deal, King."

"I don't make deals with cops."

"Yeah well, you did with this one." He waited for King to reply, but when King simply stared at him in silence, he added, "I want your guys off Gambarro."

King crossed his arms. "No."

Ryland's carefully controlled composure finally cracked a little. "No? You do realise what will happen to you if you don't comply, right?"

King's jaw clenched. "How about you waste your breath and tell me again."

Ryland stepped closer to King in what appeared to be an effort to intimidate him. He shouldn't have bothered; nothing intimidated King. It would only piss him off more than he already was. "You're playing with fire here, King. You remove the men you've got watching Gambarro, otherwise I'll be stepping up my investigation of your club. And I think we both know how that will end up. I'll also find a way to take over the investigation of Jacko's murder, which will only increase my surveillance of your members."

King's nostrils flared as he looked at Ryland with every ounce of contempt he felt towards the man. I didn't know what had happened to King when he was younger, but I would have put money on him having an altercation with the cops, because I didn't know anyone to hate them as much as he did. "You do whatever the fuck you have to, Ryland, and leave me to do whatever the fuck I need to. Investigate the shit out of Storm. You won't find anything that others haven't been able to find over the years. But let me be crystal fucking clear—you're the one playing with fire here, not me. And when that

fire gets hotter than you ever realised it could, you'll be wishing you never knew me or threatened me."

Neither moved for a good few moments, each staring the other one down. Ryland was the first to move, taking a step back. "I've warned you. Let the chips fall where they may." He stalked out of the clubhouse after that, leaving King to track his movements with disgust as he left.

"You think he's got much on us?" I asked.

"He's got something. But whether or not he can back it with evidence is another story. I'm not fucking removing our eyes off Gambarro, though, so Bronze better come through with something soon."

We were dangerously close to the kind of shit we'd managed to avoid for a long time. Bronze had kept us off the cop radar most of the time, and whenever we'd hit it, he'd dragged us off it fast. But this time felt different; this time I was actually concerned about where it would all end up. Where *we'd* end up.

CHAPTER 10

Monroe

“So, do we think this is going to become a thing?” Tatum asked as she stirred our Milos and passed me mine.

“God, I hope not. Milo Fridays suck. But I can’t handle another night of too much alcohol this week. I’m barely recovering from Wednesday night.”

“How sick were you yesterday?”

I groaned as I sat on the stool at her kitchen counter. I loved being in her house. Since she’d moved in with Nitro, Tatum had decorated and made it a beautiful home for them. One of the things she’d scattered throughout was plants. The kitchen alone had three in it. Every time I visited, I thought about how much I would love some plants in my home, but I was certain they wouldn’t survive. I had a tendency to kill them.

“I felt ill all day and most of the night. I’m beginning to think I’m getting too old for hangovers.”

“Jesus, Roe, you’re only thirty-one. That’s not old.”

My phone rang, drawing my attention away from how old I really did feel. “Hey, Robyn, what’s up, girl?” It was one of my oldest friends.

“I’m calling to beg you for a favour next week, but I totally understand if you can’t do it, okay?”

I'd do pretty much anything for Robyn if I could swing it. She was the kind of friend every girl should have—loyal, kind and giving—and she'd never once let me down when I needed her. "Sure, what is it?"

"Bree has ice skating on Tuesday night, but I also have to go to John's parent-teacher interview. And Matty isn't home until Wednesday. Are you able to take Bree to ice skating?"

Her hubby worked away from home, and she often struggled with being able to do it all on her own. But she wasn't the kind of woman to ask for help very often, so when she did, I knew she was desperate. And I loved Bree, her fifteen-year-old, so of course I would do this for her. "Just let me know the time, and I'm there."

The relief was clear in her voice. "Thank you so much, Roe. I owe you huge."

"You don't owe me a thing, girlfriend."

After I ended the call, Tatum asked, "Is she okay?"

I drank some of my Milo and nodded. "Yeah. Matty's away, so she needs some help juggling the kids. I'm taking Bree ice-skating on Tuesday night. You wanna come?"

"I can't. Nitro and I are going to check out cakes for the wedding."

I almost spat out the Milo I'd just drunk. "*Nitro's* checking out cakes? How the hell did you convince him to do that?"

She shrugged. "Sex. And well, the man loves cake, and I told him he'd get to sample lots of it."

"That man loves *you*. I'd say that has a lot more to do with it than cake."

She smiled. "And sex. Let's not forget that."

She was right. Nitro couldn't keep his hands off Tatum. "Yeah, but he can get that from you whenever he wants."

Her smile dimmed. "We've been a bit hit and miss lately. He's been so busy with club stuff, and on edge, too. He comes home tense as hell and exhausted after the long days he's putting in, and pretty much just falls into bed. I told him enough was enough and that he had to finish work early on Tuesday night to come to this with me."

"He didn't argue?"

"Well, that's where the sex came in. I told him I'd make it worth his while and may have mentioned something about installing a mirror on the roof above our bed. He likes to fuck me in front of the

mirror, so I figured we needed one in the bedroom. It arrives on Monday."

I raised my mug. "Nice work, sister."

She clinked mugs with me. "I thought so." After she drank some Milo, she said, "How's Bree these days?"

Bree had been a handful for the past three years, but was beginning to mature into the kind of daughter any mother would want. "Let's just say that I think they've turned a corner with her. Robyn's not reporting half as many arguments as she used to."

"So you and Bree are still getting on okay?"

My face spread out into a smile. Bree was like the daughter I'd never had. I loved Robyn's son, too, but I'd always wanted a little girl, so I felt a special bond with Bree. "We have our moments, but I never let her walk away angry with me. I always make sure we resolve any issues before they can become a problem."

"You'll make a good mum one day, Roe." Tatum wasn't really a kid person, but she always supported my dream of having a large family.

"That's if I ever manage to have one before my eggs shrivel up."

"Oh God, sometimes you are overly dramatic. You've still got years to go before that's a concern."

I lifted my brows. "You saw what happened to my friend, Davinda. That shit could happen to me, too."

Tatum waved her hand in the air dismissively. "That's not going to happen to you. Davinda will grow old alone because she was too much of a bitch to hold her marriage together. And then when it fell apart, she was too much of a bitch to find another man who would put up with her shit. She's childless because of her personality. You don't have that problem. Men fall over themselves to be with you. You're just too damn fussy."

"I'm not fussy. I just have extremely high standards."

It was Tatum's turn to raise her brows. "Look, I'm all for high standards, but yours are out of this world. I mean, what woman ditches a man because she discovers he doesn't eat meat?"

"You know why I did that. I'm not going to spend the rest of my life arguing with my husband over what we eat. I like my meat, and I refuse to give it up."

"Did he ask you to give it up?"

I put my hand on my hip. "No, but he would have."

She shook her head in frustration. "You don't know that, Roe. But that's the thing you always do—you assume to know what will happen down the track and you make rash decisions based on those assumptions. I'm beginning to think you sabotage your relationships before they can even get started."

"I do not. I—"

I was cut off by Nitro's booming voice from the front door. "Vegas, you got a minute?"

She moved off her stool, a look of confusion on her face. I was confused also. He'd told her he wouldn't be home for hours. Leaving me, she headed towards the front of the house.

I listened as he said something to her and then the door closed, leaving the house in silence. Guessing they'd gone outside together, I decided to fill in the time waiting for her by making us some tea. I was rummaging through Tatum's teas when the front door opened and boots thudded down the hallway towards the kitchen.

Turning when they stopped, I expected to find Nitro, but instead found Hyde standing in the kitchen doorway.

Good God, the man was impressively built. So much so, that I found it hard to keep my eyes on his face. All I wanted to do was let them drop so I could take a good long look at his body. But I managed to stay strong and hold his gaze.

He had the darkest eyes. They matched everything else about him—his dark hair that hung in tangled waves around his face, his dark beard, and his tanned skin. And not to forget, his dark moods. I'd only seen one of them, but I got the distinct impression they made up his personality. He seemed to be an intense man, that was for sure.

"I need your car keys," he said after a few moments of silence.

I frowned. "Why?"

"So I can move your car."

"You don't think I could do that myself?" My tone got a little snarky even though I tried to keep it in check. I was acting weirdly, which annoyed even me, so who knew how he would take it. There was just something about this man—something that drew me to him when all I wanted to do was run the other way. Snapping at him would hopefully keep him at arm's length.

His jaw clenched and he took a minute. Finally, he nodded and said, "I do. Could you move it so I can pull Nitro's ute out of the

garage?"

Well shit. I had to give him points for not losing his cool. Grabbing my keys, I made my way out to the driveway. As I brushed past him, I did my best to ignore his masculine scent and the hard muscles I grazed. The muscles that practically pleaded with me to reach out and touch them.

Stay strong, Monroe. You do not need a biker in your life. Not even for sex.

I reversed my car out onto the footpath and then joined Nitro and Tatum in the front yard. They were deep in conversation but glanced at me as I made my way to them.

Nitro raked his fingers through his hair as he lifted his chin at me. "Thanks."

I took a good look at him. Tatum wasn't kidding when she said he was exhausted. It was written all over him. "You doing okay, Nitro?"

Hyde interrupted us with an impatient look. "King just texted. He wants us back at the clubhouse."

Nitro nodded and dropped a quick kiss on Tatum's lips. "Don't wait up, I'll be late."

She reached for him as he stepped away from her. "Be safe." She spoke softly, but I heard the concern in her tone. Something was off here because it was unlike Tatum to speak like that to Nitro. She knew he was capable of looking out for himself, and while she always worried, she never felt the need to voice it to him.

He stopped and turned back to her. Taking her face in both his hands, he said, "I'll call you as soon as I can after this is done." For a man who wasn't tender, Nitro had a way with Tatum that was as close to tender as I was sure he'd ever get. It seemed to do the trick. She nodded and motioned for him to go.

A few moments later, Hyde took off in Nitro's ute while Nitro's bike roared down the street.

Looking at Tatum, I said, "What's going on? I've not seen you this worried before."

She took a deep breath, straightening her body and pushing her shoulders back. Anyone would have thought she was the one going into battle. Some days, I figured she probably felt like it. "One of their guys was murdered. They're looking for payback, and I know it's not going to be pretty."

“Shit.” No wonder she was concerned. I wasn’t sure how she managed to cope with this type of stuff. If the man I was dating went to work with the threat of murder over his head, it would be enough to make me spend my days worrying.

She nodded. “Yeah, that’s one way to put it. This isn’t going to end well for someone. I just hope that someone isn’t going to be Storm.”

CHAPTER 11

Hyde

Someone was banging on my front door. Loudly and fucking insistently.

“Jesus,” I muttered to myself as I left my bed, pulled my jeans on and stalked down the hallway towards the door.

What fucking time was it anyway? It couldn’t be later than eight. After only getting to bed at about three this morning, the last thing I wanted to be dealing with was some asshole wanting shit from me.

The bashing on the door quietened before a female voice called out, “Aiden, are you home?”

I slowed.

My heart rate kicked up a notch.

Charlie.

What the fuck was she doing here?

She commenced bashing on the door again. “Fuck, Aiden, open the door.”

I yanked the door open and stared at my daughter. On one hand, I wanted to welcome her with open arms. On the other, the father in me kicked in and I knew I had two things to do here—pull her up on her attitude and call her mother to make sure she knew where her daughter was.

Our eyes met. Hers swirled with emotions I wasn't sure I was ready for. I'd imagined this moment thousands of times over the years, but I hadn't nailed it in my mind. Not if the way my daughter glared at me was anything to go by. I'd expected anger, but not this attitude rolling off her.

Crossing my arms, I said, "Does your mother allow you to swear in her house?"

My question caused her to hesitate, but only for a moment. "No, but this isn't her house, is it?"

"I don't appreciate it in mine either."

Her brows lifted before she casually ran her gaze over me, zeroing in on the ink covering my chest and arms. "You look like the kind of man who couldn't give a shit about swearing."

"I'm the kind of man who gives a shit about how his daughter grows up, and growing up with a foul mouth isn't how I imagined that to go. When you're in my house, you don't swear."

She blinked. This time I managed to cause her a few more moments of hesitation. And then she simply shrugged and said, "Fine." With that, she pushed her way past me and entered my home without another word. I stood in silence and watched with a full chest as the child I loved more than anyone in this world finally merged her world with mine.

Nope, I definitely hadn't nailed this moment in my imagination. I hadn't realised the depth of emotion I'd feel. My chest filled to overflowing, and feelings I wasn't sure I'd ever experienced roared through me.

She's here.

Charlie's home.

With me.

I closed the front door and followed her into the kitchen where she dumped her backpack on the counter before opening the fridge.

"You got any juice in here?"

I pushed against the refrigerator door and closed it. "No. And how about we start again? Does your mother know you're here?"

"No. And she doesn't need to know."

I reached for my phone. "Yeah, she does."

When I started hitting numbers on my phone to dial Tenille, she blurted, "We had a huge fight. I just need somewhere to crash for a bit, okay?"

I stopped what I was doing and stared at her. "You plan on staying with me?"

"You're my father, right?"

Fuck, I was so out of my depth here. I knew how to deal with assholes and motherfuckers, but a teenager? No fucking clue. I placed my phone back down on the kitchen counter. "Yes, I'm your father."

"Good. So I'm staying."

"How did you get here if your mother didn't bring you?" I hoped like fuck she didn't say she hitchhiked.

"By bus."

It was clear she didn't want to discuss that, so I let it go for now. "What did your mother tell you about me?"

"Everything." She didn't volunteer any further information until she grew tired of waiting for me to speak again, which I didn't do because I figured whoever spoke first lost in this situation. And I needed to get the upper hand here if I was going to have any hope of controlling this. "Fine, she told me you didn't really die in that fire, that you faked your death and left town because of shit that was going down at your work."

Her tone was indifferent, like she was detached from the whole thing. I wasn't a man too interested in feelings, but I had to know how she felt about this. "Does that piss you off?" Fuck, this was the strangest fucking conversation. Asking my daughter if me faking my death and walking away from her pissed her off. Based on the way my father abandoning me as a child made me feel, I could only assume Charlie was angry and hurt.

Her shoulders lifted in a shrug. "Yeah, but I don't blame you for wanting to get away from Gibson. He's an asshole."

That threw me. After Tenille had defended him, I hadn't expected Charlie to dislike him. But that wasn't what I needed to focus on. For now, I needed to work on my relationship with my daughter. "Did she tell you anything else?"

She blew out a long breath, looking more pissed off about this conversation than any emotion I detected in her voice. "Look, I'm not into discussing how I feel, okay? It's not what I do. I just want somewhere to crash until I get over this shit with Mum. You think we could do that?"

I recalled something Tenille had said about teenage girls slapping on a mask to hide their vulnerabilities, so I decided to let both this

conversation and her attitude go for the moment. It was going to take us some time to work our way towards each other, and in the meantime, I was just going to have to ease into my role as her father. Unfortunately, patience wasn't my strong suit, so fuck knew how this would go.

I picked up her bag. "Follow me." I led her to one of the spare bedrooms. "You can stay here as long as you want, but I'm calling your mother now to let her know where you are."

"She's not going to come get me if that's what you're hoping for. All she cares about at the moment is getting drunk and avoiding her problems."

I knew she was close to the mark with the getting drunk bit, but she was way off base if she thought Tenille didn't care about her. In the small amount of time I'd spent with Tenille, the love she had for Charlie had been evident. However, I figured that getting into a discussion about that now wouldn't get me anywhere.

I lifted my chin at her. "You want some breakfast?"

She stared at me like I had two heads. As if having breakfast with me was the last thing on her agenda. Moving to the bed, she sat on it and pulled her bag into her lap. "No, thanks."

"I'll be in the kitchen if you change your mind."

I didn't wait for her answer. She'd made it clear she wanted to be by herself. Forcing her to do anything with me would probably just push her away, and that was the last thing I wanted. It had been too fucking long since I'd had my child close; I wouldn't screw this up.

I headed into the kitchen to make a coffee and call Tenille.

She answered the call straight away "Aiden, I can't talk for long. I need to keep the phone free in case Charlie calls. She took off yesterday and I have no idea where she is." The panic and worry in her voice bled through the phone.

"Tee, she's here."

Silence.

And then a sob broke from her. "Oh, God. Thank God." She exhaled her relief, and I imagined her doubling over as she heard this news, in the same way she had years ago whenever she was relieved about something. Not that I knew if she did that anymore, but my memories were clear as day where Tee was concerned, and they flashed through my mind whenever we spoke or when I caught a glimpse of her. I wondered how our relationship would pan out now

and whether she'd allow me close enough to learn who she had become. It wasn't my intent to force that, but I would welcome it.

"She showed up just now. Said something about a fight you'd had and that she needed a place to stay while she calmed down."

"Yeah, we had a fight about you. She said she didn't want anything to do with you, and I told her she should give you a chance and get to know you before making that decision. And now look where she is. I'll come get her." Tenille sounded drained, exhausted. She probably was. Between a husband with a gambling addiction, thousands of dollars disappearing from her bank account, a husband she thought dead turning back up, and a daughter going missing, I guessed she was running on emotional fumes right about now.

Opening the cupboard above where I stood, I grabbed the bottle of whisky from it and splashed some into my coffee. Fuck knew I was gonna need it today. As I stored it back in the cupboard, I said, "How about she stays here for a couple of days while she blows off steam, and then you come and get her?"

Silence again. And then—"I'm not sure about that, Aiden. She doesn't know you. And you have no experience dealing with teens. I should probably just come today and take her home. By the time I get there, she'll have calmed down enough to talk to me."

"Tee, stay put. I've dealt with worse than teens in my life. I can handle Charlie. You need a break."

She barked out a laugh. "And what do you propose I do with myself while taking a break?"

I frowned as I downed some coffee and waited for the whisky to hit my bloodstream. "I don't know. Whatever the fuck mothers do when they get some alone time."

"You really do have a lot to learn about parenting," she muttered. "Fine, I'll call Charlie and tell her I'll be there in a few days. She's all yours. Don't kill each other, okay?"

Jesus, how fucking bad was this going to be? "I'll keep you updated."

We ended the call, and I reached for the bottle of whisky again. Filling my cup, I took a long gulp, closing my eyes briefly as the alcohol began to take the edge off.

How hard could this be? I could put up with a bit of teenage attitude for a few days. Anything to keep Charlie with me.



Three hours passed without a word from Charlie. Not a sound. Nothing. Those three hours felt like three fucking days to me. I fought an inner battle between leaving her alone and going in there to make her come out and spend time with me. In the end, I left her alone and went outside to the gym I'd built in my garage.

I'd just finished with the weights when she wandered into the garage. Wiping the sweat from my face, I watched her silently, waiting for her to speak.

Her gaze travelled around the gym before coming back to me. "You've got a good setup here. Would you mind if I did a workout later?"

"You box?"

"Yeah."

"How about you do that workout now?"

Her eyes widened a fraction. "With you?"

I nodded.

She hesitated for a moment before shaking her head. "Nah, I prefer to work out on my own."

"Fair enough. I'll be finished in about half an hour. The gym's all yours then."

"Thanks." With that, she turned and left.

As I watched her go, I wondered if she'd inherited my preference to be alone most of the time. She certainly seemed to have inherited my desire to avoid needless conversation. And I wasn't sure yet, but perhaps my moodiness as well.

My phone rang, and I quickly swiped it off the bench. I'd been expecting a call from King all morning. Nitro and I had paid some visits around town last night looking for anyone who knew anything about Jacko's murder. Sydney wasn't talking, though, and we'd almost called it a night when we finally found someone who knew something. He'd given us a guy's name, said the guy could probably help us. King had been adamant he wanted to be present if we found someone who might squeal, so we'd called it in to him and he'd told me to be ready today to drag information out of the asshole. I was more than fucking ready to do that.

King wasted no time on small talk. "I'm gonna text you an address. Meet me there in half an hour." And then he was gone. A moment later, an address came through, and I headed inside to get dressed.

"Charlie," I called out as I walked the length of the hallway. When she didn't answer me, I knocked on her closed bedroom door. "I've gotta go out for a while. You okay here on your own?" I figured she would be. I just wasn't sure *I* would be. My protective instincts were kicking into high gear, and leaving her was the last thing I wanted to do.

She still didn't answer me, so I knocked loudly a few more times, and when no answer came still, I opened the door without waiting any longer.

I found her lying on her bed, earphones in, eyes closed. Fuck, this was frustrating. She couldn't fucking hear me and still had no clue I was in the room.

Pulling one of her earphones out, I said, "These things are a pain in my ass. I've been calling out to you, trying to get your attention."

She scrambled into a sitting position as she shot me a filthy look. "I could have been naked! You can't just barge into my bedroom."

I ignored the way she referred to this room as her bedroom, and how much I liked that, to instead address what she'd said. "I can barge in if I've been trying to get your attention for a while with no response. You stop with the earphones and I'll stop with the barging in."

"No one listens to music without earphones. That's a dumb idea."

"Suit yourself, but expect me to enter your room if I need you and you don't hear me."

Scowling, she muttered, "Screw you."

I raised a brow. "You care to alter that?"

Eyes steady on mine, she refused to budge. "No."

She was my daughter all right. The way she held her ground and refused to back down was exactly how I would have handled this situation. But that didn't mean I would encourage it.

"Charlie, we need to get something straight here. I want you to stay with me, and I want to get to know you and have a relationship with you, but no way am I putting up with you disrespecting me.

You wanna tell me to go screw myself, you do that when I can't hear you."

Her turn to lift a brow. "Oh, so now you wanna get to know me? *Now* you wanna be my father?" She moved off the bed and stepped close to me. Her shoulders tensed as she spat out, "You talk about me disrespecting you. Well, how about we talk about the way you disrespected me for the last fourteen years by ignoring me? That kinda felt like a big screw you from you to me."

And there was the anger I'd been waiting for. It hit me like a tidal wave, causing my chest to constrict with all the guilt I'd been trying to shove away for years, and then some. I deserved everything she said.

"Yeah, I guess it did. The only excuse I have is that I was trying to keep you safe." Fuck, I wasn't prepared for this. I should have been. I'd had fourteen fucking years to prepare for it, and yet there I fucking was fumbling for words that would never ease her hurt or adequately tell her how sorry I was.

Her eyes searched mine furiously, looking for what, I wasn't sure. Short, harsh breaths pumped from her as she worked herself up with more anger. "That's all you have to say? *Really?*" She shook her head at me, but she had the kind of look on her face that told me she wasn't hearing anything she hadn't expected. "Fuck, I've got a father anyway. I didn't need you."

With that, she spun on her heel and stalked out of the bedroom while I stared after her processing what she'd said about not needing me.

Who would have thought a child could inflict so much hurt with four words? The pain was instant and deep as fuck. And unlike any pain I'd ever experienced in my life. But I didn't have time to feel it; I had to go after her and attempt to fix the mess I was making.

"Charlie!" I called out as I followed her out of the house. "I fucked that up. Let me try again."

She didn't stop, though. Instead, she picked up the pace and jogged away from the house. I followed suit and eventually caught up to her four houses down the street.

Grabbing her arm, I stopped her and turned her to face me. Almost breathless, she stared at me through tears that streamed down her face. No words came, though. The only thing that sat between us

was heartache and misery. We were both hurting, and I had to begin repairing the damage I'd done all those years ago.

Wiping away her tears, I said, "I'm sorry, baby. There's nothing I can say or do that will make up for all the years I wasn't there. At the time, I did what I thought was right for everyone. I was young and had no resources to do anything else. But I fucked up. I see that now. I should have tried harder to fix the situation without doing what I did."

When she didn't argue with me or attempt to walk away again, I moved closer. I wanted to take her into my arms and wrap her up in them, but it was too soon for that. Even though she lived and breathed in my soul, I wasn't in hers. She didn't know me, and she had no reason to trust me. So I gave her the only thing I could. The only thing I thought she might respond to. "I know you have no reason to believe anything I say, but I'm gonna say it anyway. There hasn't been a day gone by that I haven't thought of you. The day you were born was the happiest day of my life. I've missed seeing you grow up, but I've been watching you and keeping track of everything you've done. Don't think that I didn't care, because I do. And I'm going to be there for you now, however you need me to be."

I'd hoped my words would help stop her tears, but they seemed to have the opposite effect. She madly wiped them from her cheeks. "You think that an apology and a promise to do better will magically fix everything, Aiden? You have no fucking idea. Even though I had a dad growing up, I always wondered what it would have been like having my *real* dad there. I wondered if *you'd* been there, would we have been like those fathers and daughters who did everything together. Would you have taken me fishing or camping or taught me stuff about cars or shit like that? Dad never really did that stuff with me, and while I'm not sure I would have wanted to do any of it, maybe if you'd been around, you would have taken me." She paused for a beat before her face twisted and more tears fell. "Just because you say you want to be there for me, doesn't mean you will be." Her voice cracked as she uttered those last few words, slicing more guilt through me. Fuck, I'd screwed every-fucking-thing up.

"Give me a chance, Charlie. That's all I'm asking. I don't expect you to suddenly trust me or believe in what I say, but let's take it a day at a time and see where we end up. I'm not fucking around here. I want you in my life more than I've wanted anything." My voice

turned gruff and I almost held my breath waiting for her reply. She was everything to me, but I had no idea how to make her understand that.

Her tears slowed as she quietly watched me. Weighing up which way to choose. Something I'd said must have reached her because she finally said, "A day at a time. And I'm not making any promises to you."

I exhaled and nodded. "Fair enough."

Another silent few moments passed between us as we settled into this new phase of our relationship. I wasn't sure where to go with it next. I felt like a fucking parenting manual would be good right about now. In the end, she broke the silence. "You're gonna have to get used to me wearing earphones, though. When you want me and I can't hear you, just message me."

Fuck. This was a whole new world to me. "I've got a lot to learn, haven't I?"

She raised her brows and nodded. "Yeah, and one other thing? Don't call me baby. I'm not your baby anymore, Aiden."

She'd always be my baby. One day she'd grasp that. I'd make fucking sure of it.

CHAPTER 12

Hyde

"You're late," King said when I showed up ten minutes late at the address he'd sent me.

"Had some kid trouble, brother."

His forehead wrinkled in a frown. "What happened?"

"My kid showed up on my doorstep this morning. She wants to stay with me for a few days or so after having a fight with her mother, which is good, but we got into it just before I was about to leave."

"You got it sorted?"

I blew out a breath. "Fuck knows. I'm drowning here, man. Got no fucking clue what I'm doing, but I managed to calm her down enough to know she'd be at my place when I get home later. Now I've just gotta figure out how to get through to her that I want to be in her life."

"Talk to her mother and find out what shit she likes to do and then spend time doing that with her. It'll be a start. Time's what you've gotta give."

King never failed to surprise me with the shit he knew. He'd never had kids, but he'd spent a lot of time around them, so I figured he was probably onto something here.

Changing the subject, I said, "How'd you evade the feds?"

"Devil and Nitro caused a scene outside the clubhouse. Distracted Ryland enough for me to leave." He nodded before casting his gaze towards a house down the street. Jerking his chin at it, he said, "That's Dean's house." The asshole we'd been told could help us find Jacko's murder. "I did some digging on him and he deals in stolen cars. Recently took up a heavy coke addiction and gets it from Marx. We're not leaving here today until we get something out of him."

"Agreed."

We made the short walk to the house, and King took the front while I took the back. The place looked abandoned and filthy. The person who lived there didn't appear to care about their surroundings. Overgrown grass and weeds filled the yard, peeling paint and dirt made up the outside of the house, and the backyard was a mess of old tyres and rusted car parts.

Finding a back door open, I easily entered the house and headed towards the bedroom where I could hear someone talking. Dean was on his phone. As I came into view, his eyes widened and he muttered, "Fuck, I gotta go, babe," before dropping the phone and demanding, "What the fuck?" Yanking his gun out, he pointed it at me and pulled the trigger.

I ducked and narrowly avoided getting a fucking bullet in my chest. King was right behind me. Without hesitation, he entered the bedroom, taking purposeful strides towards the asshole. Dean shifted the aim of his gun and shot at King who took a bullet in his arm. That didn't slow him down, though.

He grunted through the pain and bellowed, "Welcome to your worst fucking nightmare, Dean," right before he punched him so hard in the face that it almost knocked him out.

By the time I joined them, King had the guy down, flat out on his back. He'd straddled him and pinned his hands to the floor above his head. No amount of fighting King helped the asshole; he was stuck beneath him, caged in by King's legs that refused to budge. King had strength and grit that not many men I knew possessed. When he set his mind to something, nothing stood in his way.

"You good?" I asked King as I took a look at his arm where the bullet hit.

"Yeah, it just grazed me. Nothing I haven't dealt with before."

I bent to get a better look at Dean. Eyes full of hatred stared up at me, and I wondered how long and what efforts we'd have to go to in order to change that hatred to fear. And whether we'd have to introduce some horror to make that happen. After being shot at, I was itching for some of that, and I figured King would be too.

"Next time you wanna shoot a man, make sure you know who the fuck you're shooting first," I barked. "King here doesn't appreciate bullets in his body."

Dean spat up at King. "Go fuck yourself."

His spit landed on King's face, and I felt the energy change in the room as King reared backwards, a look of absolute rage settling over his face. After he had wiped the spit away, he spoke, his tone low and murderous. "You'll regret that."

Without pause, he swiftly stood, bringing Dean up with him. Grabbing him by the shirt, he pulled him out of the room, down the hallway and into the small, dirty kitchen. Yanking out a chair at the kitchen table, he shoved him down onto it. He then took both of Dean's hands and bound them together tightly with a large tea towel he found next to the kitchen sink.

Gripping Dean's hair, he wrenched Dean's head back and demanded, "Tell us everything you know about Marx and the drugs he's dealing. And once you've done that, tell me who killed one of my men this week."

Sweat beaded on Dean's forehead as his eyes met King's, but he refused to give up what he knew. "Like I said before, motherfucker, go fuck yourself. You're getting nothing out of me today."

"We'll fucking see about that." King slammed his face into the table and then jerked it right back up again.

Blood streamed from Dean's nose, and I figured King had broken it with the force he'd used. Dean glared up at King as he kicked and thrashed his legs in an attempt to move off the chair. I reached down to grab his legs to prevent him from breaking free.

"I've got all fucking day, asshole," King said. "Longer if needed. And I'm in the kind of mood to inflict some pain, so I suggest you stop fighting us and start fucking talking or this isn't gonna go well for you."

Dean didn't reply. He simply sat there staring at King defiantly. I knew then that my itch for violence was about to get scratched. King

did, too. His eyes met mine and he nodded at the knife block sitting on the kitchen counter. "Time for some Jekyll time."

"You read my mind, brother."

I selected a knife from the block and stood in front of Dean after King swung the chair around to face me. I undid the binding holding his wrists together and splayed his hands out on the table, holding them down in place with my free hand. I then dug the tip of the knife into the back of one of his hands. "You want that through your hand, Dean?"

When he didn't answer, I sliced into his hand. Not too deep, but enough to give him a reason to start talking.

"Fuck!" His body jerked and he tried to pull his hand away, but I pressed my hand down on his harder keeping them there.

"I can go deeper if you want."

His eyes met mine, and I saw some of the fear I was aiming for. "You're fucking crazy! I don't know anything that you want to know."

I bent and pushed my face close to his. "Your reaction to us showing up here tells me otherwise." To give him more incentive to start talking, I ran the blade of the knife along his throat, making sure to draw some blood there too.

His hostility intensified at that, and instead of volunteering information, he spat at me like he'd spat at King. "Fuck. You."

Anger rolled through me, and the fine line I walked between surviving in this world with a touch of rage and sliding over the edge into full-blown madness was crossed. Slamming the knife down, I grabbed his shirt with both hands and lifted him out of the chair. The adrenaline coursing through me gave me the kind of strength that took over and achieved my goal. Barrelling him into the wall, I shoved him with enough force that he dented it. Not giving him a second to catch up with what was going on, I smashed my fist into his face. Again. And again. Over and over, until his face was a bloody, unrecognisable mess.

My mind ceased to process my actions. Instead, my rage controlled me.

I wanted to inflict as much pain as I could.

Misery and blood fuelled me.

To cause it and to see it.

I wanted to inhale his pain.

I wanted to draw it in to my soul and breathe through it.

All I lived for right then was his torment. It would match my own raging storm of pain. Being in the moment with him—*with his agony*—would ease mine for a brief time. I would be able to forget it. His suffering would wipe mine, even for just a moment.

“Hyde. Enough.” King stepped in and dragged me off Dean.

I blinked a few times as my surroundings came back into focus. I’d beaten Dean so badly that he’d slumped to the ground, covered in blood, half unconscious.

After he had pushed me out of the way, King crouched down and slapped Dean’s face a few times. “You still with us, asshole? Ready to talk? Or do I need to finish what Hyde started?”

Dean coughed a couple of times and attempted to sit up straight, but he cried out in pain and swore as he failed. After spitting some blood out onto the ground, he managed to get out, “I’ve never met Marx, but I’m pretty sure he’s tied to that murder. I overheard my dealer talking about it yesterday. That’s all I fucking know.”

King shook his head as he took hold of Dean’s throat. “No, you know something else. Keep fucking talking.”

Barely able to talk thanks to the unyielding grip King had on his throat, Dean choked out, “Whoever organised the murder is Italian.”

King grunted and let Dean go, shoving him hard as he did so. Standing, he looked at me and said, “Well that narrows it down.”

By my count, there were six major Italian players in Sydney. “Shouldn’t take us too long to go through them all.”

King pulled his phone out. “I’ve got something I’ve gotta do for the next couple of hours and then I want you, me, Nitro and Devil on this. I want to find that motherfucker and end this shit now.”



An hour later, I entered my house after leaving King and grabbing some food on the way home. I hadn’t restocked after being away in Melbourne, and I figured Charlie would be hungry.

The house I’d left a couple of hours earlier and the house I walked into were like two completely different places. I stood in silence at the living room entry when I found Charlie in there. I was silent, the room was not. She had rap music blaring from the speak-

ers and was sitting on the floor in the middle of the room smoking and drinking what I was pretty fucking sure was whisky from my cupboard.

"What the fuck?" I barked loud enough that she heard me over the music. Any attempt at keeping my outrage in check would have been futile so I skipped that. The sight of my sixteen-year-old daughter smoking and drinking slapped me in the face with a level of shock I found confusing. I didn't give a shit if people did those things—teens even—but not *my* fucking kid.

Her head whipped around so she faced me. After she had taken a swig of her drink, she said, "What?"

I stalked into the room and turned the music down. "You don't smoke or drink. Not in this house. Not fucking ever."

Her brows lifted and it appeared she was settling in for a fight by the way her shoulders squared and her back straightened. "Yeah, I do."

Shaking my head, I snapped, "No, you don't." I motioned for the glass. "Give me that."

She held her drink close. "No. And you can't tell me what to do."

"Oh yes I can. This is my house and you are my kid. I make the rules here. Not you."

Pushing up and onto her feet, she threw back, "If this is how it's gonna be around here, I'm out. I can get this at home from Mum. I don't need it from you too."

I reached for her arm as she turned to exit the room, halting her. "You're fucking sixteen, Charlie. Don't fuck your life up this early by drinking and smoking. I can promise you that's the last thing you'll be happy about when you look back on your life as you get older."

"So that's why you've got a kitchen full of booze then? You are so full of shit."

"No, I'm full of honesty. I want so much better for you than I have in life. I don't want you to make the same mistakes I did."

She rolled her eyes as she shrugged out of my grip. "You and Mum must have taken parenting lessons from the same manual. That's exactly what she says."

I raked my fingers through my hair. I wasn't sure if I was fucking shit up here or not, but no way would I stand back and watch her do what she was doing. "Do you know why we both say the same shit? Because we both came from families who didn't give a fuck about

us. They let us do whatever the hell we wanted and couldn't care less what the consequences were for us. My mother was a drug addict from the age of fifteen and she died from a drug overdose when she was thirty-eight. She was a selfish woman whose only desire in life was to make herself feel good. Taking time for me wasn't in those plans. And she sure as shit never worried about whether I was taking drugs or drinking. I'm not that kind of parent, Charlie. I will always care about what you're doing with your life."

Something I said hit a nerve with her because she took the time to process my words and think about them. "Your mum did drugs?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Coke mainly, but she didn't discriminate when she was desperate."

She narrowed her eyes at me. "Did you ever do drugs?"

"Yes."

"What? When?"

"After I left you and your mum, I started on the coke. I did it for about a year, and it almost killed me."

"As in you almost overdosed on it?"

"No. I was taking so much of the shit that it brought out my violent side. I was getting into fights almost every night, taking on anyone who pissed me off. If I hadn't kicked my habit, I would have ended up killing myself in a fight."

"So, what, now you just drink? No drugs anymore?"

"Yeah. I haven't touched anything besides alcohol since then."

She was quiet for a beat before blurting out, "I've smoked pot, but I haven't tried anything else."

Fucking hell. I was definitely not ready for this conversation. But, I had to be. And I had to keep my fucking cool or else I knew she'd walk. At least she wasn't arguing with me anymore. "You still smoking it?"

"My boyfriend smokes, so sometimes I do it with him. But I don't really love it. Usually it just makes me feel sick. I'd rather drink."

I inhaled sharply. "Your boyfriend?" I should have been prepared for that. Charlie was a beautiful girl, so I really should have expected a boyfriend to be kicking around. The fact she'd chosen a fucking stoner didn't impress me, though.

"Yeah, Jamie."

"How long you been with him?"

"About seven months. Mum and Dad hate him, but he's amazing."

No shit her mother hated him. I did too, and I didn't even know the little fucker.

"What makes him so amazing?"

A defensive look crossed her face, and I guessed that came from always having to defend him to her family. "He's the one who gave me the money to catch the bus here, and he's always there for me when I fight with Mum."

"He works?"

"No. I guess his family gives him money or something."

Or something. I bet the little shit was either dealing or stealing stuff. Jesus, it just reminded me how young and naïve Charlie was.

My phone buzzed with a text, and I quickly checked it.

Tenille: Everything going okay there?

Me: Yeah. She's okay.

Tenille: Keep me in the loop. This is doing my head in.

Me: Will do.

Shoving my phone back in my pocket, I said, "Look, I know you're gonna drink at your age. I don't like it, but I get it. But don't do it here, okay? And quit the smokes. That shit'll kill you eventually."

I wasn't sure how I'd managed to do it, but all the fight had left her. She didn't argue with me, but she didn't let me have the last word. "We've all gotta die from something, Aiden."

I pointed my finger at her. "Not in the house."

She bent and picked her drink up off the floor. Passing it to me, she said, "Now go. I'm gonna watch some reality TV and I'm pretty sure you'd hate it."

I took the drink and left her to it. I figured I'd won half the battle for now. The fact she was still talking to me was the biggest win of it all, but hell, I felt like I'd been to war and back with her today. My respect for Tenille leapt. If this was what she dealt with day in, day out, I had mad fucking respect for her. Which reminded me that I

needed to find an ice-skating rink. I was going to take King's suggestion and do stuff with her that she loved, in order to win her over.

CHAPTER 13

Monroe

As I sat and watched Bree ice skate on Tuesday night, I wished I'd taken it up when I was a kid. She seemed to really love it, and it looked like so much fun. Hell, maybe I should take lessons myself. It'd kill two birds with one stone—fun and exercise. There were plenty of adults out on the rink taking a class, many of them older than me. Bree was about fifteen minutes into her lesson, and I'd spent that time watching both her and a man who had to be at least sixty. He moved like he was my age. If he could do it, surely I could.

A waitress interrupted me when she delivered my order of hot chips to the table where I sat in the tiny café at the rink. The heating in there coaxed me in. I'd rather watch Bree from the warmth than sit on the bleachers and freeze.

"Thanks," I said as she placed the bowl of chips in front of me.

"Just let me know if you want anything else, love. I'm serving hot food for another half hour and then closing down the kitchen."

"Will do." I wouldn't want anything else, though. God, I shouldn't even be having these chips. I'd hit the gym at lunchtime, so I was probably undoing all that work. *Story of my life.*

As I watched her walk away, I caught a glimpse of a guy entering the café—the kind of glimpse that made me keep looking. I did a double take when I realised it was Hyde. What the hell was he doing

at an ice-skating rink? He didn't strike me as the type of man to skate.

Oh, God, my belly started doing somersaults. And all I'd done was look at the man. I needed to get myself under control. But damn, these kinds of somersaults weren't common for me. Why, why, why did *he* have to cause them?

He took a few steps into the café before turning to look out at the rink. I watched intently as his gaze stayed pinned there and his mouth curled up into a smile. He wasn't here to skate; he was here with someone.

I looked away and focused on my chips and Facebook. Anything to take my attention off him and those muscles of his that made me want to do dirty things with him. Not to mention that ass. Fuck, I wondered if his cock was pierced.

Stop it, Monroe.

Enough.

He is not the man for you.

A girl could daydream, though, right?

Scrolling through my Facebook newsfeed, I discovered my sister had started another online marketing course that day. Savannah was a twenty-nine-year-old uni dropout who had quit her teaching degree about a year ago after coming home from two months of overseas travel and declaring teaching wasn't for her. She'd decided to try internet marketing instead, and was convinced she'd make her fortune in that field. Our father was concerned about this change in direction, and that she was throwing money away by buying a multitude of online training courses, but Mum told him to let her be. Mum believed that everyone eventually found their calling in life, some just found it later than others. Dad didn't agree, but he'd let it go for now. This new course had to be, by my count, her sixth one this year. I kinda believed the same as Mum—Savannah would find herself eventually.

"This seat taken?"

My head snapped up at the sound of Hyde's deep, gravelly voice. Oh dear Lord. Mother of all things holy. This man had it all going on. Especially when he flashed that smile at me that he was currently flashing.

"It's all yours," I said against my better judgement. But really, it'd be weird if I told him to find a different table to sit at. The café was

tiny and there were only about four other spare seats.

He pulled the chair out and folded his huge body onto it, his long legs stretched out in front of him and his arms crossed over his chest. "I figured you'd say no after that tongue lashing you gave me the other day."

"Trust me, I wanted to." The words fell out of my mouth before I could censor them.

His lips twitched. "I like a woman who's honest."

"Yeah, well I'm not sharing my chips with you, so don't ask for any."

This time a smile spread out across his face. "Message received loud and clear, sugar." He uncrossed his arms and leant towards me. "You should probably know, though, that you've got tomato sauce on your face." Taking hold of my jaw, his thumb swiped the sauce from under my lip. He then placed his thumb in his mouth and sucked the sauce from it while I sat mesmerised by his moves. The man made cleaning my face look sexy as hell. I wanted to squirt sauce all over my face after that.

"Thanks," I said, but it came out like a bloody croak. What the hell was happening to me? I didn't get nervous around men, but Hyde made me act all kinds of weird.

His smile turned into a grin, but he didn't say anything else. He simply lounged back in his seat and crossed his arms again.

I ate a few more chips in silence and tried to focus all my attention on Bree, but just having Hyde sitting next to me made that difficult. As much as I avoided looking at him, I could smell him and sense his presence. And he smelt so bloody good with whatever scent he was wearing. Damn him.

"Who are you here with?" he asked, giving me a reason to turn back to him.

I found him watching me closely, which I both loved and hated all at the same time. "My friend's daughter, Bree. You?"

"My daughter."

Colour me shocked. That was the most unexpected thing to come out of his mouth. I hadn't picked him for being a father, and certainly not one who spent Tuesday nights taking his kid ice skating. But I loved that he did. "How old is she?"

"Sixteen."

"Oh God, you must be in hell. Bree's fifteen and she's more of a handful than she's ever been. How are you even managing to look so cool and calm? I mean, we've spoken a few times now and besides being a bit of an asshole the last time I saw you, you didn't seem run down or beaten to a pulp by your kid." God, I was fucking rambling. Would someone take a shoe and shove it in my mouth to shut me the hell up?

He chuckled, and that surprised me too. Hyde always seemed so intense and serious. I had to admit, I liked this side of him. A lot. "She lives in Melbourne with her mother, so she hasn't had the opportunity to beat me to a pulp yet. I'm sure it's coming, though. We've already gone two rounds today."

"Any bloodshed?"

"Only mine so far."

I laughed. "When did she arrive?"

"Three days ago."

"Oh man, strap on some combat gear. You're in for a wild ride."

"Yeah, I figured that after the first day."

"How long have you got her for?" It wasn't school holidays, so I wondered if she'd moved in with him.

"Her mother will be here tomorrow, but I'm not convinced Charlie wants to go home with her."

"Her name's Charlie? I love that."

"It's short for Charlotte."

An insistent tap on the window of the café drew our attention. It was Hyde's daughter. He promptly pushed his chair out and went outside to her where they engaged in a short conversation before making their way to the skate hire counter.

Charlie was a stunning girl with the same dark hair that Hyde had and a beautiful face I was sure the boys flocked to. I wondered how much stress she caused her father where boys were concerned. I remembered how much hell I'd given mine when I was a teenager. He swore half his grey hairs were from that time in my life. I'd had a new boyfriend every couple of months until I found one I really liked in my last year of school and had kept him for almost the entire year. My father hadn't been excited about him and it had caused us numerous fights.

Hyde helped Charlie exchange skates and waited until she was back out on the rink before he came inside again. He ordered a drink

and then joined me at the table.

After drinking some of his coffee, he said, "You got kids, Monroe?"

"No, not yet."

"You want them?"

I nodded. My heart actually hurt at the thought of not having kids. "Yes," I said quietly. This conversation had turned personal, fast. Another thing I hadn't expected from him, but that was probably my bias against bikers. "I want a big family. Five kids. Maybe. Or three, at least. I guess it depends on my partner and what he wants. And whether those three have driven me insane before I can go for another one." Why the hell was I sharing all this with him? It was like my mouth had a mind of its own and just kept going.

His lips twitched. It seemed to be a regular occurrence, but then again, I was babbling a little, so I could understand his amusement. Please God, let me shut up. "You've put some thought into this. But you haven't found a father yet?"

I sighed. "Sadly, no. I'm flat out finding a man who likes meat, let alone one who wants to settle down and have kids."

He frowned. "Meat? Who the fuck doesn't like meat?"

"Right?! My thoughts exactly." He was tall *and* he liked meat. *And* he smelt heavenly. I died a little on the inside. He wasn't the man for me, but fuck, he was beginning to tick a lot of boxes.

He leant back in his seat, stretched his legs in front of him and reached his arms back so he could cradle the back of his head with his hands. Good Lord, did the man not know how sexy that move was when he did it? It was like having your favourite food laid out on a banquet in front of you and being on a nil-by-freaking-mouth diet.

"I guess there's always IVF or some other shit you could try if you can't find a guy who likes meat," he said, his mouth curving into more of a grin.

I pursed my lips in mock annoyance with him. "You're finding this meat thing hilarious, aren't you? I'm telling you, it's a serious thing to look for in a man."

Still grinning. "I have no doubt. Tell me, what else are you looking for? Someone who flosses regularly? Or maybe someone who gets their tax in on time every year?"

I lifted a brow. "Flossing is very important. And honestly, I hadn't thought of the tax thing. I may need to add it to my list."

He laughed, and my belly fluttered at the sound. It was like a deep rumble of sexy goodness that I wanted to provoke over and over from him. "Ah, the mysterious list you mentioned the other night."

"I did?" God, I didn't remember that. What else had I said to him?

He shifted so he was leaning forward, his body and face closer to me. Dropping his voice to a low gravel, he said, "Yeah, you said I ticked two items off it. I had no idea what the fuck you were talking about, but it's making sense now." He paused for a beat before adding, "I'm guessing the fact I like meat gets me another tick."

Okay, it was time for me to woman up. Hyde had me on all kinds of edge just by being in the same room as me. No man ever did that to me. I was the woman who could flirt with anyone and never get tongue-tied. And yet, Hyde was making me question my ability to even engage in adult conversation.

I leant forward, resting my elbows on my knees and putting my cleavage on full display for him. Hitting him with the sexiest smile I could muster up, I said, "Three ticks don't make a list, tiger. You're gonna have to do better than that."

"I'm not looking to hit a list, sugar. But I will tell you, that vibrator of yours could learn a thing or two from me."

Fuck.

Hyde-1. Monroe-0.

"Roe, I hurt my ankle." Bree's voice cut through the heat between Hyde and me, which was the saviour I needed right then. If not for her, I'd be sliding fast into dangerous territory, contemplating letting a biker show me a thing or two. Or three or four. Hell, why stop at four? *Jesus*.

I stood. "Here," I said, motioning for her to come to me, "Sit down, honey. What did you do to it?"

She limped my way, her skates in her hands. "One of the assholes out on the rink pushed off the wall, straight into me, and I twisted my ankle as I fell."

"Little shit," I muttered as I crouched to take a look at her ankle. I had not even one ounce of an idea as to what I was looking for, but it didn't appear to be swelling, so I figured that was a good thing.

"You can still walk on it?" Hyde asked.

Bree nodded. "Yeah, but it hurts really bad."

He shifted to sit on the edge of his seat so he was closer to her. After taking a good look at her ankle, he said, "It doesn't look crooked or swollen. Is it numb at all?"

She pressed on her ankle in a few spots. "No."

He stood. "Good. I'll get you some ice. Wait here."

As we watched him go, Bree said, "He's hot, Roe. Do you know him or did you just meet him here?"

I stopped drooling over his ass and turned to face her. This checking-out-guys side to her was new. Well, at least the sharing it with me was new. Her mother would have had a fit if she knew Bree was checking out a man old enough to be her father, but I figured it was a natural progression in a girl's life. I didn't want her to feel like she couldn't talk to me about guys, so I ran with it. "I've met him a few times now, but I don't really know him. And yeah, he's hot as sin, but definitely not my type."

She hit me with a look of shock. "You're kidding, right? Like, why is he not your type? What doesn't he have that you're looking for?"

"Bree, baby, he's the bad boy your mama will warn you about when you get a little older. Bad boys are okay to fool around with, but you don't date them."

"So all your life you've dated the good guys? Is that working for you?"

I narrowed my eyes at her. "When did you become so sassy?" Honestly, I loved her sass, just not when it was directed at me.

A smile spread across her face. "Just pointing out something you may want to consider. You know, kinda like you do *all the time* for me."

I returned her smile. "Smartass," I muttered. "And while I haven't met the man of my dreams yet, I'm not sure a guy like Hyde would fit that bill."

Her smile morphed into a smug grin. "Don't judge a book by its cover, Roe."

I poked my tongue at her. "Shut up, missy. And stop throwing all the shit at me that your mother and I have been throwing at you all your life. That's good advice, but sometimes you just need to ignore it."

She laughed, but her laughter quickly died as she gripped her leg. "God, this hurts. I want to go back out there and run into that kid who ran into me. He should be hurting too."

Hyde returned with ice, and positioned Bree's leg up on the chair. He placed the ice on her ankle and said, "You'll probably wanna get her one of those compression bandages and keep her foot elevated."

"And see the doctor, I'm guessing." My first aid knowledge was going to need a major brush up if I was ever blessed with children.

"Yeah," he agreed. I loved that he didn't make fun of the fact I had zero awareness of how to treat this. He was just like bam, bam, bam, do this, do that, and all will be good. Hyde seemed like a take-charge kinda guy, and that right there made me like him more.

Bree glanced up at Hyde with a look of appreciation. "Thank you for all your help."

"No worries." He grabbed a spare seat from the table behind us and sat. "It's a good sign that it's not swelling. I'd say it's a minor sprain only."

"God, I hope so. I do not want to have to get a boot or anything like that," Bree said. At my smile, she pulled a face and added, "Those things are not hot, Roe. No guy is gonna check me out while I'm wearing a boot."

I held up my hands in defence. "Point taken, but I'm not sure I agree with you. I think you could milk a boot for a long time. Guys like to help pretty girls."

Hyde seemed amused by our conversation, but he didn't get involved. And a moment later when his daughter came off the rink, he left us to help her.

I watched him with her for a few minutes. He had to be one of the most attentive fathers I'd ever come across. Where some dads would be itching to get out of here, Hyde seemed intent on taking his time with his daughter. It was like he savoured every minute. I guessed that was perhaps because she lived in another city and he maybe didn't get much time with her. Whatever it was, I loved it. And bloody hell if that didn't annoy me a little. I didn't need any more reasons to like him.

CHAPTER 14

Hyde

It had been three days since Charlie showed up on my doorstep. I wasn't sure if we'd progressed far in our relationship, but the fact she'd agreed for me to take her ice skating had to be a good thing. Tenille had told me that ice skating was the one thing Charlie loved to do the most, and watching her out there on the rink blew me away. She was fucking good at it. It killed me that I'd missed out on all the steps she'd had to take to get to this point in her life. I wouldn't miss any more.

"Do you know them?"

I followed Charlie's gaze to Monroe and Bree. "Not really."

She'd just taken her skates off and tied the laces together before sliding her shoes on. "What does that mean?"

"I've met Monroe a few times, but we don't really know each other." I watched as Monroe bent to pick up Bree's skates, and spent a good few moments appreciating her ass. She had curves in all the right places, and my hand itched to touch that ass.

"You call her by her surname?"

"No, it's her name."

"Cool name. I've never heard it before."

Monroe put her arm around Bree's waist in an effort to help her walk, and I had the sudden urge to ensure they made it out to their

car safely. Turning to Charlie, I said, "You ready to go?"

She nodded and grabbed her stuff. "Yeah."

I headed in Monroe's direction, meeting her just as she started struggling with Bree's bag as well as the other stuff she carried. Reaching for it, I said, "Here, let me take it."

She hit me with a look of relief and passed me the bag. "Thank you."

Charlie and I followed Monroe and Bree out to Monroe's car. It was pitch-black outside, which pissed me off. The skating rink owner should have made sure the outside lights were switched on. I'd be having words with them about that.

I lit the torch up on my phone and angled it in the direction we walked. Monroe stopped when she came to a red Mazda. "This is us," she said as she unlocked the car and walked Bree around to help her into the passenger side.

My attention caught on one of her back windows. Moving to it, I confirmed what I thought and said, "Someone's smashed your window."

Her head popped up and she eyed me with disbelief. "Motherfucker."

My thoughts, too. I dialled a number and put my phone to my ear. When the call was answered, I said, "I'm gonna text you an address. Can you send Roach over to replace a car window for me?"

"Sure thing, man."

"Appreciate it." I ended the call and texted him the address and car details. It wasn't until she spoke that I realised Monroe had moved so she stood next to me.

"Ah, you know I'm quite capable of organising stuff on my own, right?" She sounded pissy. Kinda like she sounded the night I'd asked her to move her car out of Nitro's driveway.

"You'd be waiting for hours if you called someone. My guy'll be here within half an hour."

"Okay, so while I am thankful about that, I'd actually really rather you ask me first before you start organising shit for me."

"I don't see what the problem is here. You needed help, I organised it."

The car park lights turned on, and I took in her widened eyes and her annoyed expression. She was definitely pissed at me, but I failed

to understand why. It was a no-brainer that I'd call for Roach when I knew he could get here fast.

She placed her hand on her hip. "What if I'd had someone I knew who could come and do it?"

I frowned. "Do you?"

Exhaling in frustration, she said, "No, but that's not the point! You don't get it, do you?"

Charlie stepped in at that point. "He really doesn't. Aiden sees everything in black and white from what I can work out."

Something Charlie said caused Monroe to falter. Shifting her attention between Charlie and me, she finally settled it on me and said, "I like that."

Jesus this woman confused the fuck out of me sometimes. "What?" She'd just given me hell for doing exactly what Charlie said I did, and now she was telling me she liked it. I wondered if she was this confusing to everyone she met or just to me.

"Aiden. I like your name."

I stared at her for a long quiet moment. No one had called me Aiden in fourteen years. Not until Tenille and Charlie came back into my life. It was a part of me that I'd left behind all those years ago, and it felt strange for someone other than my family to utter it. I did have to admit, though, that it sounded good rolling off her tongue.

Before I had a chance to respond, Charlie's phone lit up with a few texts that came in one after the other, causing her to swear after she read them. "That fucking asshole!"

"Boy troubles?" Monroe asked, completely shifting gears from our conversation to give all her attention to Charlie. How women managed to do that was beyond me.

Charlie met her gaze and nodded. "It's our anniversary today, and he promised me he'd Facetime tonight, but my friend just sent me photos of him drunk at a party. And that's after he blew me off yesterday to hang with his friends instead."

"Oh honey, you need to let him know that he's going to have to up his game or else you're out of there."

"No," I said forcefully. "She needs to end it with him." The little shit needed to be wiped from her memory as far as I was concerned. He was lucky I didn't live in Melbourne.

Monroe gave me a look that even I could decipher as meaning *keep out of this*. Taking Charlie's arm, she pulled her close. "Okay,

he's going to call you tomorrow all apologetic. I recommend you be icy to him. Let him know he fucked up. Then he's going to try to make things right. The trick here is to accept his apology, but make it clear that there's no way you'll ever accept this again. You may need to stay icy for a little while, but then again, you don't want to drag that out too long, because then that just makes you bitchy. And no guy is going to put up with bitchy for very long. But girl, what you need to be prepared for is this—if he screws up again, you need to stick to your guns and ditch his ass." At Charlie's look of horror, Monroe raised her brows and added, "Life is too short to put up with shit from a man, honey. There are a lot of other guys out there who would kill to have you by their side. Don't settle for less than the best."

"Or," I said, "you could just tell him where to go now and save a lot of time and effort."

They both stared at me as if I was talking out of my ass and then turned back to each other and ignored what I said. When Bree hobbled around the car to join them, I said, "You wanna get off that ankle and rest it." She also ignored me and started talking boy shit with Monroe and Charlie.

I spent the next half hour checking in with King about club shit that was going down and waiting for Roach while doing my best to drown out the conversation taking place between the three girls. I tried to interrupt at one point to ask Monroe if anything was missing from her car, but she quickly shook her head and continued on with the boy talk.

I caught bits and pieces of what she told Charlie, and while I was on board with the ball-breaking advice she seemed to be giving, I wondered how the hell anyone survived dating her. She'd be hard fucking work with all her demands.



Tenille texted me early the next morning. Shit was going down at home with Craig, so she wouldn't make it to Sydney that afternoon. Charlie gave the impression she didn't care, but I saw the disappointment cross her face for a split second when she heard the news. My kid was a fucking pro at acting unaffected by family stuff, but I

could see her mask. In the few days she'd been with me, not much had changed between us, but because I knew she hid her real feelings, I tolerated the attitude she still flung at me. Mostly. Every now and then, I pushed back, and it was in those moments when she let me that I knew we'd eventually find each other.

Tenille had organised for Charlie to keep up with her schoolwork via email, and I made sure she was up and getting ready to do it before I left home each day. That morning had been a struggle because she wanted to sleep instead. We'd argued for a good half hour about it. Once I was convinced she'd stay up and get on to it, I left for the clubhouse. King was still hunting the Italian who supposedly had something to do with Jacko's murder, and he'd told me the day before that he wanted me, Devil, and Nitro with him when he paid a visit to Salvatore Ricci, one of Storm's enemies. Salvatore had been out of town for a few days and was scheduled to arrive home in a few hours. King's plan was to catch him when he least suspected it, and he figured that would be when Salvatore made a stop to visit his mistress on his way home.

I was surprised to hear Monroe's voice when I entered the clubhouse. Making my way inside, I found her talking with King who seemed mildly amused by something she said.

His eyes met mine and he grinned. Motioning towards me, he said, "Here he is. You can give him the cash yourself."

She spun around to face me. Closing the distance between us, she thrust an envelope at me. "Here's what I owe you for the car window."

I frowned as I glanced down at the envelope. "You don't owe me anything."

"Yeah, I do. Well, I owe your friend so you can give it to him."

I held the envelope out to her and jerked my chin at it. "He doesn't want your cash, sugar."

She held her hands up and shook her head. "I don't care. I don't take things for free, Aiden."

King's brows lifted and he hit me with a questioning look. "Aiden?" Looking back at Monroe, he added, "You two on a first name basis, *sugar*?"

She looked at him. "We're not on anything. And I really need to get to work." Taking the envelope off me, she forced it into King's hands. "Maybe you can sort this out for me." With that, she stalked

out of the clubhouse, leaving me staring after her and King watching me with interest.

"What?" I barked when I turned to him.

Nodding in the direction Monroe left, he said, "You tapping that, brother? 'Cause if you're not, I've gotta get me a piece."

"No, have at it," I barked again. This whole conversation pissed me the fuck off. "But be prepared because she's a fucking handful." As much as I tried to ignore it, the fucking thought of him going anywhere near Monroe irritated me.

His grin grew. "I'll leave her for you. Besides, I've got enough of a handful at home. I don't need any more women trying to break my fucking balls at the moment."

"Jen's still giving you hell?"

His mouth flattened. "When does that woman *not* give me hell? I've slept here for the last few nights so I could get some fucking peace."

I'd never understand their relationship. It wasn't like King to let anyone control him, and yet there he was changing his life because of her.

He passed me the envelope of cash. "The plan for today has changed. Salvatore's trip has been extended a day. I'm gonna take care of some other shit that's come up. I want you and Nitro to visit that guy Fox told you about. He's finally home. Do whatever the fuck it takes to get an address for Marx. I want a fucking face-to-face with the motherfucker."

Marx had been eluding us at every turn, and King was reaching crazy levels of fucked off about it. I nodded. "Will do." I didn't intend to leave that asshole until I had what King needed.

CHAPTER 15

Monroe

"You're not yourself. What's going on?" Tatum asked.

I drank some of my cosmo before turning to face her. "It's Hyde. That's what's going on." Just the thought of the man caused my stomach to swirl with butterflies. And not just the good type of butterflies. There were some seriously confused butterflies in there too.

We were sitting in the pub after work, the night after I spent time with Hyde at the skating rink. I'd seen him that morning to give him the money I owed him, and I hadn't been able to stop thinking about him all day.

"Are you seeing him?" She seemed just as confused as I did.

"No."

"So how's he affecting you? You're not making any sense, Roe. You're usually cool and calm over men, but you seem anything but calm tonight."

I exhaled a long breath. "I'm interested in him, but I don't want to be. He's a biker, and you know how I feel about bikers. And he can be infuriating sometimes with the way he tries to boss me around. I do not need a man in my life who is always trying to take charge of me."

Her lips pulled up slightly at the ends as if trying not to smile. "Wasn't it you who said you wanted a man with some balls to go

with his dick? Or something like that? I kinda think you do want someone to boss you around. Just a little bit. And as far as bikers go, don't judge Hyde based on that. Look at Nitro. You didn't like him to begin with, and now you're all about him."

"Well, there's a difference between a man who bosses me around a little and one who does it a lot. Hyde's argued with me over a few things now. Like last night, he was at the skating rink when Bree and I were there, and he walked us out. Someone had smashed one of the windows on my car, and he just took it upon himself to call a friend to come fix it. Without asking me!"

She laughed at that. "Oh, Roe, come on, admit it—deep down you like a man who can take charge. I think you're just fighting your attraction because he's a biker and you're scared that he's different to any guy you've ever dated."

"I don't need a man who will fuck me over, Tatum. I'm not saying Hyde would, but he told me he doesn't have much experience with dating, so I really don't think he's the kind of man interested in settling down and having kids. I don't have time to waste on a guy like that."

"Hang on, when did you discuss dating with him?"

"That night he showed up at my house. I told you about that. I was drunk and said lots of inappropriate things to him. I forget some of it, but I definitely remember discussing his love life with him."

She finished her drink and slid the glass across the bar before turning her body to me. "Okay, let's go over all this. You are way too anxious about it all. You've let dating become a task you need to do in order to achieve your mission. You need to take a step back, Roe, and breathe, and just have some fun. Take a chance on him if you're that interested in him. See where it goes. Maybe it'll just be some casual sex and fun before you move on to someone else who might end up being the man for you." She shrugged. "There's nothing wrong with having a little fun in your life."

I stared at her. "Umm, since when did Tatum Lee become all about fun?" I had to admit, though, that I loved this new side of her. It was good to see her happy.

Her gaze shifted to look at someone behind me, and her face lit up. Glancing back at me as she slid off her stool, she said, "Since this man." Nitro moved next to her, slid his arm around her waist and pulled her close so he could drop a kiss on her lips.

"Vegas," he murmured in greeting. Still a man of few words. She looked up at him. "I'm ready to go."

Frowning, I said, "We just got here. You need to stay for at least one more drink with me."

Smiling at me, she shook her head. "No, you've got other things to do. I'll call you tomorrow to check in."

It wasn't until Nitro stepped to the side that I realised what she meant. Hyde stood behind him. His eyes met mine when Nitro moved, darkening as he took me in. Being watched by Hyde was one of the most unnerving things ever. I wasn't sure if I wanted to hide from him or bare my soul.

I tore my attention from Hyde and gave it back to Tatum when she said, "I'll call you tomorrow."

Hyde's presence had pretty much wiped all coherent thought from my mind, so I simply nodded and murmured, "Okay."

As she and Nitro walked away from us, Hyde moved closer. His scent almost hypnotised me, if that were even possible. Looking down at me, he said, "What are you drinking?" The husky tone of his voice was like the final nail in my coffin. He could lead me down the path to sin with that voice.

"A cosmo please."

He turned to the waiting bartender and ordered drinks before shifting his gaze back to me. His body was so damn close it almost pressed against mine. His eyes dropped to my chest. "You weren't made to be subtle, were you, sugar?"

"Can't say that word's in my vocabulary, no." The way he devoured my body told me I'd made the best decision when I'd bought the black dress I wore tonight. Knee-length with a plunging neckline and accentuated with a belt around my waist, it clung to every curve I had. My girls were up and proudly out, just the way I liked them. I mean, if you had it, flaunt it, right? And I'd had the red in my hair touched up that afternoon. It hung in lazy vivid-red curls to just below my breasts. I wasn't sure which part of me he thought wasn't subtle, but I guessed it had something to do with my dress by the way he seemed unable to draw his gaze from my body.

Finally he found his way back up to my face. The heat flashing in his eyes shot a round of lust through my veins. Good God, this man, though. I wondered if he had any idea of the storm he caused within

me. "Don't ever add it." If what he said didn't make my legs sway a little, the forceful, gravelly way he said it did.

The bartender placed our drinks on the counter, distracting us from each other. Hyde dropped some cash on the bar, took a mouthful of his whisky and looked back at me while I got down as much of my drink as I could in one mouthful. I needed it. I could stand my ground with any man, but Hyde had a way of catching me off guard.

"You calm down after that thing about owing me money this morning?" And there he went, flipping my feelings about him on their head.

I fixed him with a look that let him know I wasn't impressed. "I didn't have anything to calm down from."

"You seemed all worked up about it."

I drank some more of my cocktail. "I wasn't." But I was getting there now, that was for sure.

He drank some more whisky, keeping his eyes steady on mine. "Okay."

Okay? Oh no he didn't. He didn't get to end a conversation with that bullshit. "Okay? Seriously, you're going to end with that?"

"It seemed pointless to argue."

I finished my drink and placed the empty glass down with some force. Sliding off my stool, I said, "We weren't arguing. I was simply telling you like it was."

"Yeah, I've picked that up about you."

My eyes practically popped out of their sockets. "Picked up what about me?"

"That you like to tell men *like it is*."

"I do not! You just have this way of pushing my buttons. I feel like it's you, not me."

His lips twitched. "Sugar, if I knew which buttons I was pushing, I'd push them some more. I never said I didn't like the way you told me how it was."

I snatched my bag off the bar. I needed a moment to get my thoughts under control. In the space of seconds, I'd switched from wanting him to wanting to smack him to wanting him again. My mind needed a break from the whiplash. I took a step away from the bar and said, "I'll have another cosmo."

Without waiting for his response, I headed in the direction of the ladies' room. I'd almost made it there when a hand slid around my

waist, and I was pushed up against the wall in the dark hallway. A hard body pressed against mine as the hand around my waist slid down to settle on my ass and warm breath whispered across my cheek. "My cock likes that attitude of yours. Surprised the fuck outta me, but I can't deny I want more of it."

The proof of his statement ground against me, sparking need all over me. Every inch of my skin blazed with desire. I gripped his shirt with both hands and found his eyes. "You and I weren't made for each other, Hyde."

"I'm not saying we were."

My body went to war with my mind. It fought me kicking and screaming, desperate for what was on offer, but I didn't want to surrender. "So what's the point of starting something?"

He pushed his cock harder against me. "I came here against better judgement tonight. Nitro told me you'd be here and I came because I couldn't, for the fucking life of me, get you out of my head. I want my hands on those curves of yours and my dick as far inside you as you can take it."

I'd never dated a guy or even been with one who spoke as filthy to me as Hyde did, but everything he'd just said did it for me. Especially the bit about my curves. Hell, at this point he could probably start bossing me around, and I'd do whatever he said.

I gripped his shirt harder, pulling it, and him, even closer. "Does that dirty talk always work for you?"

The determined glint in his eyes caused another explosion of need in me. "Can't say I've ever used it before, sugar. Never wanted to fuck a woman who argued with me like you do."

"Fuck," I muttered. I wanted to say yes, so badly, but something held me back. Something I couldn't quite put my finger on.

He bent his head so he could trail kisses along my collarbone. My skin sizzled with heat where his lips touched it. I struggled with the urge to curl my fingers in his hair and hold his head in place. When he was done, he lifted his face and rasped, "Give me one night. I'll show you what you're missing with those vibrators."

I could do one night. Truth be told, I could do with one night of real cock. It had been a long time between drinks. But first I needed to know if he could kiss. There was no point going home with a man who didn't know his way around a set of lips.

I let go of his shirt and reached for the back of his neck. Pulling his face down to mine, my mouth found his. I moaned as his tongue slid inside and he took charge. I knew instantly that Hyde knew his way around a kiss. I also knew that he was going to rock my world. Every part of me fell under his spell as he consumed me. There was no turning back from this.

By the time we were done with the kiss, he'd run his hands over my ass and then up my body to my breasts before finally taking hold of my face. He came up for air and growled, "I hope to fucking God that's a yes."

I smiled. "That's a yes, tiger. Now get me the hell out of here and show me what you can do with that cock of yours."

CHAPTER 16

Hyde

My dick was hard as fuck by the time I got Monroe back to her place. Half of it was due to her efforts at fighting me over this. I was conflicted. I wanted to slam her onto her back and fuck the hell out of her, but there was just something about the way she attempted to run the show that turned me on. I decided to let her think she had a say in it for a little while longer.

As soon as we made it through her front door, she'd grabbed my hand and led me to her bedroom. I'd briefly taken in the colour explosion of artwork, pillows, and other shit in there before she distracted me with a hand to my dick.

Biting her bottom lip, she smiled seductively at me and said, "I'm not ashamed to admit I've been imagining this cock since that night you rescued me from my front yard."

I undid the belt from around her waist. "What kinds of things have you been imagining, sugar?"

Her hips drew my eyes. I couldn't fucking drag my gaze from them. Monroe had an hourglass figure—the kind that gave a man something to hold onto while he pounded into her.

She flicked the button on my jeans and slid the zip down. Reaching into my pants, she wrapped her hand around my dick. With her eyes firmly on mine, she slowly stroked it, her movements very de-

liberate. "I've been thinking about how it would feel in my hand. How it would taste if I ran my tongue along it, licking the tip and sucking it slowly, my tongue making circles around the tip. Over and fucking over. And I thought about how much I want to take this cock into my mouth and deepthroat you." She brought her face close to mine so she could whisper in my ear, "The thought of your dick hitting my throat gets me so fucking wet."

I groaned, not sure how much longer I would last if she kept this sexy shit up. She had a dirty fucking mouth on her. I made a mental note to make sure I gave her that opportunity one day. She could suck my dick to the back of her throat any fucking time she wanted.

Grabbing a handful of her hair, I pulled her head back so I could dip my mouth to her neck. She moaned, and I growled, "You like a little rough play?"

She kept stroking my dick. "I'm all about the rough play, tiger. I'm hoping you can bring it."

I pulled her hair harder as I nudged her legs apart with my knee. With one hand holding her hair, I reached my other hand to the bottom of her dress. That fucking dress should be made illegal. It hugged every curve of hers and was a fucking hazard to my health.

Her dress was too fitted for what I wanted, so I let go of her hair and gripped the bottom of the dress with both hands. A moment later, I had it off her, and she stood almost naked in front of me.

Dropping my gaze to her tits, I said, "Fuck, red, I don't even know where to start." Cupping her tits, I bent my face to them and sucked a nipple into my mouth. Jesus, I loved tits that were more than a handful, and Monroe had that. Her tits were a gift from fucking God as far as I was concerned. I could dedicate a whole session to them.

"Not sure if you're aware, but you have a way of making a man want to do the filthiest fucking things to you."

A sexy smile spread lazily across her face. "What filthy things are we talking? I'm all for filthy."

I ran my hands down her back and took hold of her ass. Another gift from the big guy. "The kinds of things that will make it hard for you to walk tomorrow."

"Oh God, you're trying to kill me, aren't you?"

"Just trying to fuck you, sugar."

Her lips parted mine and her tongue slid in. She kissed me like I imagined she would fuck me—thoroughly and deeply—while her hand remained around my dick, stroking me, getting me closer to my release.

When she finished kissing me, I said, “Take off your bra and panties.”

“You don’t want to?”

“No, I want to watch you do it.”

She let my dick go and slid her hands down her body until she reached her panties. Slowly hooking her fingers over them, she slipped them off, all the while keeping her eyes firmly on mine.

Fuck, she gave me a show. I took hold of my dick and jerked off while watching her remove her bra in the same way. It was hot as hell. But not half as hot as when she reached her hand down to her pussy and ran a finger in circles over her clit.

She turned me on so damn much that I knew I couldn’t last much longer. I fucking wanted to drag this out all night long. Wanted to command her to fuck herself with her fingers while I watched. Hell, I wanted to ask her for a fucking lap dance, but a man had to be realistic. My dick was hard as steel for her. I fucking needed to be inside that sweet cunt of hers as soon as possible.

As I watched her finger herself, I rasped, “You’ve got two minutes left, sugar, and then I’m getting in that pussy of yours.”

I removed my clothes while I continued to watch her. I then located a condom and slid it on. When I was ready for her, I ordered, “I want you on your hands and knees on the bed, ass in the air.”

She shook her head at me, her fingers still working that pussy. “No, you’re not fucking me in the ass. That shit’s reserved for men who stick around.”

“Wasn’t planning on it. I just want your ass in my view while I fuck you.”

“Well, I was thinking—”

Jesus, this was not the time for her to argue with me. I snaked my hand around her waist and pulled her body to mine. “When I tell you how I want to fuck you, you don’t argue with me,” I growled.

Her eyes flashed with heat. Gripping my arms, she said forcefully, “I want to watch your face while you do it.”

I jerked my head at the bed. “Get on your back.”

Her lips curled up in a smile, and she did what I said.

I positioned myself on top of her. I then ran my finger along her pussy to see how ready she was for me. She was wet as fuck.

Holding her gaze, I growled, "Stop thinking and start fucking, sugar."

Not giving her a moment to argue with me, I thrust inside of her. Sweet fucking Jesus, her cunt wrapped around my dick like it was made for it. When her arms and legs gripped me, and a long, satisfied moan tore from her mouth, I pulled out and slammed into her again.

"Fuck, I like your kind of filthy," she said in a hot-as-hell tone. "Don't stop now."

"Wasn't planning on it."

"Thank God."

I got serious then. If she was down with me fucking her the way I wanted to, I'd take her up on that. I pounded into her over and over, not giving either of us a second to catch our breath. Our fucking turned into a violent, demanding need we both had.

I grunted through her nails digging into my skin and scratching lines down my back.

She pushed me to give it to her harder.

Every minute of being with her drove me towards a climax like I'd never achieved. When I finally came—and fuck knew how I managed to last as long as I did—I thrust into her with so much force her head almost rammed into the headboard.

I roared out my release as she gripped me tighter, nails piercing my skin, and screamed out her own.

"Fuck, you weren't kidding when you said you liked my kind of filthy, were you?" I said after I rolled off her.

She made one of her sexy noises and curled against my body, her arm over my chest, leg over mine. "No, I wasn't. I like being fucked exactly the way you did it."

I stretched an arm over her shoulder. Usually, I had no desire to hang around and talk after I fucked a woman. But with Monroe, I couldn't get enough of her. "I'll bring my filthy anytime you want it."

Another sexy moan fell from her lips as she stretched her body in one of the most arousing moves I'd ever seen. She ended up half on top of me with her leg hooked around mine, tits pressed against my chest, and her hand curved around my neck. Those full lips of hers

captured mine in a long kiss before she said, "I think you should bring it right now. And when I say bring it, I mean give me every-fucking-thing."

I reached for her leg and gripped her thigh. Pulling it, I slid it up my body, spreading her wide to give me access to her cunt. My finger was on her clit a moment later, and I ran lazy circles over it. My eyes remained firmly on her face. I wanted to watch as she took the pleasure I gave. She didn't disappoint. As I built her bliss, her eyes fluttered closed and she bit her lip while giving me more of those sexy-as-fuck sounds that got me off.

"Fuck, Monroe, any man ever told how fucking hot your mouth is? You keep making those sounds and I'll blow before I get back inside you."

She opened her eyes as a smile spread across her face. "Slow down, tiger. We've gotta get you hard again."

I slapped her ass. "I need to get rid of this condom first. But I'm telling you now that my dick will be hard before you can get on your knees and lick my balls."

She moved off me so I could leave the bed. I made my way into the bathroom and disposed of the condom. She met me in the doorway as I turned to leave.

Hand to my chest, she said, "I think we should move this into the shower." At the arch of my brow, she added, "I have a thing for clean sex. Don't get me wrong, I fucking love sex anyway I can get it, but there's just something about a man who smells amazing. It gets me off like you wouldn't believe."

I cupped one of her tits and tweaked the nipple. "If water and soap get you off more than I did in that bed, I'm all for the fucking shower."

She grinned and moved past me towards the shower. I trailed my gaze down her body, lingering on her ass. Monroe's curves were to fucking die for, and that ass was something else.

She snapped me out of my trance. "You gonna stand there staring at my ass all night?"

I closed the distance between us with two determined strides. "You keep it up, and that sass will get you fucked harder than you can take," I growled, forcing her into the shower.

She dragged her bottom lip between her teeth. "I'm really fucking hoping so."

My gaze caught on the colourful assortment of sex toys she had in her shower. "Fuck, red, you weren't kidding about the vibrators, were you?" There were at least seven different vibrators, dildos, and bullets in her shower. On top of that, she had a handle and footrest set-up. The only thing I was surprised not to see was a dildo suctioned to the wall.

"I don't kid about sex. I'm dedicated to it in ways you can't even imagine."

"I don't want to imagine. I want first-hand fucking experience. Get your ass over to that wall and your foot up on that rest." I needed those legs of hers spread and my fingers in that pussy.

She did as I said while I grabbed the soap. My dick hardened at the sight of her gripping the handle, leg up, ready for me. Jesus, it would be fucking hard to walk away from her when we were done. If I didn't have to get home to Charlie, I'd spend the night between Monroe's thighs.

"Cleaning myself off you is a fucking shame, sugar," I said as I soaped up her pussy.

Her back arched as I ran my hand through her folds. "Yeah, but you'll be back there soon."

I cleaned every inch of her, taking my sweet time with her tits, ass, and pussy. When I was done, she turned and took the soap from me. A few moments later, she'd lathered my chest and had shifted her attention to my cock.

Wrapping one hand around it, she kissed me before saying, "I want to suck you off, but I also want you to come inside me again. It's a real fucking dilemma, because I'm not sure if you've got two more in you tonight."

A phone rang in another room, breaking into our conversation. "You need to get that?" she asked.

"It's not mine."

She frowned. "Well, it's definitely not mine."

The ring tone was the Sesame Street theme song, and it sure as shit wasn't coming from my phone. If it wasn't hers either, we had a problem. I placed a finger to her mouth, indicating she should be quiet. "Wait here. I'll go take care of this."

She nodded, and I stepped out of the shower, wrapping a towel around my waist as I moved silently towards the ringing phone. I would fucking cut the balls off whoever had broken into her house.

However, as soon as I entered her bedroom where the sound was coming from, I realised we didn't have an intruder. It was my fucking phone ringing.

I snatched it up off the floor where I'd dropped it in my jeans. Charlie's face grinned at me from the phone. "You changed the ring tone on my phone?" I muttered, answering the call.

"Yeah, you like?"

What I did like was the smile I heard in her voice. That, I would have paid good money for. "What's up? You okay?" She'd told me she would be all right at home on her own, but my fatherly instinct had kicked into high gear. I shouldn't have fucking left her.

"Settle down, I'm good. No need to stress. I'm calling because Mum arrived about an hour ago and she's wondering what time you're coming home." Her voice dropped as she added, "I think she wants us to have a family dinner or some shit, but I'm good if you're staying out all night."

I held the phone away from my ear for a moment to look at the time. Just after nine. "I'll be there in about half an hour."

"Oh, okay." She sounded surprised. "I'll tell her."

We ended the call and I bent to reach for my jeans.

"It was yours after all?" Monroe said from behind.

I turned to find her standing naked in front of me. Fuck. My dick ached to fuck her, but the desire to get home to Charlie—to not let her down—won out. "Sorry, sugar, I've gotta get home to my kid."

A smile flickered across her face and she came to me. Her hands looped around my neck and she kissed me. It was long. Deep. And fuck if it didn't stir more need in my gut. "I like that about you."

When she dropped her arms and took a step back, I let my towel go and put my jeans on. "Yeah, well kids come first."

Her eyes dropped to my dick. "They do, but there's something to be said for a man who walks away from sex with a hard-on he'll have to take care of himself, for his child. Unfortunately I've met many who wouldn't."

I grabbed my shirt and the towel off the floor. After passing her the towel, I put my shirt on and then snaked my arm around her waist. Dropping a kiss to her lips, I said, "This needs to be continued."

"No, this was only one night, tiger."

My lips brushed her ear as I rasped, "Your pussy is, right now, begging you to fuck me again. I'm gonna give her what she wants."

"My pussy doesn't need you worrying about her. She can find cock elsewhere."

I tightened my hold on her, pulling her body hard against mine. "You can fight me on a lot of shit, Monroe, but not this. This is the one fight I win. I'll be calling you and you'll be answering that call. And we are going to get clean as fuck in that shower of yours and then I'm going to fuck you harder and longer than you've ever been fucked in your life."

Our eyes met when I let her go. Hers were wide. She didn't argue with me, didn't say another word. She simply watched me collect my keys off the bedside table and exit the room.

Monroe might have thought we weren't made for each other, and hell we probably weren't. But we were sure as shit made to fuck each other.

CHAPTER 17

Hyde

I scrubbed my face and stared at Tenille as she slammed cupboards and drawers in my kitchen. She was pissed off with me, but I had no fucking idea why. And she'd hardly said a word to me since I'd arrived home, so there were no clues there.

"Tee, what the fuck's going on?" I finally asked. Charlotte had hightailed it out of the kitchen five minutes ago after an argument with her mother, so I was making it my mission to figure this out.

She slammed the container she held down and met my gaze. "You came to me! *You!* It wasn't my choice for us to come back into each other's lives."

My temper spiked. I fucking hated the way she fought with me when I didn't know shit about why she was angry. She'd done it when we were together, and it seemed old habits died hard. I took a deep breath. "You're not making any sense. How about you back the fuck up and start from the beginning here. Why are you so pissed at me? I mean, I came home twenty minutes ago and we've hardly said a word to each other. How the fuck have I managed to get you so worked up in that time?"

Her eyes widened. "You never did understand women, Aiden, and it appears you still don't." She rested her hands on the counter as she glared at me. "How do you think it makes me feel when the

man I loved for so long—the man who I just found out didn't really die years ago, who just showed back up in my life, telling me he wants to be there for me now—comes home the first night I'm in his new home, having just been with another woman? You think that makes me feel good?"

Fuck.

I raked my fingers through my hair, unsure of the best way forward here. Moving around the counter, I reached for her, but she slapped my hand away, so I stopped and said. "Tee, I didn't know you were coming here tonight. Last I heard, you were dealing with shit in Melbourne with Craig."

She blinked a few times, and I wondered if she was about to cry. She didn't, though. "I left him," she blurted out.

I was surprised, but relieved. As far as I was concerned, Craig wasn't good enough for her. He didn't love her the way she should be loved. "What happened?"

She dropped her gaze and fussed with the food she had on the counter. She'd bought a roast chicken and had filled plates with meat and salad for dinner. "He's been coming home drunk for months, and he's always fighting lately. I've had enough."

"Fighting?"

"Yeah. I don't know where or with who, but he comes home beaten and bloody some nights. Others, he turns up with ripped and blood-soaked shirts."

Sully had told me about the drinking, but I didn't know about the fighting. "What did he say about all that?"

She stared at me silently for a long while before admitting, "He told me not to ask questions about things that didn't concern me. About things I didn't really want to know." Her voice cracked. "And when I pushed him on it, he hit me and told me it was all my fault."

I clenched my fists. I wanted to knock him the fuck out. I wanted to make him bleed myself. Putting my hand out, I demanded, "Give me your phone."

Her forehead crinkled. "Why?"

My body tensed the longer this took. "Tenille, give me your phone. I want a word with that motherfucker."

"No. He's never hit me before. This was just a one-off thing. You don't need to get involved."

I drew in a long breath and let it out slowly, willing myself to get my shit under control. I wasn't the same man Tenille had married anymore. She wasn't acquainted with my violent side, and I didn't want her to get fucking acquainted with it.

Needing a moment, and a whole lot of the one thing that had a shot at calming me, I stalked to the cupboard where I kept my whisky. Grabbing it out, I poured a mouthful into a glass and downed it. Not even close to enough, I poured another mouthful and knocked it back too.

Moving to where she stood, I said, "Where's your phone? I'm not going to ask again."

She responded to my forceful tone and pulled her phone from her back pocket. "What are you going to say to him?"

I took the phone. "What's your password?"

"I asked you a question."

Another deep breath. "Your password, Tenille?"

She rattled off four digits, which I keyed into her phone. I then scrolled through her contact list to find Craig's number, all the while, ignoring her tirade about what an asshole I could be.

Craig answered on the fourth ring. "Where the fuck are you, Tenille?"

I saw red.

"This isn't Tenille." If a voice could commit murder, Craig would be dead.

"What do *you* want?" he spat back.

I squeezed the phone. "I want you to know that *I* know what you did. And I want you to also know that in my world, a man doesn't hit his wife and get away with it."

"So, what? I should watch my back or some shit? You're gonna come get me?"

"I don't come *get* people, Craig, but I do take care of them," I said far more quietly than I was feeling. A hurricane of violent thoughts raged inside me. In my mind, I'd already hurt him a million different ways. Some of them, the kinds of ways a person didn't survive.

Silence for a beat. And then—"Put my wife on the fucking phone, asshole."

"If memory serves me correctly, I never divorced Tenille. And I sure as fuck didn't die. Which makes her still *my* wife."

Silence again. "Fuck you!"

The phone went dead, and my eyes met Tenille's. Confusion lay there. "Oh God." Her hand flew to her mouth. "This is a fucking mess, Aiden."

I nodded. "Yeah. But if you want to leave Craig, there's your answer."

"That's not an answer! It doesn't matter if we aren't technically married, we were together for a long time, and we have a lot of shit to work out."

Why did women have to make everything so damn hard? In my mind, it was a no-brainer. She wasn't happy. She wanted to leave Craig. They were never legally married. Fuck up solved.

"So what's the plan now?"

She stared at me with a broken expression. "I don't know."

"Stay here for a bit. Figure shit out." I refrained from telling her to never go back to Craig, but God help him if she did. I'd never take my eyes off him again.

"Yeah, maybe." She seemed anything but certain, but this was still fresh. Tomorrow things might be a little clearer.

"And Tee?" At her questioning look, I softened my voice a little and said, "I'm sorry about coming home like that."

She nodded. "I shouldn't have lost it with you."

It killed me that she had to navigate this new relationship with me. That I'd brought this on us. But there was no way back, only forward.

Changing the subject, I said, "Have you and Charlie figured stuff out?"

"Yeah, we had a good talk. But if I'm gonna be staying here for a bit, you need to be prepared for lots of arguments between us."

I could only imagine. Charlie had inherited her parents' temper. "I'll deal."

"Mum!" Charlie called out.

"What?"

"Come here."

"No, you come here if you want me."

She went quiet for a moment before yelling, "God, why do you have to be such a pain?" She stomped out to the kitchen, glaring at her mother. "I need to know which lipstick looks better on me." She held up two options.

Jesus, all that for lipstick.

Tenille pointed at one of the lipsticks. "That one. Why?"

"I'm Facetiming with Jamie tonight. I need to look my best."

I scowled. "I thought that little shit was in the doghouse."

She gave me an unimpressed look. "We moved past that."

"What happened to leaving him out in the cold for a while like Monroe said?"

Tenille's eyes hit mine. "Monroe?"

"She's cool, Mum."

Tenille's brows arched and her body snapped straight. Something was going on here, but again, I had no fucking idea. "Who is she?"

Charlie frowned at Tenille's sharp tone. "She was at skating last night with her friend's daughter."

"So she's not your woman?" Her icy gaze penetrated mine. Fuck, she ran hot and cold.

Before I could answer, Charlie said, "They're not together. They hardly know each other."

Monroe wasn't my woman, but Tenille didn't need to know anything further about our relationship. The last fucking thing I needed right now was to revisit the fact I'd come home straight from fucking another woman. That conversation hadn't gone so well the first time; I could guess where it would lead if mentioned again. A man didn't need to issue any invitations to break the peace in his own home.

CHAPTER 18

Monroe

“You’re walking like you’ve been thoroughly fucked. Is there something you’re not telling me?” Tatum said on Friday night. We’d skipped drinks at the pub after work because Nitro had asked her to lay low due to some club stuff going on. She’d arrived at my place about an hour and a half ago carrying a bottle of Jäger and cans of Red Bull. Jäger wasn’t her favourite drink, but she’d recently started doing Jägerbombs with me because I loved them so much.

I made us another round of drinks. I’d lost count, but it was probably our sixth round. Passing her glass, I said, “That’s because I *have* been thoroughly fucked this week. And can I just say, I’m pretty fucking sure it was the best sex I’ve ever had.”

She looked at me over the rim of her glass. “Fuck me, you slept with Hyde?”

I sagged against the kitchen counter where we sat. The thought of sex with him made me swoon. I’d hardly thought about anything else over the last two days. “I did.”

“And?”

The breath whooshed out of me as images of fucking him ran through my mind like a video—a video I’d been watching like a crack addict since Wednesday night. “Sister, the man knows what the hell he’s doing.”

She laughed and drank some of her Jäger. "Are you going to go back for more?"

"I don't know. He tried to boss me into saying yes to more, but I'm not sure I want to go down that road."

"Why not? If it was that good, I'm surprised you haven't already called him. You don't usually say no to good sex. Plus, you told me you're sick of one-night stands."

"I want more than casual sex with a guy, Tatum, and I think that's all Hyde is offering. Honestly, why would I put myself in the situation where I get attached to him when he's not interested in getting attached to me?"

She rested her elbows on the counter. "Do you like him enough to want something more?"

It was a question I'd been going over and over in my mind. One I wasn't sure I wanted to answer. But this was Tatum and I told her everything. "I feel like I have a love-hate relationship with him. He's too damn bossy for me most of the time, but then he will say or do something that impresses the hell out of me. He seems like a good dad, and I think that says a lot about a person." I sighed. "Yeah, I like him. But it doesn't mean much if there's no hope of anything happening with him, you know?"

"I understand what you're saying. But you know what? Sometimes we don't know what we want until it's given to us. You're pretty hard not to love, Roe. Hyde might just change his mind once he gets to know you."

A loud knock sounded from the front door, followed by, "Roe! Let me in, I've got shit I neeeeed to discuss!"

It was Savannah. I'd never seen her so excited when I let her in. She practically bounced on the spot.

"I just met the father of my babies!" She exclaimed. I was almost sure she was about to pee her pants from the happiness radiating off her.

I followed her into the kitchen where Tatum and I were set up with drinks and nibblies at the kitchen bar. "Who? And where? You want a drink?"

She madly nodded and motioned with her hand for a drink. "Yes, I need all the drinks to celebrate." Sliding onto one of the spare stools, she continued, "We met on the train coming home from work. I practically poked his eye out with my umbrella. I said sorry and

just about fainted when I realised how good-looking he is. He's a fucking suit! I've been fantasizing about him ripping his tie off and tying me up with it ever since I had to say goodbye to him."

I handed her a drink. "So, what, you guys spent the ride home talking? He asked for your number? You've got a dinner date this weekend? I need to know everything." I was heavily invested in this story already. Any love story was worthy of my attention. Because, love... who the fuck didn't *love* love?

"Yes, yes, yes! To all of that!" My sister was a die-hard romantic like me. "I'm gonna need your help picking a dress to wear. And will you do my make-up? Say yes or otherwise I might just stab you at this point."

I laughed. She seemed so worked up about needing my help. "I'll do it, babe. We can go shopping for a new dress tomorrow morning if you want. I haven't got any plans for the weekend yet."

She collapsed against me with relief, hugging me. "Yes! That sounds perfect."

"What's his name?" Tatum asked.

Savannah's face lit up again. "It's the absolute perfect name ever. Theo."

Tatum's lips curled at the ends, and I knew she was trying not to laugh at Savannah. She loved her, but she also wasn't all about the dramatics that my sister was well known for. The extent of Tatum's ability to handle drama and over-the-top behaviour was with me. And I was sure that was only because she loved me so much.

"I love it," I said.

Tatum finished her drink and shoved the empty glass across the counter at me. "Yeah, it's a cool name," she agreed. Although she wasn't a fan of Savannah's excessive excitement, she always threw her support Savannah's way.

Savannah's smile could have lit my house. "It really is."

My phone vibrated on the counter. Checking it, I found my mother calling. "Put the kettle on. I'm about five minutes away."

"Huh?" I wasn't aware she was coming over, but the way she said it was like I should be expecting her.

"To hear about Savannah's new man! She rang me and told me to come over."

I slid off my stool and made my way to the kettle. Flicking it on, I said, "You should have gotten Dad to drive you so you could have a

drink with us. Tatum's here, too."

"He's driving. Pour me a drink instead."

I grinned. I loved having my family around me. "Done." I ended the call and announced to the girls, "Mum's on her way. It's time to get serious here. We've got a lot of celebrating to do. Tatum's found the perfect cake for her wedding. And her man's on total board with it. Sav's found herself a suit. And I've had the best sex of my life."

"I promise we'll get to the cake, Tatum, but Roe, you need to spill about this sex."

"It was with a biker," Tatum said with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

"No!" Savannah said, shocked. "I thought you were all about the steady, stable guys."

She was right. I'd been so vocal over the years about always steering clear of bad boys. The longest relationship I'd had was with the kind of guy you didn't bring home to your parents. It had ended badly with him cheating on me and lying to me about almost everything. It took me a long time to recover my self-esteem after that. And I'd put on a lot of weight in the process. I'd sworn I'd never date a guy like him again.

"Sav, if you saw this guy, you'd know why I slept with him. It was just sex. It's not like I'm dating him."

Tatum made a weird noise and raised her brows. "Don't believe her, Sav. I predict she's going to be all over this guy soon."

"We're here!" Mum announced from the front door. She had a key to my place and let herself in.

Dad followed her into the kitchen. "You girls had dinner yet?"

I shook my head. "No, we've just been eating cheese and dips. You hungry?"

"How about I go and grab some pizzas?"

"Sounds good to me," I said. "But before you go, I need the light changed in the hallway. It's too high for me. Can you do it?"

"It can't wait?"

"It's so dark without the light. I'm concerned Mum might trip. Her eyesight is so bad these days."

"Yeah, okay, good idea. I'll grab your ladder from the garage."

"I'll be fine," Mum said. She hated any fuss about her eyesight or anything to do with her getting older. My mother liked to pretend

she was still forty. I couldn't blame her; I figured I'd take after her in that respect.

"It'll take me five minutes," Dad said as he turned to head into the garage. I loved the way my dad adored my mother. He'd do anything for her.

"Okay," Mum said, clapping her hands together while looking at Savannah, "tell me everything."

We spent the next twenty minutes going over Savannah's man, Tatum's cake, and my sex. Dad left during the middle of our conversation. And then Mum shared some news with us.

"Your father and I are going to buy a caravan and travel around Australia. It probably won't be happening for another six months, but we're getting organised for it now."

My eyes widened with happiness. "That's awesome!" They'd been talking about seeing more of Australia, and I'd been encouraging the idea. I was a huge fan of parents spending their kids' inheritance—I wanted my parents to enjoy their retirement.

"Best news!" Savannah said. "Make us some more drinks, Roe. This definitely calls for cheers." She left us to put some music on, and a few moments later my home came alive with beats and laughter.

It was about ten minutes later that my phone rang. I didn't recognise the number. Usually when someone called who I didn't know, I let it go to voicemail, but the alcohol buzzing in my system caused me to be a little playful. "I'm only interested if you're tall, hot and know how to use what God blessed you with."

Silence for a beat. And then a deep voice rumbled down the line. "And let me guess, if I like meat, that's a bonus."

Hyde.

I threw the last of my drink down my throat. "Always a bonus, tiger." I squeezed my legs together. This was the call he'd promised me, and I still hadn't decided what I was going to do. I needed to fob him off to give myself some more time. But damn if just the sound of his voice wasn't sending my core into a state of need.

"How about you open your front door and let me in?"

Fuck.

He was here.

Fark.

"I'm kinda in the middle of family stuff." Jesus, worst excuse ever. But fuck, I could hardly think straight.

"I can hear. Sounds like a party. Open the door, Monroe. I'll make it worth your while."

Oh. Good. Fucking. God.

Hyde making promises like that was dangerous. And that bossy tone of his that usually pissed me off? It wasn't pissing me off this time.

"Who is it?" Tatum asked, but she knew. She could tell from my reaction who it was.

I moved the phone away from my mouth a little so I could answer her. "Hyde."

Mum's eyes sparkled. "Hot-sex Hyde?"

Fuck me.

Shoot me now.

He had to come over when my family was here.

"Yeah, Mum, hot-sex Hyde."

"Monroe." Hyde's voice sounded from the phone. He didn't say anything but my name, and yet I knew from his forceful tone the words he wasn't saying. He was bossing me without even fucking bossing me.

"Can you come back later? Or tomorrow?" I knew what his answer would be, so I was just wasting my breath.

"No."

I tried to ignore the look of pure expectation and excitement flashing in my mother's eyes. "Fine," I muttered and stabbed at my phone to end the call. Jabbing my finger at Mum, I ordered, "Stay here."

She grinned, and I knew I had zero chance of holding her back. Groaning, I headed to the front door.

I opened it to find Hyde gripping the top of the doorjamb with both hands, staring down at me with the kind of look that could only be described as carnal. Before I could gather my wits, he dropped his arms, scooped me around the waist and pulled me outside. After he had yanked the door closed, he forced me up against the brick wall and ground himself against me.

"Been thinking about you, sugar," he rasped against my ear. "We need to make a plan to get you back in that shower of yours."

My breathing sped up and butterflies took over my stomach. I placed my hand against his chest in a half-hearted attempt to push him away. That attempt failed. Mostly because I really didn't want him anywhere but up against me. "Fair warning, my mother's inside and she will probably open this door any minute."

His heated gaze met mine. "Noted." He settled his hand on my ass. "What time will this party of yours finish?"

"I don't know." I wanted to run inside and kick everyone out right now.

We stood in silence for a few moments, eyes searching each other's. It was like he was trying to work something out in his mind. Finally, he bent and claimed my lips in a kiss that revealed his desire for me. It was raw. Rough. Demanding. He was letting me know he wouldn't be taking no for an answer.

Before he'd finished with me, my mother opened my front door and said, "Oh. My."

I tried to end the kiss, but Hyde made a growly noise and pressed himself harder against me, his fingers digging into my ass as he held me in place. When he finally came up for air, he set me straight. "When I'm kissing you, you don't get to end it."

A sigh sounded from my mother. I barely heard it, though. Hyde commanded every ounce of my attention. I was fucking putty in his hands.

He let me go and turned to face Mum. "Jesus, there's no mistaking you're Monroe's mother." His tone made it clear he said this in the best way, and I guessed by the way my mother responded that he was looking at her with an appreciative gaze.

She flashed him a huge smile, her eyes dropping to take in his impressive body. "So, you're hot-sex Hyde."

He glanced at me with an amused smirk. "Hot-sex Hyde?"

I returned his smirk. "Come on, you've gotta admit it was pretty hot."

My mother inserted herself smack bang in the middle of the conversation. "From everything I heard, it was hot as hell."

Hyde dropped his head for a beat before looking back up at me with a slight shake of his head. I loved the smile on his face. "Can't say I've ever come across a woman who shares everything with her mother."

I threw caution to the wind. Hell, what woman wouldn't when a man like Hyde was watching them with that smile? "Welcome to the family. You wanna come in and meet my sister, too? She also knows how good you are in bed."

My mother's excitement spiked. "Yes, come in. Sav will love you."

He kept his gaze on me. "I take it Sav's your sister?"

"Yes, Savannah." I nodded at Mum. "And Mum is Angela."

Taking a step away from me, he gestured towards Mum. "Lead the way."

This thing with Hyde was taking a new turn. I'd expected him to take Mum's invitation as his cue to leave. I hadn't thought he'd want to stick around and get cosy with my family. And yet, there he was—following my mother inside my house as if it was the only place he wanted to be.

CHAPTER 19

Monroe

I had to give Hyde full points. He was handling my mother and sister like a pro. They'd grilled him for the past hour on everything from his thoughts on shower sex to his family, to life as a biker. He'd somehow managed to satisfy their curiosity without really giving them solid answers. I figured his muscles and voice had them under the kind of spell that allowed him to get away with not giving them the sort of information they were actually looking for.

My father watched the conversation silently. I knew he'd be picking apart everything Hyde said and did. Dad didn't take it easy on any guy I dated, and it seemed he was more wary of Hyde than he'd been of any man I'd brought home.

As Savannah shared a funny story from something that happened to her during the week, Hyde leant close to me and said, "Any chance we can move this party along to the part where everyone goes home?"

"You really think we've got any hope of getting my mother to leave? You've won her over. She's here for the long haul."

His eyes searched mine. "You're not shitting me, are you?"

I grinned. "No. I think it's safe to say you've probably never met a woman like Angela Lee."

"You'd be right there. You girls always share such personal information with each other?"

"Oh, you have no idea. My mother likes sex as much as I do, and she likes talking about it just as much."

"What are you two discussing?" Mum demanded to know. She was way past her alcohol limit for the night and was veering into smashed territory.

"I think this party is over, Mum."

"Yeah, me too," Tatum said. I could always count on her to take my back.

Mum pouted. "We were just getting to know Hyde."

Dad stood and motioned for Mum to follow suit. "Plenty of time for that, Angela."

I packed up some pizza for them to take home and did my best to get them all out the door. I was as desperate to be alone with Hyde as he was. Dad, however, had other plans.

As he and Mum made it to the front door, he turned and looked at Hyde. The way he looked at him told me that whatever he was about to say wasn't going to lead to anything good. "What's your surname, Hyde?"

"Dad," I warned, but I knew it was futile. He'd been hanging for this conversation since he arrived back with pizza. I was surprised he managed to wait this long for it.

Hyde's gaze remained steady on Dad. "McVeigh."

"Your mother named you Hyde?"

"No."

Dad planted his feet wide and crossed his arms. "You this cagey with everyone?"

Oh good Lord.

"Colin—" Mum started, in the same warning tone I'd used, but Hyde cut her off.

"Yeah, it's a practice I've learnt over the years so that people can't fuck me over. You and I get to know each other better, it'll be a different story."

Dad took that in. He seemed less than impressed, but my father wasn't stupid. He knew when to push the point and when to back off. "You start spending time with my daughter, we're going to be revisiting that a lot sooner than you might think."

Hyde surprised me when he nodded and said, "Agreed."

Dad grunted in response but didn't say anything else. The two of them simply stood there sizing each other up. It was a waste of time in my opinion, and I wasn't even sure why Hyde bothered. It wasn't like he and I were pursuing anything other than hot sex.

It took my family another ten minutes to leave. After I had closed the front door behind them, Hyde spun me around and pinned me against it. Not wasting a second, he reached for the bottom of my shirt and slipped a hand under. "I like your family, sugar, but the last hour was fucking painful. My dick is so damn hard for you that we're gonna have to skip getting clean in the shower."

I pressed myself against him, desperate for the same thing. "I'm on board with that." Gripping his shirt, I pushed it up and over his head. Dropping it to the floor, I let my eyes fall to his chest. "Seriously, it's a sin how hot you are." Placing my hands on his muscles, I said, "This is like perfection."

A growl rumbled from deep inside him right before his lips came to mine. Kissing me with force, he took my breath away. No man had ever kissed me the way Hyde did. I felt his kisses deep in my toes; they reached every nerve ending I had and scorched me with their heat.

Remembering his earlier declaration that when he kissed me I didn't get to end it, I wrapped my arms around him and kissed him back until I was panting for breath.

By the time he'd had his fill, he'd removed all my clothes except my bra and panties. When he was done with my mouth, he moved down my body slowly until he found my breasts. Another growl came from him. I would never get enough of the hot-as-fuck noises he made. He was the kind of man who made it clear the effect I had on him and how much he liked it.

Threading my fingers through his hair, I arched my back and said, "I really like what you're doing—like, *really* like it—but I'm so ready to have that mouth of yours on my pussy."

Another sexy growl from him. He then angled his head so he could find my eyes. With hands still firmly on my breasts, he watched me while taking my nipple into his mouth. After sucking it for a moment, he asked, "How wet are you for me?"

He drove me insane by dragging this out. Taking hold of his face, I pulled his mouth back up to mine and kissed him. "You need to

stop making me wait for you and find out for yourself how wet I am."

His eyes darkened and he spun me around to face the door. Before I had a chance to keep up with him, he had my hands flat against the door above my head, my legs spread and my body pressed against the door. Grinding himself against my ass, he rasped, "I'm in control here, sugar. *You* do what I say. Not the other way around. And I'll taste your cunt when I'm ready."

I bit my lip and closed my eyes for a beat, enjoying the way his bossiness made my whole body tingle with excitement. *A man who took charge during sex. Finally.*

His hands gripped my waist and he crouched behind me. Hooking his fingers over the top of my panties, he ripped them down. I stepped out of them and waited with anticipation for his next move. I assumed it would be to finally give my pussy the attention she needed, but he had other ideas.

Standing, he unhooked my bra and removed it. Turning me back around, our eyes met again, his full of heat. Unzipping his jeans, he said, "I want your hand around my cock."

The man was talking my language.

I reached into his pants and did as he'd ordered. Hyde's cock was fucking huge. The biggest I'd ever had. The only thing that would have improved it was a piercing. But he was so damn talented at using it, that I'd even deal with no piercing if he was my man.

His eyes closed as he dropped his head back while I pumped him. "Fuck, Monroe, you can do that any day of the week you want to."

I opened my mouth to reply, but his phone rang.

Worst timing ever. His phone had a habit of interrupting me getting what I wanted.

"Fuck," he muttered, reaching into his back pocket for his phone. Checking caller ID, he gave me an apologetic look. "I've gotta get this."

I nodded and let his dick go, but his free hand moved straight to mine and held it in place, letting me know I should keep going. With his eyes firmly on mine, he answered the phone. "King, what's up?"

They had a short conversation. I couldn't follow it because they seemed to talk in the shortest sentences known to mankind, sprinkled with a good dose of grunts in between. I would never under-

stand how men could get their point across with so few words, but Hyde ended the call with a clear understanding of what he had to do.

"I've gotta go, so this is gonna be quick," he said, surprising me. I'd figured we were done for the night. I was all down for quick; I just needed cock.

He grabbed a condom from his wallet. Once he had it in place, he spun me again so my back was to him. He thrust inside me a moment later, hard enough that I ended up slammed against the door.

Holding my hips firmly, he pounded into me with a determination I loved. Hyde took charge and made shit happen, and I was one happy woman with his style of fucking. There was no talking, no fumbling, and no hesitation. He went after what he wanted, and he did it with a relentless force that had so far delivered a mind-blowing orgasm.

Even today, when he had to do it quickly, he didn't disappoint. And again, by the time he was finished, I wasn't sure my legs would be able to hold me up for much longer.

After he came, his body rested against mine for a minute, his hands moving around to cup my breasts. "Jesus, Roe, this pussy of yours gets me off like nothing else." He trailed kisses down the back of my neck and along my shoulder, his teeth nipping my skin as he went.

Roe.

I loved the sound of that coming from him. I wasn't sure why it made me feel so good, and I reminded myself not to get attached. But damn, it felt personal. It felt like we'd taken a step beyond where we were before he fucked me. And while I liked that, it was probably just that my nickname had fallen from his lips in the heat of the moment.

Pulling out of me, he let his hands roam down my body from my breasts to my hips to my ass. I turned to find him reaching for his shirt. He picked my clothes up too and passed them to me. Again, his gesture made me feel good.

Stop it, Monroe.

It's just sex.

Dropping a kiss on my lips, he said, "I'll get rid of this condom."

I dressed while he was gone, and headed back into my kitchen to find a drink. I needed one after that. After I'd let my feelings start

wandering to places they shouldn't.

He met me in the kitchen, his hands all over me again. With one last kiss, he said, "I'll call you."

I drank some of my drink, my tummy alive with butterflies. "We need to stop this now, Hyde."

"No."

All my mixed emotions about him collided. Irrational anger resulted. "Why do you always get to decide things?"

"Why are you fighting this?"

"What is *this*?" I threw back.

"It's exactly what you like, sugar. Dirty fucking sex."

"That's what *you* want."

"You don't?"

"I told you last time this was a one-time thing. I don't want casual sex."

His eyes narrowed at me. "You want more?"

And there was the rub. "I don't know what I want."

He raked his fingers through his hair. "You're making this hard to follow."

"Okay, let's forget what I want for a minute. You told me you don't date, so we're an incompatible match anyway."

He stepped closer to me, his hand curling around my neck. "You need to stop overthinking this. And stop figuring that you have me worked out." He kissed me one last time. "Like I said, I'll call."

I stood in shock as he walked out. Yet again, he'd told me how things were going to go down between us, and I'd let him. And he still hadn't confirmed he wanted more than sex. His vague "stop figuring you have me worked out" was such bullshit. It gave me nothing more than I already had. And fuck, I still wasn't sure what *I* wanted.

But really, I *was* sure.

I wanted a whole lot more sex with Hyde. I just didn't want to admit that I also wanted to spend more time with him.

CHAPTER 20

Hyde

Monroe was distracting me and she wasn't even anywhere near me. I couldn't get her out of my head. And that was a dangerous distraction to have when Storm was in the middle of shit.

Salvatore Ricci had turned out to be a dead end. He didn't have anything to do with Jacko's death and had proved it to us. That left us with a few other options, but getting to the bottom of it all was proving hard to do. King's call tonight had been in regards to the guy Fox had put us onto. He'd been found dead with a message delivered to King afterwards.

"You've taken what's mine, now I will take what's yours." King's wild eyes came to mine as he waved the piece of paper sent to him in a box with the guy's head. "What the fuck does this even mean?"

I had no idea either. It made no sense to me that this guy's head had been sent to us. We'd had nothing to do with him until recently. And it made even less sense as to what King had supposedly taken from whoever was behind all this.

Bronze stepped forward. King had called him, Devil, Nitro, Kick and me in to deal with this. "You definitely don't know this guy?" He indicated to the head in the box. "Not even from years ago?"

King scrubbed his face. "I'm almost one-hundred-fucking-percent sure I've never had anything to do with him."

"And he gave you no leads when you saw him?"

Nitro shook his head. "Nothing. Hyde made sure he was in enough pain to speak if he had anything worth sharing, but he didn't."

Bronze nodded. "I don't need specifics." It was the warning he often gave us when we were about to cross one of his self-imposed boundaries. I didn't know why he bothered. Simply working with us the way he did crossed enough lines to ensure his imprisonment if his colleagues ever discovered his corruption.

"I want to know everything about him," King said to Bronze, indicating he wanted Bronze to look into him.

Bronze exhaled a frustrated breath. "I'm stretched, King. You've got me investigating three other guys. I'm trying to get through a huge workload at work, and I'm trying to evade Ryland, which is starting to prove difficult. Something's gotta give if you want me to look into this."

King frowned. "Why the fuck is Ryland on you?"

Bronze shrugged. "Got no fucking idea. I've either searched something or asked the wrong person something, and it's triggered his interest in me. He's been sniffing around for days, asking me all kinds of shit about Storm. I need to lay low."

King met my gaze again. "We need to deal with Ryland."

"Take him out of the equation?" I asked to confirm I'd understood where he was going with this.

Bronze held his hand up. "No. Let me look into him."

"What will that achieve?" I asked, not following.

"There'll be some dirt there. I just need to find it and then use it to get him to back off."

This whole fucking situation was doing my head in. I'd had little sleep this week. That, on top of dealing with this shit, caused me to lose my patience with Bronze. "I'm about fucking done with pussy-fucking-footing around this, Bronze. I say we remove Ryland once and for all. And as for these three other Italians, why the fuck are we being so damn careful with them? Just fucking eliminate all of them."

"Fuck, Hyde," Devil said, "Who twisted your panties today?"

I shot daggers at him. "It's starting to feel like Storm has lost their edge. We need to mark our fucking territory and make it clear again that you don't fuck with us."

"Yeah, but we can't just go fucking pissing over whoever we want," Nitro warned. "That shit will give us more issues than we have now."

I needed a fucking drink. "Fuck it," I muttered, and turned to head into the clubhouse bar.

"Where the fuck are you going?" King demanded.

"I'm getting a drink. Maybe when I get back you assholes will have come to your senses."

I stalked out of the office and down the hallway to the bar, ignoring the shit they called out to me as I went. The minute I hit the bar, I decided it wasn't the best idea. Being Friday night, members packed the room, and they were loud as fuck. A headache had kicked in while listening to everything King said, which meant the combination of music blaring from the speakers and drunken antics was like walking into hell.

Kree watched me with a wary eye. Smart woman. "Whisky?"

I nodded. "Why are you here? I didn't think you worked nights anymore."

"I don't usually, but we were short staffed, so I came in." She poured my drink and handed it to me. "Why do you look like you could murder someone?"

I poured some of the whisky down my throat. "Because I could."

An argument broke out between two club members next to me at the bar. Within moments, fists were involved, and the few empty glasses on the bar top went flying, smashing onto the ground.

"For fuck's sake!" I roared and moved to break them apart. I managed to do that, but in the process, ended up with a fist in my eye. That infuriated me more than I already was, and I retaliated with a fist to his fucking face, knocking him to the floor.

I glared at him as I picked up my drink. "Next time you wanna fight, take that shit outside." I downed the rest of my whisky and shoved the empty glass at Kree. "I'll have another," I barked.

She arched a brow. "You want to try that again?"

"Not particularly."

"I'm not making you another until you speak to me like a civil human being, Hyde."

Fucking hell. "Make me a fucking drink, Kree, or else you and I are gonna have words about your employment here."

"Hyde." King's ominous voice came from behind me.

I faced him, shoulders squared. "Have you come to your senses?" Distaste clung to his words when he ordered, "My office. Now."

We watched each other, silently waging war. This wasn't an unusual occurrence for us. One minute united, the next going to battle with each other. It never lasted long, but over the last few months, tensions had simmered to boiling point. I did my best to reel my shit in, but when my mind snapped like it had tonight, my efforts were futile.

When I didn't budge, he repeated himself in the quiet, menacing voice that signalled he'd also reached his limit. I managed to come to my senses enough to heed his warning. When we arrived at his office, he kicked everyone out and closed the door behind us.

"If you were anyone else, I'd tell you to get the fuck out of the clubhouse for the way you spoke to Kree."

"You're fucking joking, right?"

"No."

"Who the fuck is Kree to you, King? I've watched the way you are with her. I've never seen you like it with any other woman here."

"That's not fucking important here. Your—"

I cut him off. "You've never cared about this shit before. Why the change all of a sudden?"

"Fuck!" He slammed his hand down on the desk and then paced the width of the office in silence for a few moments. Finally, he stopped and looked at me. The torment I saw in his eyes was enough to make me stop. Something else was going on here.

"What?"

"The club is in danger, and I can't fucking figure out who is behind it. I can't fucking stop it. And I can't fucking make sure everyone is safe." He paused for a moment. I'd never seen King in this state before. He lived and breathed power, not this bewilderment. "The only thing I seem to have any control over at the moment is the club." He jabbed a finger in the air at me. "I fucking need you behind me, brother. Not pissing all over club members and staff. Not losing that fucking temper of yours all the damn time. Go home, get yourself together, and when I see you next, I don't wanna see any of this bullshit. It's done. I'm not fucking putting up with it anymore."

He was right. I was smart enough to acknowledge that.

I nodded, but said nothing. There wasn't anything to say to that. King wasn't looking for promises; he never was. The only thing he

was interested in were actions that produced results.

"Go home. Bronze is looking into Ryland and the other guy for us. There's nothing else to do here tonight." With that, he exited the office, his shoulders tense with the burden he carried.

Fuck.

Letting King down wasn't something I wanted to do. And I'd done plenty of it over the years. I hadn't cared enough, though. Life had just been something to get through. Until now. Now, I had reasons to do better. To be better.

I stopped at the bar before I left. Kree was busy so I waited for her. When she was free, I said, "I was an asshole. I'm sorry."

Her eyes searched mine. I had the distinct impression she was assessing my honesty. Finally, she nodded and said, "Apology accepted. Don't do it again, Hyde. I've put up with enough shit from men in my life. I won't accept it anymore."

"Understood."

I respected the hell out of a woman who stood her ground. If she'd told me to go fuck myself, I would have understood. Now that I'd calmed down I would have. Not earlier, though. No, earlier my temper owned me. And that scared the everloving fuck out of me. It reminded me that I really was my mother's son.

CHAPTER 21

Hyde

I cracked an eye open and instantly regretted the whisky I'd drunk when I got home last night. My head throbbed and I felt like shit. The headache was intensified by the yelling coming from another room. Tenille and Charlie were going at it.

Checking my irritation, I headed out to the kitchen where they stood arguing. "What the fuck's going on?" I asked.

Two heads snapped around to face me, and they both yelled something about the other. I held up my hand. "How about you take turns? I've got a headache and can only focus on one at a time."

It took them a good five fucking minutes to tell me they were fighting over Charlie getting her hair done. She wanted a colour that was apparently out of Tenille's budget.

Desperate to end the yelling, I cut in. "I'll pay for it."

Charlie's eyes widened with surprise. Tenille's darkened with anger. Neither reaction was what I'd expected.

"You're fucking kidding me," Tenille started in on me. "You're just going to come back into our lives and play the fun dad who gives her everything she wants?"

"Jesus, Tee, that wasn't my intention." Where the fuck did women come up with these ideas?

"Regardless of whether I could afford it or not, Charlie knows that until she brings her grades back up and stops smoking and drinking, I'm not paying for her to get balayage."

"Balay-the-fuck-what?"

Charlie groaned impatiently. "Balayage. It's a colouring technique." To her mother she said, "You're so hypocritical! You drink your gin like its water, but you have a whole other set of rules for me."

"That's because it's my job to have rules for you." Tenille's voice grew louder. Blinking, I took a good look at her. She looked like shit—tired and drained.

"What's in your plans for the day?" I asked her.

That question really pissed her off. "Don't change the conversation!"

I reached for my bottle of whisky and poured some into a glass. "Wasn't trying to. I figured maybe you should take a day and go out. Do something by yourself."

Tenille's hand slammed down onto her waist as she glared at me. "You're trying to get rid of me?"

"Fuck, tone that shit down, woman." Her voice had turned into a screech that hurt my head. "No one's trying to get rid of anyone. I'm suggesting, though, that we could all do with a break from each other."

"You've hardly been home, Aiden. I don't know what the fuck you need a break from."

I swallowed all the whisky in my glass, hoping to fuck I could control my rising temper. "Tenille," I said, deathly calm, "walk away from this conversation, pick up your bag and remove yourself from this house for at least half the day. When you get back, we will resume this discussion and come to an agreement on Charlie's hair." How the fuck hair colour could cause a problem like this was beyond me.

"Ugh," Charlie whinged before stomping off to her bedroom. "I wanted to get it done today!"

Tenille picked up her handbag. Dropping her gaze to the bottle of whisky, she said, "You're turning into your mother, Aiden. Something you swore you never wanted to do."

The front door slammed after her a few moments later as her words settled deep in my bones. They cut like a motherfucker be-

cause she was right—I had sworn I wouldn't become my mother. A mean drunk. And yet, I was fast becoming exactly that.

Fuck.

I shoved the whisky back in the cupboard and dumped my empty glass in the sink. Walking faster than my headache preferred, I made my way to Charlie's room where I found her with earphones in on her bed.

Glancing at me, she pulled an earbud out and muttered, "What do you want?"

"You need to cut your mother some slack. And you need to realise that her rules are there for a reason. And for fuck's sake, you're old enough to know that parents do the shit they don't want their kids to do. Drinking doesn't make her a hypocrite."

She looked at me with shock. This was the first time I'd been so blunt with her. I'd been fucking tiptoeing around her, not wanting to chance pushing her away. But the time had come for me to step up to the plate and parent her. And she could try to push me away all she liked. I wouldn't stand for it. I was in her life now whether she wanted me or not.

"You don't understand, Aiden. She's turned into such a bitch this last year. I don't know what's going on with her, but she hates everything I say and do. Nothing is good enough for her."

"Ever stop to think about shit from her perspective? For her to leave Craig, I'm guessing they've had a lot of problems."

"Dad does a lot for Mum, but she's never happy with him either. They fight so much. The only time she seems happy is when Gibson comes over."

I ignored the fact she called Craig dad and zeroed in on the way she spat Gibson's name out. "You don't like him, do you?"

Her face darkened. "No. He's a creeper. He's always watching me, asking me about how school is and about my friends and my sport. I mean, why does he even care about that stuff?"

My fists clenched by my side. I hated that Tenille had let him into their lives. "Do me a favour and stay away from him."

"I thought you two were close when you were younger?"

"Why would you think that?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. He talks about you a lot. He's always reminding Mum of things you guys did with his son."

Tenille had said something similar. It made no sense to me. I'd always thought Gibson cared about me, but he'd shown his true colours the day he threatened to kill my family and me. "When was the last time you saw him?"

"Not for a couple of weeks. I think he's been overseas." She huffed out a breath. "God, can we stop talking about this and start talking about my hair? You need to talk Mum around."

"I'll talk to her when she's calmed down, but I'm gonna need to see some respect coming from you towards her."

She slumped against the wall. "I'll try. I just hope she tries too. I'm sick of her making me feel like shit."

I decided it might be a good idea to keep them apart for the day, to give each a chance at getting their head together. "You ever been on a motorbike?"

Her eyes sparked with interest and she sat forward. "No."

"You wanna go for a ride?"

She was off the bed in a flash. "Hell yes!"

If I'd realised she'd be this excited about something that meant we'd be spending time together, I would have suggested it sooner. Jerking my head towards the front of the house, I said, "Get your ass outside. And Charlie?"

"Yeah?" She was already halfway across her bedroom.

"No more talk of hair today. I take you out on my bike, we're gonna discuss everything else that has been happening in your life."

Slowing, she met my gaze. She understood my meaning. I could tell by the way she looked at me with a little hesitation. Today would mark a change in our relationship. I'd be asking for more from her from here on out.

"Okay."

With one word, she made my fucking day. The headache pounding in my head cleared, and hope stirred deep in my gut. My kid and I were finding our way back to each other.

CHAPTER 22

Hyde

Holding my phone to my ear, I watched Monroe in her front yard from where I'd parked my bike outside her house. Sully was on the other end, but I had trouble focusing on what he said as Monroe proved again what a distraction she'd become in my life.

"Are you listening to what I'm saying, Aiden?"

I wasn't listening to a damn word he said because the only thing I could focus on was the fact another man had his arm around Monroe. *And I didn't fucking like it.*

"No, I missed it."

Monroe laughed as the guy standing next to her with his arm around her shoulders said something to her. The smile on his face irritated the fuck out of me. Fox was with them, laughing too.

Who was the motherfucker with Monroe?

Sully's voice boomed from my phone. "I said I'm heading down to Melbourne today to check on Craig like you asked. He's been in Perth but is back now. I'm not sure how long for, though. I'll check in with you when I have more information." I'd asked him to investigate what Craig was up to that caused him to come home beaten up.

I gripped the phone harder when the guy with Monroe squeezed her closer to him for a moment. "Sounds good."

With that, I ended the call and gave my full attention to the asshole with Monroe. Committing his face to memory, I vowed to find out who he was. I also vowed to get Monroe on the same page as me. I was done with letting her fight this thing between us.

Her gaze turned to me as I walked towards her. She hit me with a sexy smile. At least she hadn't given that to the motherfucker.

"Hyde," Fox greeted me.

I nodded at him. "Fox."

"I didn't know you were bringing your sexy ass over today," Monroe said, her voice all smoky and breathy, hitting me right in the dick. "I thought you were gonna call," she added, a hint of playfulness creeping in to her voice too.

"I decided not to take a chance on you ignoring my call."

Her head dropped to the side, eyes full of heat. "You *really* think I would have ignored your call?"

"Right," Fox cut in, "That's our cue to leave you two alone." He indicated for the asshole with his arm *still* draped over Monroe's shoulders to leave.

"Thanks for everything, Fox. I'm excited about our plans. I just hope I can find a way to pull them off," Monroe said.

The asshole said something to her that I couldn't hear before following Fox out of her yard. I watched silently, tracking their movements. They couldn't leave soon enough as far as I was concerned.

Monroe slid her arm around my waist and pressed her body against mine. "It's good to see you, but I really wish you'd called first."

Hardly paying attention to what she said, I growled, "Who was that?" I couldn't keep the demanding tone from my voice even if I'd tried. I needed to know who he was and what the fuck he was to her.

Her eyes narrowed. "What does that mean? If we were dating, I'd say you sounded jealous."

"Answer my question, sugar. Who the fuck was that?"

She let me go and took a step back. "Whoa, tiger, steady on there. That was Leo, Fox's cousin and a friend of mine. What's going on here?"

With a determined stride, I closed the short distance between us and took hold of her by the waist. "What's going on here is that I didn't like his hands on you."

Her eyes widened and she planted her palms on my chest. Trying to push out of my hold, she said, "I don't live my life making sure to only do things you like."

I tightened my hold, not letting her move a fucking inch. "I never said you had to, but I would like to know what that asshole means to you."

"He's not an asshole, Hyde. He's a good friend. That's all."

"Looked like more than that to me."

"You *are* jealous."

I ignored that. "You sleep with your friends, Roe?"

She smacked my chest. Still trying to move out of my embrace. Still failing, because there was no way in hell I was letting her go. "Oh my God, you did not just say that to me! We've made no promises to each other, so who I sleep with is none of your business."

"I'm making it my business. And I'm telling you now, I don't want another man's hands on you."

"Well, sorry to burst your bubble, but the only man who gets to dictate that kind of shit to me is the man I'm dating. And seems as though you and I aren't dating, you get zero say in whose hands are on me." She hit my chest again and added, "Now let me go." Her eyes were full of that fierce energy I loved in a woman.

"How about you and I start dating?"

She stopped trying to escape my hold. "You don't do dating."

"I don't *do* dating because I haven't found a woman I wanted to date."

"Oh, but now you have? Or is this just because you got your dick in a twist when you saw me with another guy? I'm not down with a man fucking me around, Hyde. If you only want me when you think someone else has me, you can walk away right now."

"Jesus, woman, are you always this fucking difficult?"

Her mouth fell open. "Are you always this fucking insulting?"

"I don't date women just to keep other men from them. I can't stop thinking about you, Monroe. You're there when I wake up, and you're still there when I go to bed at night. And in between, you're every-fucking-where. Hell, I'm even thinking about you when I should be focusing on club business." I pulled her even closer to me and growled, "I just about lost my fucking shit when I saw that asshole's hands on you. That's never happened in my life."

She stared at me for a long few moments before muttering, "God damn you have a way of saying stuff that makes me wanna drop my panties and fuck you on the spot." Slapping my chest again, she added, "Stop doing that! A woman needs some control in a relationship."

My lips twitched. She had a way of amusing the hell out of me. "I'll take that as a yes, then?"

She pointed a finger at me, in the way that let me know she was about to lay down some rules. "Yes, but I'm not sure about this possessiveness you've got going on. It's kinda hot, but at the same time, I don't like being told what to do."

My lips grazed her cheek on their way to her ear. "Sugar, stop trying to boss me. I fucking boss *you*. And as far as that possessiveness goes, we're good unless I turn up here again to find someone's hands on you. That happens, all fucking bets are off. I don't share what's mine."

She didn't say anything, but I was sure I heard a moan fall from her lips.

Not wasting any time, I smacked her ass and said, "Now, I want you inside, naked. We're about to get wet."

Her upper body angled backwards and her eyes found mine. "See, that's why I said before that I wished you'd called me first. It's that time of the month for me where I don't share a shower with anyone. And before you tell me I can suck your dick instead, I'm not in the mood for that either."

My lips twitched again. "And here I was thinking you thought about dick 24/7."

"Oh, I do. I just have a few days a month where I don't want one anywhere near me."

"How many more days we talking about here?"

"I think I'd like to keep you hanging. I'm not going to tell you."

"You have no idea how much you keep me hanging. Get inside and we'll find other ways to pass the time."

Fuck, I just wanted to be with her. At this point, I didn't care if that meant I was inside her or not. So long as we were in the same room. Being with Monroe felt good. And I hadn't felt good like this in a long fucking time.

CHAPTER 23

Monroe

Hyde's arm hooked around my waist and he pulled my body to his. Sunday mornings had never felt so good.

He'd showed up last night waving his possessive flag all over the place marking his territory, making me fall for him more, even though I tried hard not to fall for that shit. But damn, knowing a man wanted me that much was always going to cause me to fall.

There was no sex to be had because I had my period, but he'd sat through reruns of *Friends* with me, helped me cook spaghetti for dinner, ordered me to stay on the couch getting my *Friends* fix while he cleaned up the kitchen after dinner, and then stayed the night. While he hadn't been able to keep his hands and mouth off me, he hadn't tried to force anything more. In my book, that shit earnt him a fucking medal.

I placed my hand over his. "Morning, tiger."

His leg curved over mine, pressing his erection against my ass. Having my period sucked. All I wanted was Hyde inside me, but I wasn't a woman who ever had sex on her period.

"Fuck, Roe, I need your hand around my dick," he said as he nuzzled my neck.

"I told you I don't do dicks when I'm on my period."

He groaned and ground himself harder against me. "Fuck, woman, you're a savage."

I decided to play with him a little longer. The truth was, though, that I wanted his dick as much as he wanted me to have it, so I wouldn't be able to drag this out for too long. "I'm down with watching you take matters into your own hands." I made sure to push my ass back against his dick.

While he kept grinding against me, one of his hands moved its way up my body to cup my breast. Tweaking my nipple, he rasped, "You wanna tease me with that ass of yours, you're gonna end up on your back so I can fuck your tits."

Desire exploded through me. Fucking my tits sounded like heaven. I teased him some more, making sure to really rub myself against him hard.

He didn't fail me. Before I knew what was happening, he had me on my back, his knees either side of my body as he knelt over me. Grabbing my hand, he wrapped it around his cock. Eyes to mine, he ordered, "First your hand, then your tits. Next time you wanna tease me, think twice, sugar."

I licked my lips as I pumped his cock. "I've decided that teasing you is fun. And that you are changing my mind about dicks at period time."

A deep, guttural groan came from him while I got him off. "As in you want my dick deep in your cunt instead of between your tits?"

Hyde had a way with filthy words. They got me hot, even during the time of the month when nothing usually got me hot. But no way was I into what he suggested. I squeezed his dick harder as I moved my hand up and down it. "No. There's no pussy for you today, but I'm definitely into this tit sex."

He stopped what I was doing so he could position his dick between my breasts. I squashed them together and held them there so he could focus on fucking them.

The visual of his cock pumping between my breasts, his body driving him towards his release, and the erotic grunts coming from him turned me on far too much. I was going to be left with a need I couldn't begin to fulfil.

"Fuck," I muttered while I kept my tits pressed together. "I'm so fucking horny right now."

He kept thrusting his dick between my breasts. "I can take care of that for you."

"Yeah. No." I was still being stubborn. Maybe one day, if we were together for a long time, I'd be into period sex with him, but not yet.

"Christ," he growled. "This is gonna be fast."

He only managed two more thrusts before he came. Holding his dick while he directed the cum onto my breasts, he met my gaze and said, "Your tits and my cock need a standing date."

"I'm on board with that. Especially because you're gonna cook me breakfast while I take a shower."

His lips curled up at the ends. "Really?"

"Yes, really. You wanna shoot your jizz all over me, you're in charge of making food while I clean that shit up."

"You fucking love that shit, sugar."

"That may be the case, but I also love food. Almost as much... no, some days, more.... No, scrap that, I always love dick more, but right now I am starving, so you need to feed me if you've got hope of ever getting inside me again."

He chuckled, and I had to say, I loved that sound coming from him. Moving off me, he said, "You got bacon and eggs in your fridge?"

"I've got eggs. No bacon. How about scrambled eggs?" I really was hungry, but I also wanted to see how domestic he was.

"Fuck that, we need bacon. I'll go grab some while you're in the shower."

A man after my own heart. I grinned. "Thank God you love meat."

He chuckled again. "I always did have that going for me."

Yes.

Yes, he did.



The man could cook. Good God, could he cook. I hadn't had bacon and eggs that good in a long time. And then he'd cleaned the kitchen again. Without me even asking. He'd taken charge and ordered me to put my feet up while he cleaned. What man did that?

"How long have you lived on your own?" I asked from the kitchen table where I sat watching him clean.

"Fourteen years."

"Were you always this domestic? Or did that just come from all those years by yourself?"

"Always. My mother didn't lift a finger most of her life, so I learnt pretty fucking fast that if I didn't cook and clean, I'd be hungry and living in filth."

My heart squeezed at the thought of any child going through that. I'd been blessed with my family. "How old were you when you figured that out?"

His eyes met mine, and I saw the pain there. "Seven."

He went back to loading my dishwasher while I sat in silence wondering about his life. Now that we were doing the dating thing, I wanted to know everything there was to know about him. But I wasn't convinced Hyde was the kind of man to share that kind of information easily. I decided to push him a little.

"Are you close to your parents?"

He was bent over the dishwasher, and I saw his body tense at that question. Surprising me, he glanced up and said, "I never knew my father. My mother died when I was twenty-one. She and I were never close."

I'd figured he wouldn't be close to them if they treated him like that as a seven-year-old, but I always held out hope that people could change. Mostly, though, they didn't.

"I love that you've chosen to parent your daughter differently."

He straightened, his body still tense. By the look on his face, I decided I must have said something wrong. "Charlie's only just come back into my life. My fault, not her mother's. But yeah, I would never raise a child the way I was raised."

I frowned. "You haven't had anything to do with her until now?"

"I was there for the first two years of her life. Shit got in the way of that until just recently." He watched me closely. It felt like he was trying to judge my reaction.

I stood and walked to him. "Something you need to know about me, Hyde, is that if you're in my life, I don't judge you."

His eyes searched mine for a beat and then he nodded. "Good. I judge myself enough for everyone."

I knew he was being honest with me. It was right there in his body language and his voice. I realised then just how much Hyde carried his pain with him, and I wondered what he'd been through in life to cause that anguish. I hoped in time he would share it with me so I could help him through it.

He kissed me before smacking my ass—something he seemed to like to do—and saying, “Yesterday you told Fox you were excited about some plans but not sure you could pull them off. What plans are these?”

Figuring that changing the subject was his way of dealing with whatever he had going on, I ran with it instead of forcing him to talk about something he didn't want to. “I want to convert some of the space in my shop so I can add another room and bring in someone to do waxing. There's a dress shop a few doors down from me that is flat out, so I figure between the women I have coming in and her customers, there're enough women to target for waxing. But, I don't really have the cash to pay someone to do the work, so I'm gonna have to get creative to make it happen. Fox had some ideas. Now I just have to go through them and see what I can do.”

Someone knocked on my front door just as I finished telling him about my plans. When Savannah called out my name, I said, “Shit, I forgot she was coming over.” She was here to tell me all about her big date the previous night.

“That's your sister?”

“Yeah. Sorry, but we already had plans to go out for lunch today.”

“Let her in. I'll grab my stuff and get out of here.”

I gripped his shirt as he turned to go into the bedroom. “We need to discuss you taking me on a date.”

“As in out to dinner?”

Honestly, the man had no idea. It had clearly been too long since he'd dated a woman. And it was clearly my responsibility to teach him what he needed to do. “Yeah, as in out to dinner. If I'm gonna do this with you, you're gonna have to earn it.”

Those lips of his twitched again. I seemed to amuse him a lot. “Noted. I'll pick you up for dinner tomorrow night.”

I was free tomorrow night, but there was no way I was allowing him to dictate terms to me. I liked to start a relationship the way I in-

tended it to go on. Him always making the decisions was not the way I saw our relationship going.

Shaking my head, I said, "Tomorrow's no good for me. How about Tuesday night?"

Full points to him for not even blinking an eye. "I'll pick you up at seven."

I smiled and pulled his face down for a kiss, ignoring the fact my sister's knocking had grown louder. "I can't wait to see where you take me." The first date was everything in my opinion. It set the course for the future. I had high hopes of Hyde rocking my world on a date, just as much as he did in bed.

CHAPTER 24

Hyde

"I'm just saying I think it might be wise to choose our battles," I said to Tenille late Tuesday afternoon. We were discussing Charlie and the fact Tenille felt like she was out of control.

"So you're the expert now, are you? A week or so of parenting and you know everything?" We'd been going over this for a good half hour, and I didn't see the end in sight.

I raked my fingers through my hair. "No, but I'm not a fucking idiot, Tee. I've been watching you two fight and listening to what she's saying about it all, and I think that you fighting every damn battle is just pushing her further away."

"Oh, so you think I should just let her smoke and drink and give me attitude, do you? Not to mention cutting class and letting her grades slip." I saw where Charlie got her attitude. It rolled off Tenille in waves.

"I'm suggesting you work on a couple of those things at a time. Pick the most important one, say her grades, and go to war with her about that. The rest, tread carefully. Have you seen her smoking or drinking since you got here?"

"No."

I nodded. "She and I had a talk about it. I told her not to do it in the house. I figure I can't control what goes on outside the house, so

why fight her on it?"

"You're delusional, Aiden, if you think that by simply telling her not to do it here will stop her."

"I know it won't stop her doing it. But I'm hoping that by not alienating her completely, I'm keeping the communication going between us. And that by giving her some room to figure shit out on her own, she will come to respect me and want to show me she can make better choices."

My phone buzzed with a text. My dick stirred at the thought of it being from Monroe. We'd been exchanging dirty messages all day.

Monroe: You know how I didn't want dick the other day?

Me: Yeah.

Monroe: I'm over that. Just so you know.

Me: Thank fuck.

Monroe: I want it every way I can have it tonight.

Me: Ass?

Monroe: Steady on, tiger. A man's gotta prove himself first.

Tenille cut in, "Are you just going to ignore me now? Your woman's got all your attention, has she?" She spat her words out like they tasted awful. I imagined they did, and I hated that I'd caused her to feel this way. I needed to fix whatever issue we had here.

"Tee," I started, but the sound of glass smashing outside distracted me. Placing my phone down on the counter, I said, "Hold that thought. I'll be back."

Jogging outside, I discovered that some kids were playing ball on the road and had smashed one of my neighbour's windows. He was already outside dealing with it, and waved me off, letting me know he had it under control.

By the time I got back inside, Tenille had my phone in her hands and had scrolled my messages with Monroe. She looked at me with a level of hurt I'd never seen coming. "I thought you didn't really know Monroe."

"Fuck," I muttered. Yet another conversation I wasn't prepared for. Scrubbing my face, I said, "I didn't when you asked. Now I do."

She shoved my phone at me. "So you coming back to us wasn't you wanting me back?"

I frowned. "You're married, Tee. While I'm not a fan of Craig's, it was never my intention to break up your family when I came back."

"Do you still love me?" she demanded.

"It's been fourteen years. I never thought I could come back, so I had to find a way to move on."

"So that's a no, then?"

"I'll always love you, but I'm not *in* love with you, no. You can't stand there and tell me you're in love with me. You moved on years ago." Christ, this was a fucked-up mess.

Her breaths came hard and fast while she stared at me. She seemed lost, and I tried to figure out how to deal with that, but I was out of my fucking depth here. "I did move on, but you coming back has stirred so many feelings in me that I never knew were buried. I only moved on because I thought you were dead. Not because I stopped loving you."

"You're telling me you don't love Craig?"

"I don't know anymore. My thinking is all screwed up."

"Where is he?"

"He's working. Splitting his time between Melbourne and Perth."

"No, I mean why isn't he here? Why isn't he fighting for you to go home?" She'd hardly heard from him as far as I knew.

She wrapped her arms around herself like she was trying to warm up, even though it wasn't a cold day. "I don't know," she said quietly.

I moved to her and pulled her into my arms. Tenille would always be the woman I'd loved first and the mother of my child. I'd never stop loving her, but there was no way back to each other as far as I was concerned. However, my guilt at what I'd put her through over the years ate me alive. Some days I was sure it would consume me. They were the days I hit the whisky the hardest. If I had any chance at defeating my mother's genes in me, I had to find a way past this guilt.

"I've got a guy looking into what's going on with him," I told her.

She jerked out of my hold. "What? Why would you do that?"

"To help you find some answers as to what the fuck's going on in your marriage."

"That's none of your concern, Aiden," she snapped.

"Is there something going on here I don't know about, Tee?" She seemed cagey all of a sudden. Like she wanted me far away from her marriage and all the shit going on with it.

"No." But she'd shut down completely on me, so I had to wonder the truth of the matter. As she turned to leave the kitchen, she threw out, "And Charlie isn't getting that hair colour. If you say yes, there will be hell to pay." She stalked towards her bedroom, leaving me clueless as to what the hell was going on.

Grabbing my phone, I tried to call Sully, but he didn't answer. I hadn't heard from him since he arrived in Melbourne a few days ago. That concerned me; Sully always stayed in contact. I sent a text to Bronze asking him to look into it for me. If anything had happened to him down there, I was hoping the cops would know.

After I had texted Bronze, I shot Monroe another text.

Me: What kind of proof are we talking?

She came straight back.

Monroe: Ever considered getting your dick pierced?

Me: That's how a man proves himself to you?

Monroe: No. I was just throwing that out there for your consideration. Proof = time getting shit right.

Me: Noted. I'll be there soon.

Monroe: If you come early, we could fit a quickie in. Just sayin'.

Well that was a fucking no-brainer. Ten minutes later I was on my way to her house.

CHAPTER 25

Monroe

I sat at the table across from Hyde and did my best not to show my disappointment. For our first date, he'd brought me to a pub for dinner. And because there was some huge soccer or football or what-the-fuck-ever game on that night, the pub was rowdy and full of assholes, one who had already spilt beer all down my dress.

He'd started the night out well by turning up to my house early and fucking me senseless. I'd thought at that point it wouldn't matter how the rest of the date went, but this pub proved me wrong.

We'd just finished eating—the food was the worst, but I didn't tell him that—and he'd asked me more about the plans I had for my shop. However his phone kept sounding with text messages, which distracted him a little.

"Everything okay?" I asked. I loved my phone as much as the next person, but I never put it on the table during dinner with someone. I kept reminding myself that he had a daughter, so that was probably why he kept checking the messages.

He placed the phone down and gave me his attention. "Sorry, sugar, it's my family. We're dealing with some issues at the moment."

After we had discussed his parents the other day, I hadn't realised he had any other family members. I loved that he opened up

like this. "How many brothers and sisters do you have?"

His forehead wrinkled in a frown. "Huh? None."

"Oh, I just assumed you meant siblings when you said family." He must have meant cousins or some other extended family.

"No, it's my ex and my kid."

His ex? He referred to her as his family still. I kinda liked that—because in this day and age of messy breakups it was refreshing to hear a man call his ex-wife family still—while at the same time experiencing a stab of jealousy in my chest.

Not wanting to get into a discussion about his ex, I decided to focus on his daughter. In my experience with dating divorced men, talking about their ex never went well. "How's Charlie going with her skating?"

The tension that had crept across his face while taking those text messages settled and he smiled. "I haven't had a chance to take her again, but she went on her own the other day. She came home in a good mood, so I figure we need to get her there as much as possible."

"So she and her mum are still here?" I recalled him mentioning that Charlie's mother was coming to get her, but that he wasn't sure Charlie would want to go.

"Yeah." He didn't offer any further information, and I didn't push.

"Well, at least you get to spend more time with her. Have you guys done much since she's been here?"

"I took her on a ride the other day. First time on a bike for her. She seemed to love it. Other than that, we're taking it slowly, getting to know each other after never really being in each other's life."

I drank some of the cosmo he'd bought me. "I remember when I was sixteen. I gave my parents hell. It's a miracle we all survived that."

"I'm figuring that out pretty fucking fast. We're in the middle of World War III at the moment because of some baly hair colour shit that her mother doesn't want her to have. You'd think Charlie's life was crashing down around her with the way she's carrying on."

My ovaries exploded a little while listening to Hyde talk about his daughter. And him trying to say balayage and trying to keep up with what his daughter wanted only helped that explosion along.

While I'd been playing it cool, trying not to bombard him with questions about his life, I suddenly couldn't contain myself any longer. It wasn't how I usually operated, and I figured it would soon shed some light on whether Hyde really was ready to date me or not. "You guys had Charlie young. I'm figuring you for about thirty-five or so."

"Thirty-six."

I smiled. "You just earnt points for not asking me how old I am. But FYI, I'm thirty-one. When's your birthday?" If there was one thing I was anal about, it was keeping track of the birthdays of those in my life. I liked to make sure their days were special.

His eyes darkened. "May seven, but I don't ever celebrate it."

"Why not?"

He reached for the whisky in front of him. He'd ordered a drink earlier but hadn't actually drunk any of it, which seemed odd. However, at that question, he drank half the glass.

"We never celebrated it when I was growing up, so I've continued that tradition." It was like he had to rip those words from his soul. The pain in them sat heavy between us, and I knew this wasn't a conversation I should continue. Not tonight.

"Okay, so changing the subject a little, why did you decide to join Storm?" I'd always wondered what made men choose the biker life.

He drained his glass of whisky and sat forward, resting his elbows on the table. "Let's talk about you, sugar. You always been a tattoo artist?"

I would rather he'd answered my question, but I got the distinct impression Hyde didn't share personal stuff easily. I could be patient; I just hoped it wouldn't take him long to open up to me. "Yeah, and I'd always wanted my own shop, so I bought it three years ago when the previous owner put it on the market for cheap."

"That—"

He was cut off when another asshole spilt some of his drink on me as he walked by our table. Drunkenly stumbling along, he grinned at me and said, "Sorry about that, baby." He stopped and let his gaze drop to my chest, whistling low as he did so. "Damn, you shouldn't be allowed out in public. Those tits—"

Hyde shoved his chair back and stood, towering over the asshole. His anger oozed from every pore, scaring me a little. "You need to keep your eyes and your fucking mouth closed when you walk past

my woman." He didn't bellow his order, but rather it came out in a low, murderous tone that anyone would have trouble misunderstanding.

The asshole held his hands up defensively, backing away from Hyde. "Sorry, dude, it's just hard not to notice a beautiful woman when I see one."

Hyde hissed. It looked like he was about to go to battle. "Back the fuck up and stop fucking talking."

The guy nodded madly and was turning to leave when a friend of his joined us. "What's going on, Kenny?"

Kenny, the asshole who spilt his drink, tried to pull his friend away. "Nothing. It's all good, man."

His friend shrugged out of his hold and eyed Hyde. "I'm not fucking intimidated by some biker asshole. You think you can come in here and threaten us just because he looked at your slut the wrong way?"

Hyde's fist connected with the friend's cheek, causing him to stumble back. Without giving him a chance to recover and walk away from the situation, Hyde kept going, punching him over and over.

I jumped to my feet and yelled, "Hyde! Stop it! He's not worth it."

My requests for him to stop were futile. The other guy fought back, turning this into a bloody and violent fight. I'd seen plenty of fights in my life, but Hyde took it to a whole new level. It wasn't until security got involved, three of them yanking Hyde from the fight, that it calmed down. By then, they were both covered in blood, and I was so done with this night it wasn't funny.

I didn't wait around for him to deal with security. I picked up my clutch and stalked outside in search of a taxi. Fucking bikers. I knew they were bad news, so why the fuck did I let my guard down and let one in? As far as I was concerned, this was the first date from hell, and I wasn't convinced there would be another date for us.

CHAPTER 26

Hyde

Fuck.

I'd managed to fuck this night right up. I'd thought bringing Monroe to a fucking pub on game night was the worst mistake I could have made. That was during dinner when I saw the disappointment sitting on her face. Turned out I was wrong. The worst mistake I could have made was letting some motherfucker get to me when he couldn't keep his eyes off her.

Jealousy wasn't something I was used to. Hell, this was the first time in my life I'd ever experienced it. Seeing another man even glance sideways at Monroe caused a nuclear reaction in my fucking head. I'd fought like fuck not to react to the asshole who mentioned her tits, but when his friend referred to her as a slut, I saw fucking red.

And then I'd lost my shit.

And my woman.

After cleaning myself up, I headed over to her house. She stood in front of me now, at her front door, a bewildered look on her face.

"I don't want to talk to you tonight," she said as she pulled her sexy dark-red robe around her. It was distracting as hell because it barely covered her thighs and revealed enough cleavage to get me

hard, but now wasn't the time to be distracted, so I kept my eyes off her body.

"I fucked up, Roe."

"You think?"

I shoved my fingers through my hair. *Fuck*. "Let me in so we can talk."

"I told you that I didn't want to talk tonight. I need some space to figure out how I'm thinking."

I didn't know much about women, but I knew giving her that space would lead nowhere good. "No."

Her eyes bulged. "You're kidding me, right? You screw up and then you refuse to give me some space to process what I saw tonight?"

"Fuck, I'm sorry you saw that, sugar. I let that asshole get to me when I should have just told him to fuck off and left it at that."

"Tell me something, Hyde. Is that standard behaviour for you? Because if fighting is something you do a lot of, I'm not interested in going any further with this."

I clenched my jaw. "Not usually." There was no point bringing up my past, because it was exactly that—the past, not the present.

"So does not usually mean you do it sometimes?"

"It means that sometimes it's called for."

"Often it's not. Just so you know."

I was a fan of Monroe's attitude but not when it came flying at me like this. This just pissed me off. "There are some things you don't know about that do require my fists. Let's just leave it at that. All you need to know is that I don't usually get them out in this kind of situation."

She fell silent for a moment. When she crossed her arms over her chest, I knew she was shutting down on me. "I'm getting the drift. You should go. There's no way you're getting in my pants tonight."

Fuck, didn't she understand? This wasn't even about getting my dick wet. This was me, trying to make things right.

Frustration filled me, and I tried to force the point. Stepping one foot inside her house, I pushed my way in and had her up against the wall before she could open that pretty mouth of hers and argue with me. "We need to get one thing straight here. I didn't come over to fuck you. I came to apologise and tell you I would do better next

time. I'm far from fucking perfect, though, so if you're looking for perfection, you're right—this should end now."

I'd caged her in with my arms against the wall either side of her, my body flush against hers. I'd expected her to fight me, but she didn't. Instead, her breathing picked up and she said, "I'm not looking for perfect. I'm just looking for a man who isn't going to lose his shit like that all the time." Her voice dropped to almost a whisper when she added, "You scared me tonight, Hyde."

Regret was a vicious bitch, one I was well acquainted with. Seemed I spent half my fucking life with her on my back. She swooped in and reminded me what a fuck-up I was. The difference this time? I had a reason not to sit with that regret and drink my way through it.

I cupped Monroe's cheek. "I'm sorry, red. I can't take it back, but I can sure as fuck vow never to do it again."

The hesitation I saw in her eyes told me she wasn't quite sure. Her words confirmed it. "How do you even know you can make that promise? I watched you tonight. You lost yourself in that fight. It was like the violence consumed you. I don't want you to make promises you can't keep. That's even worse than not making a promise."

She was dead fucking right. How the hell could I promise her that when I couldn't get a grip on my temper? But fuck, I didn't want to lose her. I needed her light to help me through my dark. I'd figure this shit out so she never needed to be exposed to it again. "I've only got my honesty to give you. I will make this right. You will never be scared of me again."

"I wasn't scared *of* you," she whispered. "I was scared *for* you. And for the guy you were fighting. I've never felt afraid of you, but I really thought you could have killed that guy tonight. That's what I was scared of."

"So what are you telling me here, Roe? Are you walking away from this before we even get it started?" I'd fight her tooth and nail, but first I needed to know where we stood.

"I'm saying what I said when you first got here—I don't want to talk about it tonight. I want you to give me the space to think it over."

Out of everything that had gone on, I realised that if I didn't give her that space, the rest wouldn't matter. She needed to know up-

front that I'd not force myself on her when she needed time out.

I nodded and dropped my arms. "You've got tonight. After that, you let me back in here,"—I placed my hand against her chest—"so we can talk this out."

On the way home, I grasped how important this thing with Monroe was to me. I'd never looked for another woman after Tenille. Had never wanted the complication again. Had never wanted to put a woman's life at risk like Tenille's had been just by being married to me. But leaving Monroe's house that night, without knowing where we stood, caused my chest to constrict in ways it never had. This wasn't love—not yet—but it meant something to me. Something I wanted to fight for.



I spent the next day taking care of club business. King and I had managed to move past our issues. I'd been making an effort not to lose my temper with any club members, and he'd been distracted by shit going on with Jen. He'd also been walking around in a mood due to Bronze finding no dirt on Ryland yet. He also hadn't found anything useful on the guy whose head had been delivered as a warning.

King sent me out early to clean up a mess one of our clients had gotten themselves in. The cleaning side of our business had ticked along quietly over the years, but King had ramped it up over the last month due to our drug income dropping. The club was bleeding cash, so he took on almost any cleaning job sent our way these days. He'd been more picky until recently, which concerned me. Who the fuck knew whether these new clients could keep their mouths closed about what we did for them? The last fucking thing we needed was one of them singing to the cops.

I arrived back at the club around four that afternoon to find King in his office having a heated discussion with Bronze. Something about an attack King planned that Bronze was against.

"You do that and you'll have the feds crawling over you like you never imagined they could," Bronze warned.

The vein in King's neck pulsed. He was worked up more than usual. "I'm sick of sitting here doing fucking nothing, Bronze. Ry-

land's had my hands tied for far too long, and Marx has evaded me because of it. I need to get out there and slit throats and cut some fucking balls off. Anything to make people talk and tell me where the hell Marx is and who's behind it all."

"Jesus, King, stop fucking talking," Bronze muttered. "I don't want to fucking know this shit." He was exhausted. The dark circles under his eyes and the way his shoulders slumped told that story.

I stepped in. "Whose throats are we slitting?"

Bronze held up his hands. "I'm leaving. Don't call me when the feds throw you in jail." He didn't wait for King's response, just simply walked away from the conversation. King didn't try to stop him either, which told me he was serious about his plans.

"Bronze ruled out one of the three Italians we've been looking at. That leaves two. I'm done with quietly investigating them. I want you to take one team of members to one of them, while I take another team to the other one. If we have to slit their men's throats in order to make them talk, so fucking be it. This happens tomorrow. By the end of the day we'll know which one it is."

"And Marx?"

"He'll be out of business once we know who's controlling him."

I rubbed the back of my neck as the tension crept in. "Fuck, King, I'm not sure that Bronze isn't right about this."

King scowled. "Last week you would have been all over this plan. What's changed?"

"Last week I let my mood dictate my actions. This week I'm trying like fuck not to do that." I'd failed so far, but a man could only try. And this shit King suggested could fuck the club right up if we weren't careful. "We go out there and cause a blood bath like you're suggesting, that's a lot of potential enemies we're creating. Those crazy fucking Italians have some loyal supporters."

"You think we can't handle ourselves, brother?" King had a god complex some days. On others, he managed to lock it down. Today was not one of those days.

"Have we been handling ourselves, King? You tell me. From my perspective, it feels like we've lost some of our edge because of Ryland. He's too close to us for you to even consider this attack. Bronze isn't shitting you when he says the feds will be all over us if we do this."

“So we just sit with our hands tied, holding our balls, and allow one man to decide what we can and can’t fucking do? Fuck that. We’re in the middle of a fucking war here, Hyde. We don’t run from war. We stand and we fucking fight to the bitter end.”

I pushed my anger away. I needed to get my point across without my temper getting in the way. “We stand this time? It might *be* the bitter end.”

King stood with his hands clenched by his side, with an expression on his face I knew to mean he’d already made up his mind. “Tomorrow, Hyde. We get this done.”

CHAPTER 27

Monroe

I relaxed into my comfy chair in my office, both hands wrapped around a hot mug of coffee, and let the stress of the day leave my body. It was just after five on Wednesday night, and Fox had two more clients to finish up with. One, he was almost done with, the other waited patiently for him. He had one of the best reputations in Sydney, so people were always happy to wait for him. I was certain that if he ever left me, my business would go downhill fast.

I'd spent the day going over everything that happened with Hyde the night before. My heart warred with my head yet again, and while I felt uncertain about what to do, I knew deep in my gut exactly what I would do.

I'd keep seeing him. He'd worked his way that far into my heart already. But he'd have to step his game up, that was for sure.

Paperwork called my name that afternoon, but the front door bell tinkling dragged me back out to the front of the shop. I slowed when I saw Hyde standing near the front counter holding a tape measure.

Closing the distance between us, I nodded at the tape measure and said, "What's that for, tiger?"

He didn't miss my intent when I called him tiger. It was my way of letting him know I'd softened my stance since last night. We'd talk

it over later, but for now, we could move forward knowing where we stood.

Jerking his chin, he said, "I've come to measure the space you want converted for this waxing room of yours."

Surprise flooded me. I hadn't seen that coming. Placing my hand on my hip, I cocked my head to the side. "You're good with a hammer and nails?"

A sexy grin spread across his face. "I'm good with my hands, full stop. Anything you need doing, I've got it covered."

"Mmm, the cost of the building supplies is a little out of my reach at the moment, but I'd be happy to put your hands to work in other ways."

His arm slid around my waist so he could pull me close. "I've got contacts in the building industry. How about you let me worry about the cost for now?"

"No, I don't ever let men pay my way."

"I figured that already. That's why I said for now. When you've got cash coming in from the waxing business, you can pay me back then."

Every independent gene of mine wanted to say no, but the businesswoman in me knew this was a good deal. My independent side tried to win the argument, but she lost badly. That could also have had something to do with the horny side of me wanting Hyde spending time working in my shop. Possibly with his shirt off. Definitely with those arms of his on display.

"Okay, yes." I pointed my finger at him. "But you agree to take my money, without argument, when the time comes, or I'm taking that yes back."

He chuckled and dropped a kiss to my lips. "Deal."

"And Hyde?"

"Yeah."

"We're going to talk about last night. Preferably tonight if you're free."

His mouth brushed my ear when he said, "You trying to boss me, sugar?"

"Damn right I am."

His eyes met mine, and I couldn't miss the earnestness there. "Tonight is blocked off for you."

The fact he took this so seriously made me feel like I'd made the right decision. "Good. If you're lucky, I'll cook you dinner."

Lines formed around his eyes as he smiled. That smile morphed into a cheeky grin when he said, "I like a woman who knows her place is in the kitchen."

I smacked his chest. "You did not just say that to me!"

Laughing he said, "Calm down, red, I was just fucking with you."

"You better have been. It's gonna be a long night for you on my couch taking care of the hard-on I give you if you weren't."

"Sounds like any night I don't spend with you," he murmured as he let me go. "Now tell me where you want this room built."



I'd been with Hyde for approximately two hours, and he'd managed to drive me almost to the point of not being able to hold myself back. No, scratch that. I'd been with him for *exactly* two hours and eleven minutes, and I was way past the point of not holding myself back.

We'd made it to my place after I closed up at the shop, and after putting steak in the microwave to defrost, I'd practically thrown myself at him. My intent for the night had been to talk to him first and then have sex, but the man was skilled at messing with my thoughts. Just by existing. It was maddening.

He dragged his mouth from mine and took hold of my arms that were around his neck. Pulling me off him, he said, "We need to talk first, sugar."

My eyes widened. "You're shitting me, aren't you?"

His lips twitched. "I wish I was, but I'm not. I want nothing more than to fuck you right now, but it's important to me that we discuss how you feel about last night."

"Stop it."

He frowned. "Stop what?"

"Stop saying all the right things. I was so mad at you last night, and I wanna keep feeling entitled to that, but you're making it hard for that to happen."

He continued to frown. "You wanna keep feeling mad at me?"

Ugh. Why couldn't men just read women's minds? Like, seriously, it would make life a whole lot easier. "No, but I feel so conflicted about you that it would be easier for me to feel like I was right to be mad." I waved my hand at him. "You coming here and saying stuff like that, about it being important to you to talk about how *I* feel, well that makes it hard for me to hold onto those feelings of being right." I mean, how often was it that a man actually wanted to discuss how I felt about the shit he'd done? Most men I dated wanted to move past their fuck-ups as fast as possible.

"You *were* right to feel mad, Roe. There're no two ways about that. I don't want to take that from you. But I do want to know you can move on from it. I'm not a fan of shit being thrown in my face later on in a relationship. We need to deal with this now and then never let it be rehashed in retaliation for something else."

And that right there made me fall for him a little more. He may not have dated in years, but he certainly knew how to do relationships.

"I can move on from it, Hyde. I wasn't sure last night because it had just happened, so I appreciated that you gave me the space I asked for."

"You're sure now?"

"I'm still concerned about your temper, but you said you would work on that, and I believe you. I'm not the kind of woman to hold a grudge so this won't be thrown in your face every time we have an argument. And I know you'll always fight for what you believe in. I just don't want you to lose your temper over something like a guy checking out my tits or a guy calling me names."

"I do fight for what I believe in, but I need you to understand exactly what that means." The way he said that raised red flags, but he was right—I did need to know what I was dealing with here.

"Okay, tell me."

He watched me with an intensity that showed how serious he was about this conversation. "There will be days I come home from club work with black eyes or broken ribs or bloody clothes. That, I can't change. Not even for you. I won't talk about that shit with you and I won't ever discuss club business with you. We need to settle that before we even begin something. If you can live with that, I'll work on my temper and do everything in my power not to knock the fuck out of any asshole who comes near you."

I wasn't dumb; I knew how bikers worked. What he said didn't surprise me. What *did* surprise me, though, was my willingness to accept it. I couldn't deny it—I wanted Hyde in my life. He desired me for exactly who I was, and he never made me feel like I needed to change myself for him, even when some of the things I said and did frustrated him. To find a man like that was everything as far as I was concerned. The rest could be worked on, but you could never change whether someone wanted you for you. They either did or they didn't.

I placed my hand against his chest. "I can live with that."

He watched me quietly for another few moments. I couldn't read his thoughts, so I wasn't sure what he would say or do next.

Finally he wrapped his hand around my wrist and moved it to his ass. "Now you can get back to blowing my mind with that mouth of yours."

CHAPTER 28

Hyde

I stared at the bottle of whisky on my kitchen counter. I'd been staring at it for the last five minutes. My body screamed for it, but my head told me if I had any chance at getting my shit together, I needed to empty the bottle down the sink. Memories of my mother drinking at six in the morning flashed in my mind. Her passed out on the couch in the afternoons when I'd come home from school. Her yelling at anyone who tried to help her. It was like a goddam assault with these fucking memories. They punched me in the gut and told me I'd become her.

I was an addict and a mean one at that.

Unscrewing the lid, I picked up the bottle and drained it down the sink. My hand shook a little, but I ignored that. I wasn't a fucking alcoholic. I could live without this shit.

"You kicking your habit?"

I glanced up to find Charlie standing in the kitchen doorway. Her eyes were firmly on the bottle I held. There was no point denying I had a problem. She was a smart kid. "Yeah."

She came closer, her eyes lifting to mine. "Good."

We were like two fucking peas in a pod. Both unable to say anything else, but there was a tension or an emotion or some shit sur-

rounding us that I knew we both felt by the way we silently watched the bottle empty.

My heart raced in my chest. I had to kick this fucking habit, if not for myself, for her. Screwing up my relationship with her the way my mother had with me was not something I wanted to do.

When every last drop had trickled from the bottle, I threw it in the bin. She nodded slowly when I found her eyes again. She then broke through the tension when she said, "That shit'll kill you eventually." They were the words I'd said to her about smoking.

I inhaled sharply and then let the breath out. "Yeah, it will," I agreed. Not wanting to talk about this any longer, I said, "You want some eggs for breakfast?"

She sat on one of the stools at the counter. "We got any bacon left?"

We.

It fucking melted my cold heart. I'd lived my life without her in it for so long and hadn't thought a moment like this would ever happen. My resolve to kick the whisky to the kerb strengthened.

Pulling the bacon from the fridge, I said, "Yeah. You want cheese in your eggs?" I'd watched her scrambling some eggs, and she'd loaded cheese and chives in there. "And chives?"

If I hadn't been watching her so intently, I would have missed the look that ran across her face for a split second. She hadn't expected me to know that. She didn't acknowledge it, though. "And onion, please."

That was possibly the first time she'd used her manners willingly with me. I'd pulled her up on it repeatedly, and she usually rolled her eyes and added a please or a thank you.

I reached for an onion. "You got it, sweetheart."

She sat watching me in silence while I cooked. It wasn't until I placed her eggs and bacon in front of her and pulled up the stool next to her that she said, "What time did you get in last night?"

Charlie had been here for almost two weeks and not once had she asked anything about my whereabouts. I always made sure to know what she had planned for each day, but she didn't seem to care about anything I did. This was another first for her.

I poured sauce on my plate. "I just came home about an hour ago." I'd stayed at Monroe's after we'd cleared the air. She'd kept me awake until just after three. When I'd left her, she'd complained that

she probably wouldn't be able to walk today. Knowing my woman would think about me every minute of the day when she tried to walk or sit or do anything made me one happy asshole.

"So you're seeing Monroe now?"

"Yeah."

"I liked her."

I glanced her way. "Her advice pay off with that little shit you're dating?"

She rolled her eyes. "Why do you hate on him so much?"

"I don't trust him."

"You don't even know him."

I put my cutlery down and turned my body so I could face her. "A man doesn't need to know a boy to see him for what he is, Charlie. You forget that I've been where he is now. I met your mother when I was sixteen and chased the shit out of her trying to get in her pants."

Her eyes widened. "Oh God, I don't need to know about your sex life with Mum."

I hid the smile that provoked. "What I'm trying to say is that I know all the sixteen-year-old-male tricks. I know he's trying to get in your pants, and I don't fucking trust him not to hurt you."

She sat with that for a beat and then said, "So you and Mum were together from sixteen?"

I frowned. "She never told you about us?"

"Not really. All she ever really said was that you guys got married at nineteen and had me ten months later. I tried to ask her stuff, but she always got sad whenever I mentioned you, so eventually I kinda stopped asking."

I smiled as the memories came back. "I'd always seen your mum around school. She was the chick who used to tell teachers to fuck off, the girl who smoked down the back of the school, the one who the boys all wanted a shot at. She never looked twice at me until the day I involved myself in an argument she was having with one of the school bullies. She'd stood up for the kid he was roughing up. I knew she didn't have a chance in hell of winning against him, so I stepped in and helped. Of course, that pissed her off, that I took over, but she at least knew my name after that."

Charlie had stopped eating, too, and rested her elbows on the counter, chin in hands. She appeared to be enjoying this conversa-

tion. "You beat that bully up, didn't you?"

I chuckled. "Not fully, but I had to show him that messing with Tenille was a bad idea."

"So how long after that did you two get together?"

"She kept me hanging for a good month or so. Your mother was smart. By the time she finally said yes to a date with me, I was like a fucking puppy following her everywhere."

"I can't even imagine that about you."

"Oh, you better fucking believe it. Tenille fucking owned me."

She pushed off the counter and sat ramrod straight on her stool. "How could you leave her, then?" The question fell from her lips softly, almost as if she was scared to ask it.

This was the question I'd prepared for over the years. I'd lain awake countless nights unable to sleep, imagining having Charlie back in my life. I'd pictured our reunion, and this question had played in my mind like a broken record. But sitting face-to-face with my daughter and trying to express my reasons was far different from doing it in my mind.

"I'm not sure you'll ever be able to understand this, but I did it to protect you both. I got myself into some bad shit and threats were made against our family." I didn't want to get into too many of the details with her. Hell, I didn't want her to know that this shit went on in the world, but I had to give her something to help her grasp it.

She sat in silence, and I held my breath waiting for her response. Finally, she ran her fingers through her hair and said, "You're right. I'm not sure I'll ever understand that. Mostly because—does that stuff really happen in real life or just in the movies? But, I know you're a biker, and I'm not clueless, so I know you're into bad shit." She paused. "I still don't get how you could leave Mum if she *owned* you, though. And you left me, too." Her voice wobbled on that last bit, fucking slaying me.

"Fuck, Charlie, adult shit doesn't make sense half the fucking time. When you love someone the way I love you guys, you do anything to keep them safe. I'd rather you both be sad than dead." When she didn't say anything to that, I added, "I'll always regret what happened back then. If I could take it all back and be the father you needed while you grew up, I would. But life doesn't give you a second go at shit, so here we are, stuck with my choices in life. You'll

never know how happy I am to have you in my life again. I just hope you'll give me a chance to show you that I can be a father."

"It's weird for me because I already have a dad."

She still referred to Craig as Dad, and rationally I understood that, but the possessive side of me fucking hated it. I figured she would always call him that, and I'd always be Aiden to her. I just had to find a way to make peace with that and allow her to have us in her life however *she* needed. Not how I needed.

I nodded. "I'll always be grateful to him for what he's done for you." That, at least, was true. "But you need to know that I'm not going anywhere. I don't care how long it takes you to accept me. I won't be leaving again."

She took a deep breath and then exhaled. This had to be a lot for her to process. "Okay."

"Okay?"

She picked up her cutlery. "Yeah, okay, I get it. You're not gonna stop bossing me around. But just so you know, it's hard enough having two parents telling me what to do. If I've gotta put up with you, too, I'm gonna need something in return. Like balayage or some shit."

"Yeah, good try, sweetheart. You think I don't value my balls? Your mother would fucking kill me if I paid for that."

"Ugh. Well, you're gonna have to come up with something. I'm not down with having three of you all over my shit unless I get stuff out of it."

My kid was the fucking shit. I couldn't have asked for a better one.

"What the fuck is balayage anyway? It's a weird fucking name to call a hair colour."

She rolled her eyes at me. "Oh, Aiden, you have so much to learn."

CHAPTER 29

Hyde

I arrived at the club an hour later with the intent to talk King out of the plan he had for the day. Turned out his plan had already been altered. In a way none of us saw coming.

Marx had stumbled into the clubhouse an hour or so before me, almost unconscious. He'd taken a severe beating before he arrived and had lost consciousness soon after arriving. Our doctor was with him while King paced his office.

"Did you get anything out of him before he passed out?" I asked.

"No. He was delirious and raving about wanting to die. Nothing I said seemed to get through. The only thing I made out was that he was Marx."

"You think that whoever did this to him is the guy he's been working for?"

"Wouldn't surprise me, brother."

"Where does this leave us today?"

King stopped pacing. "I'm putting everything on hold until I can get Marx to talk." His phone rang, and after checking caller ID, he said, "What's up, Kick?"

From what I could follow, Kick was at the hospital with Evie, and it didn't sound good. King confirmed this when the call ended.

"Evie's blood pressure has gone through the roof, so the doctors are considering delivering the baby today. He's staying with her."

"I'll drop by and check in with him later."

"Thanks." His voice was tight. I knew he'd prefer Kick on deck, but King would never ask that of him in this situation. It was one of the things I respected the most about King—he always put family first.

The doctor knocked on the office door, and King motioned for him to enter. Closing the door behind him, he said, "Your guy took a bad beating, but he's only suffering from broken ribs and a broken nose. He's in a great deal of pain, though, so I've given him something for that. If you want to talk to him, now's your chance, because he'll sleep most of the day with those drugs."

King nodded. "Thanks, Doc."

Not wasting a second, King and I made our way to where Marx rested. His swollen eyes came to us, and he grimaced in pain.

"You able to fucking talk now?" King demanded.

Marx's face was a wreck of bruises, cuts, and dried blood. His body didn't look much better. I took some fucking delight in that.

"Yeah," he croaked out.

"Took some fucking balls to show up here. Either that or you figured you were good as dead already, so you had nothing to lose. What the fuck's going on?" King asked.

Marx's throat must have been dry because he tried to swallow a few times.

King bent over him, a look of menace on his face. "You want some water, motherfucker?"

Marx nodded, barely, but got his message across.

King stayed bent over him, his gaze taking in Marx's body. I couldn't be sure, but I'd have bet that he wanted to inflict more pain on Marx.

He proved me right when he snapped back to a standing position, his crazy eyes seeking mine, and barked, "Jesus, get him some fucking water before I fucking kill him!" Looking back at Marx, he added, "And you'd better start fucking singing for your supper or else the pain you're in will hit a whole new level that I can guarantee you won't fucking like."

Fear bled from Marx, and he squirmed in the bed where we had him. He blinked rapidly a few times. There was no escape for him.

He'd come to us, and King would make him regret that decision if he didn't give us what we wanted.

After I had given him some water, he mumbled, "I'll tell you whatever you want to know."

My phone sounded with a call, but I ignored it. Whoever it was could wait.

King pulled up a chair next to the bed and sat. "Who the fuck do you work for?"

Marx pulled a face. "That's the one thing I don't know."

King was up and out of that chair faster than Marx could blink. "Don't fucking lie to me!" he roared.

Marx shrunk from him. "I'm not! I honestly don't know who he is. We never met."

King gripped Marx's chin and squeezed hard, raining a new round of pain down on him. "Tell. Me."

Marx thrashed on the bed, legs and arms trying to fight King. I quickly stepped in and held his legs down while King threatened him again. "You don't start talking now, I'm gonna start removing body parts."

"He sent different people each time," Marx managed to get out between deep gasps for air. "We met in different places, too. There was no pattern to it." He gasped again when King tightened his grip. "I swear! He told me I would never know because that wasn't how he worked. No one knew who he was."

That made King stop. Letting Marx's chin go, he demanded, "How did he make first contact with you? How the fuck did he know you? And what did he offer you?"

Marx nodded madly, tears streaming down his face. "I'll tell you! I swear I'll tell you everything." Another gasp for air and then—"I don't know how he found me, but the first time I heard from him, he called me. Well, I don't think it was him. I think it was his main guy."

"What the fuck do you mean by his main guy?" I asked, ignoring another call coming from my phone in my pocket.

"I met a lot of different men, but there was this one guy who seemed to be in charge. He was the one I always spoke with on the phone. And then they sent others to drop off drugs and collect cash."

King planted his feet wide and settled his arms across his chest. "How do you know the one on the phone wasn't the man you were

working for?"

"By what he said."

"Fuck, spit it out, Marx. What did he say?" I asked.

"He always told me that his boss would be happy with my work." He paused. "Until today."

"What did you do today?" I asked. King remained eerily silent while he took everything in.

My phone rang again. I ignored it, again. We'd be done here soon enough; I'd check it then.

"I dropped off cash to one of their men early this morning, and I followed him, trying to get to the boss. They must have been following him, too, because I didn't get far before they got to me."

King dropped his arms. "So they left you for dead. How the fuck did you get here?"

Marx shook his head slightly. "They didn't leave me there. They brought me here. Opened their car door and dumped me out the front as they drove by."

King's eyes met mine, and I knew we had the same thought. "I'm on it," I called out over my shoulder as I exited the room.

I jogged down the hallway to the room where we ran surveillance. Finding Nitro there, I said, "We need to pull footage of the front of the club from just over an hour ago."

"What are we looking for?"

"The car that dumped Marx out the front."

He whistled low. "Surely they're smarter than that."

"You'd think so, but we need that number plate either way."

Ten minutes later, I had Bronze on the phone. I'd given him the number plate to run. And then I asked, "Any word on Sully yet?"

"Nothing. I'm still looking," he said, causing my gut to tighten.

"Thanks, Bronze." I ended the call and tried to push thoughts of what had happened to Sully from my mind. I wasn't ready to admit my gut feel for the matter. Not yet. I still held hope that he'd show up.

I noticed the missed calls I'd had were from Charlie and was about to call her back when King entered the surveillance room, distracting me.

"Bronze on to it?" he asked.

Both Nitro's gaze and mine dropped to King's hands. Blood covered them. "Fuck, King," I muttered, meeting his eyes again. "What

did you do?" Surely he hadn't killed Marx. I was convinced there was more information to get out of him still.

The murderous energy surrounding him filled the tiny room. There was no mistaking how wired he was for death. "He's still breathing if that's what you want to know."

Nitro's brows raised. "You just had a little fun with him?"

"Let's just say that he won't be walking anywhere in a hurry."

"You cut his foot off?" I asked.

King scowled. "Fuck, Hyde, I'm not that fucking stupid." King's mouth twisted into the kind of smile that let you know he derived great—possibly, insane—pleasure from whatever he did. "I broke his leg so he couldn't go anywhere."

"Good move," Devil said from the doorway. "That asshole deserves it."

My phone rang yet again. This time I answered it. "Monroe. I'm in the middle of something. You okay?"

Monroe's voice filtered down the line. It was filled with concern. "I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but Charlie's just been taken to hospital by ambulance. She fell at your place and hurt her arm."

Fuck. I'd ignored Charlie's calls.

Every fatherly instinct I possessed kicked in. "Which hospital? And where's Tenille?"

"Calm down, tiger. She's okay. I don't know where Tenille is. Charlie said she tried to call you, but you didn't answer, so in the end she called Bree. And Bree called me."

She gave me all the details and told me she was on her way there, putting my mind at ease a little.

King narrowed his eyes at me. "Everything okay, brother?"

I blew out a long breath. "No. My kid's in the hospital."

He jerked his chin at me. "Go see her."

"You good here?" Not that I wouldn't go to Charlie straight away, but I needed to know where we were with the club.

He nodded. "Yeah. I'm gonna wait for Bronze to get back to me and then make plans from there. We'll be sitting tight until then."

Five minutes later, I was on my way to the hospital. My gut churned with worry for Charlie. I knew it was an overreaction, because a broken bone, if that's what it was, could be fixed. But I hadn't answered her calls, and I was pissed off at myself for putting her in a situation where neither parent was there for her.

CHAPTER 30

Monroe

It wasn't often I met a woman I took an instant dislike to, but Hyde's ex-wife was one of those women. I'd been at the hospital with Hyde for almost two hours before Tenille showed up. She hadn't liked the fact I was there with him and had spent the half hour since glaring at me. But besides that, there was something about her that I couldn't warm to. And it wasn't just because she was Hyde's ex.

Hyde was pissed at her. I could tell he was fighting like crazy not to lose his shit at her, which, full points to him, but I wouldn't even blame him if he did.

Raking his fingers through his hair, he barked, "You left her alone when she needed you? When she was sick?"

Tenille turned her glare to him. "That doesn't even have anything to do with Charlie's fall," she snapped.

His face contorted with anger. "She told you she felt sick, really fucking sick, and still, you left her alone. What was so fucking important that you had to leave her then, Tee?"

Tenille was right—this had nothing to do with Charlie's fall, which happened because she was running to the bathroom to vomit—but I was with Hyde. What kind of mother would leave her child when she was sick with a raging temperature and had been vomit-

ing? I wasn't up on first aid, but even I knew that level of sickness required attention.

"That is none of your business," Tenille threw back.

Tension coiled itself around Hyde's body, and he took a step towards her. "I'm fucking making it my business."

Oh Lord. He sounded like he could murder her. I felt the need to step in on her behalf, even though I agreed with everything he said.

Reaching for him, I said, "Hyde—"

Tenille's steely gaze snapped back to me. "Take your hand off my husband."

I lifted my brows. "Your husband?"

A smug expression filled her face. "Oh, you didn't know? We're still married."

"Tenille," Hyde warned in a low voice. "Stop trying to fuck with shit that doesn't involve you, and answer my question."

Her words hit their mark, leaving me confused and upset. Surely she was lying. He'd never told me they weren't divorced.

Tenille moved closer to me. "He never told you, did he?" The woman was awful. I could practically see the venom dripping from her lips. How the hell did he marry and have a child with someone like her?

Well, she wouldn't see me crumble. I didn't believe in letting bullies win. "You can try and change the subject as much as you want, but the fact remains—you were a shitty mother this morning. And I think Hyde deserves an answer to his question."

She slapped me. "Fuck you, bitch."

My hand flew to cover my face where she'd left a sting. She was a crazy bitch.

Hyde finally lost his shit. Gripping her bicep tightly, he dragged her away from me, down the hospital hallway. She argued with him every step of the way, but he paid no attention. To think I'd tried to help her earlier when I thought he was about to explode. Good luck to her. As far as I was concerned, she deserved anything he said to her.

I pulled out my phone and sent Tatum a text.

Me: Did you know Hyde is still married? She's fucking insane BTW.

Tatum: No. Where are you?

Me: At the hospital with them. His daughter is sick.

Tatum: She okay?

Me: She's got a vomiting bug and has broken her arm I think. They're doing X-rays now.

Tatum: I've never heard about Hyde's wife. You okay?

Me: IDK. I don't like being lied to. You know that. Honesty is at the top of my list.

Tatum: Hear him out, Roe. I think he's a good guy.

Me: Yeah, we'll see.

Tatum: Sorry, babe, gotta go. Billy's in a mood today.

Me: Love you xx

I didn't have to wait long for Hyde to return. He stalked down the hallway towards me, alone, with a furious look on his face. It softened a little as he came closer, but not much. Tenille had worked her way under his skin.

"Sorry about that," he said.

"Did you figure it out with her?"

"No. She won't tell me what she was doing, and now she's fucked off downstairs."

"Does it really matter what she was doing? I mean, nothing could have been more important than staying with Charlie, so whatever it was doesn't make any difference, right?"

He scrubbed his hand over his face, and for the first time that day, I noticed how exhausted he looked. Or maybe not exhausted, but agitated. Something. He was off, whatever it was.

"You're right. At the end of the day, it doesn't fucking matter. I just can't believe she did that."

I bit my lip as I contemplated the best way to ask my next question. But there was only one way to ask it, so I just blurted it out.

"Are you still married?"

He held my gaze and nodded. "Yeah."

My heart splintered in my chest, and I realised just how invested I had become in this relationship. But putting up with dishonesty wasn't something I was willing to do. I'd been burnt by lies before and I wasn't willing to go down that path again.

The busy hospital blurred as I focused solely on Hyde. People swarmed around us in the waiting room, but I saw none of them. All I saw was Hyde staring down at me, with what looked like regret.

Taking a step away from him, I said, "Okay, I'm out. I'm done." The words hurt to say, and I felt shaky on my legs. I just needed to get out of there, to my car, where I could sit and process all of this. And cry. Because, fuck, he'd broken my damn heart with his lie.

He took hold of my arm and stopped my retreat. "It's not what you think."

I snorted and tried to wrestle my arm free of his hold. "Yeah, that's what they all say."

His jaw clenched. "Stop fighting me, Roe, and hear me out." The tone he took with me made it sound like I was in the wrong, not him.

Using force, I yanked my arm free. "Don't you do that! Don't you make out that I'm the bad guy here when you're the one who hasn't been honest!" This situation had worked me up, annoying the fuck out of me. I hated sounding like a fucking harpy.

"Fuck, that's not what I'm trying to do. I'm just trying to get you to listen to what I have to say."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "Fine, say it."

"Tenille and I haven't been together for fourteen years. But we never got divorced."

"Is it over?"

"Yes."

"So why does she think it isn't?"

"Fuck, it's a long story—"

"I've got time."

His phone rang, cutting into our conversation. He checked his caller ID and hit me with another look of regret. "I have to take this."

I nodded and watched his back as he walked away from me. He carried so much on his shoulders. I was sure of it. But he didn't seem to want to share any of it. And as for his marriage, I felt like an idiot for allowing his wife to get me all worked up to the point where I refused to listen to him. I didn't usually act crazy like that, but damn it, my jealousy got the better of me.

Hyde finished his call and came back to me. He opened his mouth to speak, but a doctor interrupted. She wanted to go over Charlie's X-rays with him.

I met his gaze. "I've gotta get to work, so I'll leave you to it."

His eyes searched mine and he nodded. "I'll call you when I'm done here."

"No, I don't want you to worry about me. Just focus on Charlie. I'll talk to you tonight." I stood on my toes and brushed a kiss across his lips and then left him before he could argue.

I really did want him to give all his attention to Charlie. But I also needed some space to get myself under control and my thoughts in check. Tenille had fucked with my head way too much, and I had to find a way to clear that shit out.

CHAPTER 31

Monroe

I didn't hear from Hyde all day. It was almost 10:00 p.m. with still no word. I'd texted him around five to see if he had time to chat, but he hadn't replied. I had then spent the last few hours worried about him. Tatum said something the other day about Nitro wanting her to lay low due to club stuff going on, so I was concerned for his safety. Kinda crazy, knowing that Hyde was more than capable of looking after himself, but you never knew what could happen when someone pulled a gun or some other weapon.

I was about to go to bed when he finally showed up. Yanking the door open, I found him on my doorstep looking anything but okay. Dishevelled accurately described him, from his hair to his clothes to his body language. And he watched me with haunted eyes, causing my worry for him to shoot even higher.

I reached for him. "What's going on?"

He didn't answer me. Instead, he stepped inside, shutting the door with his boot, and pushed me up against the wall. His hands were under the baby-doll I wore within seconds, and a deeply satisfied growl came from him when he cupped my breasts.

I pushed against his chest in an effort to stop him, but I had no shot at that. Hyde was on a mission.

He lifted me so he could carry me into my bedroom. I took the opportunity to ask again, "Hyde, what's going on? You look like shit, and I'm worried about you."

Another growl from him. "Only thing you need to be worried about, sugar, is opening those legs of yours and letting me fuck you."

I was all for sex; he knew that. But I was more for him sharing his load. That didn't have to mean dumping all his problems out in the open, but what I was looking for was some back and forth. If this relationship was going to go anywhere, I wanted us to know we could come home at the end of the day and find some comfort there.

When we reached my bedroom and he deposited me on the floor, I forcefully stopped him from getting his hands all over me again. "The only way you're getting fucked tonight is if you stop for a minute and tell me how you are. I'm not looking for details. I just want you to talk to me and share yourself with me."

His face darkened. "It's been a long fucking day. You want me to share the shit I've got going on in my head?"

"Yes."

He shook his head. "No, you don't. If you knew what was in my head, you'd run a fucking mile, Roe."

"You need to give me a little more credit, Hyde. I may not know exactly what you do when you're out on club work, but I figure it's not rainbows and unicorn type shit. I can see you struggling. Between dealing with your daughter, and your wife, and your club, you've got a lot going on. You don't have to carry that all by yourself."

Silence filled the room while he processed that. This relationship was so new that I had no grasp on what he thought. Not when it came to this kind of stuff. So my veins buzzed with a little apprehension as I wondered what he would say or do next.

"I've been a shitty father. My kid hasn't seen me since she was two. I left her mother and never went back until recently. That enough to make you think twice about me?" It was like he was trying to provoke me. Trying to throw bad shit about himself at me in an effort to push me away.

I moved so my body was flush against his, and I gripped his waist. "You've already told me you aren't perfect, so no that doesn't

make me think twice about you. I've seen you with Charlie, and I think you're working hard to make things right."

He hissed, and his muscles under my hand tensed. Curving his hand around my neck, he held me, his fingers digging in to my skin. The small amount of pain that caused coiled desire through me. God, I wanted this man, even if he was a fucked-up mess. "I hurt people, Roe. I fucking inflict pain on them until they give me what I want. I am not a good man," he said through gritted teeth. His fingers pressed harder into my skin, and I decided right then that I was going to hell, because this only heightened my want for him.

"You don't hurt people you love."

"I have."

That should have stopped me, but it didn't. "Who?"

He dropped his head and swore sharply, "Fucking hell." Looking back at me, he yelled, "Everyone! I've fucking hurt everyone I've ever loved!"

I flinched when he yelled, but at least I'd managed to provoke some emotion from him. Up until then, he'd been holding it back even though I sensed it lurking. The room vibrated with his anger. It snaked around us, a menacing evil that threatened to rip us apart. But I refused to let it.

I pushed him and slapped his chest in my frustration. "Why are you doing this? Why are you trying to push me away?"

I hated that he was so hard on himself. The Hyde I knew wasn't a bad person. Why couldn't he see what I saw? Why didn't he know that everyone hurt those they loved?

His hand snapped around my wrist as he snarled, "I'm doing what you asked, red. I'm sharing myself with you."

"No! This isn't sharing. This is you trying to show me all your bad parts at once. That's not how relationships are built."

He yanked my wrist closer to his body while still gripping my neck hard. "This is me showing you what you're getting yourself into," he barked. "Now's the time to walk if you don't think you can handle it."

My own anger flared. Why was he trying to ruin this before it even got started? I pulled my wrist out of his hold and pushed him again. Harder this time so that he stumbled backwards. "What else have you got for me, then? Tell me your worst, and we'll see if I stay," I yelled.

His nostrils flared and his eyes flashed with fury. Before I knew what was happening, he had me around the waist and off my feet while he carried me to the bed. Dumping me on my back, he straddled me, hands pinned either side of my body. He stared down at me with the same level of frustration I felt towards him.

"You're playing with fucking fire, Monroe. I'm trying to tell you that I will hurt you. I will fuck with you. I will fucking rip your heart out and smash it to pieces. And you're not fucking listening. But you need to know that's what I do. I'm a fucking monster." His chest pumped furiously as he struggled for breath while spewing his toxic words all over the place.

Rage and passion collided in the room around us as we both fought for what we wanted. He wanted me gone; wanted to save me from himself. I wanted him to understand I didn't love small. When I let him in my life, I chose to accept all the parts of him and to love them equally. And I loved big as fuck. He couldn't escape it.

I clutched his shirt. "You are *not* a monster. And I'm not fucking going anywhere. Go ahead, hurt me, fuck with me and rip my heart out. That's what love is, Hyde. It's the good with the bad. I can take it. But you better be ready for me to fuck you up, too. Because that's love. The give and take is where the magic is. I want to bleed with you and cry with you and be slayed with you. And then I want to laugh with you and build a future with you and get wet in my shower with you. You made me fall for you. Now you can man the fuck up and show me why I made the right decision."

His breaths came hard and fast as he stared down at me. I thought for sure he'd keep arguing, but he didn't. His lips crushed to mine, and he kissed me like it was the last thing he'd ever get to do on earth. Hyde was an intense man, but this kiss was something else. I could have lost myself in it and happily stayed there forever.

When he finally dragged his mouth from mine, he rasped, "I want you on your hands and knees at the end of this bed, and that ass of yours in the air. And Monroe?"

My fingers squeezed tighter around his shirt. "Yes?"

"I hope you're ready to take everything I've got to give."

I knew he wasn't just talking about how he was going to fuck me. His eyes told me that. I nodded. "I am. And one last thing—I don't want a condom between us anymore. I'm clean."

He pushed up off the bed so he could stand at the end while I positioned myself where he'd said to. His hands came straight to my ass and ripped my G-string off. He then ran them up my back and around to cup my breasts under my baby-doll.

My back arched, pushing my ass up higher. He groaned at that and moved one hand from my breasts so he could nudge my legs further apart and run his finger through my pussy.

"You're fucking dripping for me, red."

I kept my back arched while I also angled my face up. Everything he did felt so damn good. "That's because you get me so worked up, even when you're bloody arguing with me."

He slid a finger inside me, and I moaned with pleasure. "Next time I won't argue. I'll just fuck it out of you."

I moaned loudly, closing my eyes as he fucked me with his finger. I wasn't even able to form a reply to what he said. It turned me on way too much, but I didn't want to encourage him to not discuss shit with me. God, this relationship was one big fucking contradiction. I wanted all the things I shouldn't.

"You thinking about shit, sugar?"

I wiggled my ass at him. "So what if I am?"

He gripped my hips and pulled me back closer to him. His zip sounded, and he slid his cock along my pussy. "I need your mind on my dick, so stop fucking thinking about anything other than that."

"You have no idea—"

His dick slammed into me, cutting me off. My mind exploded with light as need raced through my veins.

Oh God, yes!

Fuck, this was what sex was about. And the fact he was bare only made it better.

Hyde was a fucking master at it, and I would willingly let him take charge of me in this way any time he wanted.

He wiped every single thought from my mind as he held my hips and pounded into me. I gripped the sheets and took every thrust. We were untamed and savage, desperate for each other.

There was a brutal beauty to the way he fucked me. He took what he wanted with ferocious demand, yet he gave me so much in return. More than anything, he showed me how much he wanted me.

He roared out his release when he came. I wasn't far behind, and as I orgasmed, I collapsed onto my elbows. When he was done, Hyde let my hips go and rubbed his hands over my ass. "You're fucking beautiful, Roe."

The angry intensity was gone from his voice, and in its place was something a little softer. Not that soft was a word to ever be used when describing Hyde, but I felt it from him. I loved that he gave that side of himself to me, even if for only a rare moment here and there.

I pushed myself back up onto my hands and turned to face him. Kneeling, I looped my arms around his neck and kissed him. "You make me feel beautiful."

And there was that intensity back in his gaze. "Good. I never want to make you feel anything but that."

I watched him quietly for a beat. "I can love you if you'll let me, Hyde."

He stilled. "You sure about that?"

My heart beat faster. "I've never been surer of anything."

His lips bruised mine when he stole another kiss from me. "Give me everything, and I'll give it right back to you."

It was in these moments, when he allowed himself to be vulnerable like this, that I caught a glimpse of the man I was falling in love with. I knew he'd battle me every step of the way, knew he'd be difficult and argue with me at all turns, but I believed it would be a battle worth fighting. I believed Hyde was worth loving.

CHAPTER 32

Hyde

I stared at the glass of whisky I'd just had Kree pour. My hands shook as I contemplated drinking it, and my head pounded with a headache far worse than any I'd had in a long time.

"You want water instead?"

I glanced up to find Kree watching me with a knowing look. "No, I fucking want this."

She dropped her voice, but the bar was fairly empty at this time of the morning, so no one would have heard her anyway. "How many days has it been?"

"One." But it felt like a hundred.

"You can do this, Hyde."

How the fuck did she know what I could do? I didn't even fucking know what I could do. At this point, I was ready to throw every last drop of whisky I could find down my throat.

Yesterday had been the kind of day I never wanted to relive ever again. After I'd made sure Charlie was okay and that Tenille would stay with her, I'd had to get back to help King. The number plate on the car that dumped Marx outside the clubhouse came from a stolen car, so that had been a dead end. After receiving that news, King decided we'd visit the last two Italians on our list. The night had descended into bloodthirsty mayhem while I carried out King's orders.

Turned out neither of them was the man we were looking for. All it had done was leave a bloody trail that would possibly have the feds crawling all over us. I'd then gone home to a roaring argument with Tenille who still refused to tell me where she'd been when Charlie fell. The way she fought me told me it was nowhere good. All of that without a fucking ounce of whisky in me.

The saving grace had been when I'd ended my shitty day at Monroe's house. It had been an explosive battle with her to begin with, but she stood up to me and gave me everything I wanted in a woman.

I'd made it through the night without touching the bottle, but this morning was a whole other story.

I stood and shoved the glass back towards Kree. "Throw it away. And don't pour me any more."

She arched her brow. "You're gonna listen to me when I say no?"

"Probably not, but you're gonna stand your ground."

"This is the worst plan. Just so you know."

I was feeling agitated as fuck, so I needed to get out of there before I took it out on her. "Noted," I threw back over my shoulder as I headed outside.

King came through the front door of the clubhouse just before I reached it. Narrowing his eyes at me, he said, "You look like hell. How's your daughter?"

"She's got a broken arm."

"And your ex? Still fucking you around?" He'd drilled me on my family after I returned from the hospital yesterday, so he knew where I was at with them.

"Yeah."

"Go home and sort it out, brother. I'm waiting to hear from Bronze today. He thinks he may finally have something on Ryland, which would be good fucking timing if he did. Until then, I'm just gonna lay low. We can do without you for a few hours."

I nodded. "Call me if that changes."

As I headed home, I wondered if it was the best move. With Tenille being so damn hard to deal with, and me being this agitated, the situation was just asking for trouble.



Charlie glanced up from the kitchen counter where she sat eating a bowl of cereal when I arrived home. Frowning, she said, "I thought you had a busy day on today."

"I thought so, too, but plans changed. Where's your mother?"

"In the shower."

I dropped my keys on the counter and sat with her. "How are you feeling?"

She rolled her eyes. "You already asked me that this morning. I'm fine."

I ignored her attitude. "And I'm gonna keep asking you."

After finishing her cereal, she placed the bowl on the counter. "Yeah, well I'll probably start ignoring you."

"At which point we'll have an issue."

Tenille joined us in the kitchen, her hair wrapped in a towel on her head. "What are you doing home?"

"I figured we had some stuff to go over."

She stiffened. "We don't."

I stood. "Tee, let's start over here. I lost my temper with you yesterday, but I don't want us to go on like this. I don't want us to be angry with each other."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "I don't either, but I'm feeling like I'm out in the cold here."

I frowned. "How?"

"You've got your new woman, and you'll have Charlie here with you. I'm not going to be a part of it all soon. I just don't want to feel like I have no say."

I glanced between Tenille and Charlie. "What do you mean that I'll have Charlie here with me?"

"She hasn't told you yet?"

I checked my patience, but fuck it was hard with the way she drew this conversation out. "Told me what?"

"I want to come live with you for a while," Charlie blurted out.

"Here? You want to live here, with me?" I wanted to believe what I thought was being said, but I was sure I'd fucked it up somewhere. Charlie hardly knew me.

Tenille dropped her arms. "Yes, with you," she snapped. "She wants to come and live here with you and your girlfriend." I didn't miss the nasty tone she took when she mentioned Monroe.

"Mum," Charlie said, "I never said I wanted to live with Monroe. Why are you being like this?"

Tenille turned on her daughter. "Well, what am I supposed to think? You seem to really like her."

Charlie's chest puffed out like it did when she was about to go to war with her mother, so I stepped in. "Okay, you two, enough." I needed to tread carefully if I didn't want to alienate Tenille. "Look, I'm all for Charlie coming to live here—"

Someone knocked on the front door, interrupting us. Charlie slid off her stool and said, "I'll get it."

I watched her leave before pulling Tenille close. "We need to discuss this without Charlie in the room. Can you hold off until later?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"We also need to discuss our divorce," I said quietly. Her jealousy over Monroe led me to believe this would be a touchy subject, but it was one I had to bring up. I felt like a complete bastard doing it to her, though.

She blinked rapidly a few times before pulling out of my hold. "I was wondering how long it would take you to mention that."

I raked my fingers through my hair. "Fuck, Tee, this whole situation is screwed up. Have you heard from Craig?"

"He keeps calling me, but he's back driving in Western Australia, so he can't get here."

"Gibson keeps sending him over there?"

A strange look crossed her face at the sound of Gibson's name. I would almost have labelled it as fear. I wondered if I'd caused her to feel that way towards him. Not a bad thing if I had. I wanted her to understand how dangerous he was.

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Have you decided to leave him?"

I fucking hoped she'd say yes, but Charlie came back into the kitchen before she could answer me. And with her was Shane Gibson.

My body tensed, and a murderous urge came over me. I fought hard to contain it. If Charlie hadn't been in the house, I doubt I would have been able to control it.

I reached for Charlie and pulled her behind me. No fucking way was I allowing her near him again. "What the fuck are you doing in my house?"

He kept coming towards me. "Hello, Aiden."

"Stop fucking walking," I barked. "Turn the fuck around and go out the way you came in." I balled my fists by my side.

"That's no way to greet me after all these years, son."

I clenched my jaw. All I wanted to do was take the last few steps to where he stood and take to him with my fists. I wanted to kill the motherfucker, but not while my daughter was in the house. "I'm not your fucking son, Gibson."

He finally came to a stop, not far from where I stood. "You never did understand how I felt about you, did you?"

I'd thought I had. I'd thought he was the best man I could find to be a substitute father when mine had never been there for me. When his son, Brad, had asked me to go away with them on a camping trip when we were twelve, I'd thought all my fucking Christmases had come at once. Not once in my life had I experienced anything like that weekend. And that had just been the beginning. By the time I began working for Gibson, we'd spent five years bonding, and yeah, I'd thought of him like a father. But a few years later, he'd fucking annihilated me worse than my own father ever had. Because giving love and then killing it the way Gibson had was far worse than never giving it in the first place.

"I understand you perfectly, Gibson. You're a twisted motherfucker who uses every person he comes across. You take what's not yours to take and—"

His nostrils flared in anger. He never did like being told truths about himself. "You *were* a son to me, Aiden. And after Brad died, you were the only son I had."

Rage fuelled me to the point of insanity. How dare he say that shit to me. After everything he'd taken from me.... I wanted to rip those fucking words from the air and shove them down his throat, and then I wanted to slit that fucking throat so he could never spew lies like that again.

My chest pumped furiously while I tried to suck air in. Everything he said only made this harder while my anger ratcheted up. "Why the fuck did you threaten to kill me, then?" I roared. "Fathers don't fucking kill their children."

"I had to make you leave, so I could keep you safe from the shit going on with the cops. You would have gone to prison, Aiden."

I jabbed my finger at him. "No! *You* would have gone to prison!"

He nodded. "Yes, but you would have too. I didn't want that for you. I knew you wouldn't leave unless I gave you good reason to, so I threatened your girls. It was all I had."

"Fuck that," I spat. "I don't fucking believe you!" The fury rolled through me, building in my shoulders and demanding an escape through my fists. I inhaled sharply and tried to keep every emotion I felt trapped inside. No fucking way could I allow it to escape while Charlie stood behind me.

"Why do you think you're still breathing? Why do you think our girls are—"

I took a step toward him, unable to hold myself back. The air stilled, and a violent calm came over me. The kind of calm that descended whenever I was about to kill. It was the side of me that craved brutality—the side he'd instilled in me when I was a teenager. Back when he taught me how to hunt and kill. "What did you just call them?" I asked, my voice deathly demanding.

Before he could answer, Tee jumped in, fear splashed all over her. "Stop it! You need to leave, Shane!"

My attention was completely on Gibson, but there was an urgency to Tenille's voice that fractured my focus. She sounded off. Glancing her way, I found her eyes wide and pleading silently with him.

"Tenille, you can't control this," he warned, confusing the hell out of me.

"Control what?" I barked. "What's going on, Tee?"

Everything about her screamed panic as her gaze shifted swiftly between Gibson and me. Ignoring me, she begged him, "Please!"

I finally lost my shit then. I couldn't control it any longer. Picking up the first thing I found on the kitchen counter—a glass—I threw it at the wall. "Somebody better start fucking talking, or else that glass is gonna be a head against the fucking wall!"

I barely heard the gasps that came from Tenille and Charlie. My target was Gibson. All I saw and heard was him.

"Bradley would have loved our girls," Gibson said.

Bradley was his son who had died just before Charlie was born. I had no fucking idea what he had to do with any of this.

My fists clenched repeatedly. "Stop fucking calling them that. They aren't yours."

Tenille sniffed, and I realised she had tears falling down her cheeks. What the fuck was going on?

An evil smile lit his face. "That's where you'd be wrong, son. They *are* mine."

Tenille gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. Her eyes met mine, and what I saw there punched me in the gut.

She took a step away from me, but I snapped my fingers around her wrist, preventing her from going any further. "What did you do, Tee?"

Tears still streaming, she looked at Charlie before looking back at me. "It was a mistake. It meant nothing t—"

"What the fuck did you do?" I roared. The room closed in on me, and I struggled for breath again. I knew that when she uttered her next words, my life would never be the same, but I fucking needed to know.

"Charlie *is* yours," she managed to get out in between sobs. "Not Brad's."

Everything spun out of control as those words fell from her lips. I'd thought my life had been ripped apart fourteen years ago. That had nothing on this. I existed for my child. She'd kept me going all these years. If I didn't have her, I fucking had nothing.

"Bradley is her father," Gibson said, continuing to tilt my world on its axis.

Charlie gasped again. I turned to her, but it was like time slowed, preventing me from catching her before she ran from the room. If my world hadn't been crumbling around me, and if I was thinking straight, I would have gone after her, but I wasn't. My thoughts weren't even thoughts. The only thing filling my head was a fucking train wreck of memories and questions. And after years of locking it up tight, my heart trampled my mind, taking over with too many fucking emotions.

Gibson's declaration that his son was my daughter's real father sliced right through me, taking all the air from my lungs. I was disoriented as fuck as disbelief and confusion replaced my rage. I stared at Tenille. "You slept with Brad?"

She nodded through her tears. "Yes, but it was over before Charlie was born. I promise."

She promised? As if that made all the difference. "You think I care when it fucking started and when it ended?" I slammed my

hand down on the kitchen counter, my anger building again. "All I fucking care about is whether Charlie is mine!"

She flinched. "Aiden, she's yours. I know it!"

My mind connected dots. "*That's* where you went yesterday? To see Gibson?"

The guilt that flashed in her eyes confirmed it, but she didn't answer me. "She looks like you!"

I towered over her. "Get the fuck out of my sight," I snarled. "I can't look at you right now."

If I had to look at her for a minute fucking longer, I would do serious damage to her. Everything inside screamed for me to get her the fuck out of the room. She'd taken every good thing I'd ever given her and trashed it to pieces. Everything I thought I knew, I didn't. I knew fucking nothing. And it turned out, I could trust fucking no one.

Gripping my shirt, she begged, "Aiden, ple—"

"Now, Tenille!" I roared. "I can't guarantee your safety if you don't leave."

She played the smart move and exited the kitchen without another word, which left me alone with the man I'd dreamt of killing for over a decade. I wouldn't do it in my house while Charlie was here, but he sure as fuck wouldn't leave without me delivering a fuckload of pain to him.

My fist connected with his face before he saw it coming. He fell, hitting his head on the chair near him. My boot thudded loudly as I took a step to yank him back up. Holding him by the shirt, I punched him again, sending him flying backwards into the wall. He slumped to the ground, still trying to get his bearings.

I stood over him. "You are going to fucking bleed," I spat at him. "For every-fucking-thing you've ever done to me and my family!"

He kicked his leg out, trying to fight me so he could stand, but I didn't allow the pain his kicks caused to break my determination. I punched him over and over until the skin on his face couldn't be seen through the blood covering it. He kicked and punched at me, too, leaving my face with cuts and bruises. I moved like a machine, though. One he would never beat again.

He fought unconsciousness, his eyes rolling back in his head. I gripped his shirt and shook him. "Don't you fucking pass out yet,

motherfucker. We've got a long fucking way to go still." I wouldn't be done with him anytime soon.

He looked at me through thin slits as his lip curled into a sneer. "You kill me, your club will have to live with the consequences," he managed to get out while coughing blood.

"You think I give a fuck about that at this point?" I didn't care. Storm would find a way to deal with any shit that my actions caused.

He opened his mouth to speak again, but I jammed my foot against his face, pushing it sideways against the wall. "Stop fucking talking!"

My phone rang, but I ignored it. I was dealing with something that couldn't fucking wait. However, it kept ringing over and over. It wouldn't fucking stop.

Yanking it from my back pocket, I barked, "I'm in the middle of something! What the fuck do you want?"

"Hyde." It was King. He sounded less than impressed, but I ignored that.

"What?" I snapped, staring down at Gibson.

"You care to alter that?" Still unimpressed.

"Fuck, King, I'm dealing with Gibson."

Silence for a beat. "Where are you?"

"My place."

"Your kid there?"

Fuck.

I dropped my head. "Yeah."

"I'm sending Nitro. Don't fucking kill that motherfucker before he gets there."

He was right, but I wasn't sure I could stop myself. "Make it fucking quick."

I looked down at Gibson after King made the call. He was barely breathing, but he wasn't dead. Not yet. He would be, though. By the time this day ended, he'd take his last breath. I'd fucking make sure of it.

CHAPTER 33

Hyde

"He's all yours," Nitro said once we had Gibson in the old warehouse we used for these kinds of things.

Gibson had regained consciousness. He stared up at me from the cold cement floor where we'd dumped him. He didn't speak, though. I doubted he could, even if he tried. I'd beaten him so badly that his face was unrecognisable, swollen to the point where his eyes and mouth could hardly open.

"How you wanna do this?" Nitro asked.

I jerked my chin. "String him up." I needed to work the anger out of my system with my fists.

Nitro nodded and helped me hoist Gibson up. There was therapy in the rope work involved in this endeavour. I derived great satisfaction from it, and when we stood back to survey him hanging there, ready for me, my skin hummed with anticipation.

King came through the doorway at the end of the warehouse and walked our way. It was just the three of us there. King had called again after we'd left my place, to say he'd meet us if he could escape the feds.

"You ducked Ryland?" Nitro asked.

King nodded, his eyes focused on me. "Yeah."

"What?" I asked him. It seemed like he had something to say.

Regret flashed across his face. That didn't happen often with King. "I was calling you earlier to pass on some information from Bronze."

My gut tightened. "Sully?"

"Yeah." He paused for a beat. "Sorry, brother, but they found him riddled with bullets."

"Fuck!" I roared, turning my face to Gibson who hung by his two arms, his head down. "You did this, didn't you?"

He tried to lift his head, only managing to raise it a fraction. But his nod couldn't be missed.

I took the few strides needed to get to him. Squeezing my fingers around his face, I dug them in until he responded with a cry of pain. "You'll regret that."

He spat at me and mumbled something I couldn't understand. It provoked the beast inside me that I'd somehow kept leashed through all of this. If he thought he'd seen the worst from me already, he had no idea what was coming for him.

I gave his face one last hard squeeze and then punched him in the gut. The world drifted away after that while I took out every ounce of rage, resentment, hatred, and pain on him.

I finally embraced every dark thought I'd ever had. And every unhinged desire for revenge that had stirred deep in my soul. I'd lived with these parts of myself for far too long. They'd wound themselves around my heart, trying to choke any last pieces of good left inside. They'd flowed through my veins, trying to poison me. I'd battled them daily. I'd fought the fuck against this side of me, but not anymore. This shit ended with Gibson. I'd beat him black and fucking blue until I released this toxic shit from my body.

Every blow I delivered took me one step closer to the retribution I craved.

I fucking hungered for it.

Dreamt of it.

Needed it like the air I breathed.

"Fuck!" It roared out of me as I punched him one last time before falling to my knees. My heart pounded as I drew deep breaths.

I rested my hands on my thighs, my back hunching over as the violent high consumed me. I wasn't done with him yet. Not by a long fucking shot.

"He's got a bit more life in him," King said, moving to stand next to me.

I looked up at Gibson. "Yeah." His breaths were shallow, but they were still there. Standing, I pulled my knife from its sheath as I met King's gaze. "He won't soon."

King's own bloodthirsty desires flared in his eyes. He kept them locked tight, though. If I hadn't finished Gibson off in a way that drew blood, he would have. But he knew I needed to do this, because it was what he would have needed, too.

Turning back to Gibson, I ran my eyes over his body, taking in every bruise and wound I'd inflicted. I tasted my revenge before I took it. It felt fucking good. However, it would never be enough, and I knew that. But it would be a start.

I stepped close to him and pressed the tip of the blade to his chest. "You won't ever hurt my family again, motherfucker," I said through clenched teeth. "Charlie will be safe from you. And I don't give a flying fuck what you say—she's *my* daughter." I pulled my arm back and then stabbed the knife into his chest with all the force I had in me. "*Mine!*"

I stabbed him repeatedly.

I couldn't stop myself.

Blood oozed from him.

It covered him, soaked through his clothes and dripped to the cement floor creating a grisly red pool that only excited my thirst for his death.

I wanted every drop of his blood down there.

I didn't want to stop carving him up until he ran dry.

The blade sliced through every body part as I stabbed him to death.

The sound of flesh ripping apart was the soundtrack I moved to.

The sight of that gaping flesh and his blood, my reward.

It wasn't until Nitro stepped in and pulled me away that the vicious frenzy ended.

I stared blankly at him as he took the knife from my hand.

I was numb.

Dead inside.

I'd taken his life.

Delivered my revenge.

But betrayal had carved a wound that cut deep that day. And that wasn't something Gibson's death could ever soothe.

CHAPTER 34

Monroe

My heart ached when Hyde came into view. He sat alone at the clubhouse bar, staring at the drink in front of him, his shoulders slumped and his head bowed slightly.

I had no idea what I would say to him. All I knew was that he needed me. Desperately.

Closing the distance between us, I was glad we were alone. It was almost midnight, and there were a few club members still around, but King had cleared the bar when I arrived with Nitro. He'd looked at me with those fierce eyes of his. He hadn't said anything. Had simply let me in and jerked his chin towards the bar. But those eyes had said so much. He hoped I could help his brother in ways he hadn't been able to.

I took the stool next to Hyde, sliding onto it, and placed my handbag on the counter of the bar. My nerves had gotten the best of me on the way over here. I didn't want to screw this up. Didn't want to let him down.

We sat in silence for a while. Him staring at the drink on the counter, next to a full bottle of whisky. Me watching with my heart in my throat.

Finally, he asked, "Why are you here?"

His question slayed me in so many ways. It hurt that he even asked it, but the rational side of me understood it came from a place of such desolation.

"Charlie called me. She told me everything." His daughter had been a wreck on the phone. By the end of the conversation, I'd understood why. She'd also shed so much light for me on why Hyde was the way he was. And then she'd made me believe that she *had* to be his daughter when it became clear the reason for the call was because she wanted me to find him and make sure he was okay. She'd had the shittiest day of her life, and all she cared about at the end of it was that someone made sure her father was all right. That was something Hyde would have done, I was sure of it.

His head dropped further and he muttered, "Fuck." Looking sideways at me, he added, "I'm the worst fucking father, Roe. I haven't even checked on her."

I shook my head and placed my hand on his forearm. "No you're not," I said softly. "She doesn't think you are."

"She fucking should." He inhaled sharply and looked up to the ceiling. "Fuck, I may not even be her fucking father."

The despair blazing from him was unlike any I'd seen in my life. I really was out of my depth here, but I persisted.

"So you'll get a paternity test and find out."

My words triggered his temper. "You say that as if it'll fix everything," he snapped. "It fucking won't." He reached for the glass of whisky, gripping it hard, but not lifting it. All the while, staring at it like it was his long-lost saviour.

Being on the end of Hyde's temper wasn't a fun place to be. I cut him some slack, though, because he had good reason to be angry.

As I watched him with that glass, the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. He often tasted like whisky, but I hadn't seen him drink it often, so I hadn't put two and two together.

"You going to drink that?"

He glanced at me but didn't give me an answer. Instead, he looked back at the glass, still gripping it hard.

"I asked you a question, Hyde."

He scowled at me. "You can go."

I swallowed my hurt.

He's in pain.

Let it go.

"I'm not going anywhere."

His chest rose as he sucked in a harsh breath. Exhaling it, he muttered, "Your choice, but I'm not in the mood for twenty-fucking-questions. You stay, don't ask me shit."

My face heated as his words hurt me again. "I'm not here to ask twenty questions."

He stared at me with eyes that were dead. His brokenness killed me. "What do you want from me, Monroe? I don't have anything to give you tonight."

I placed my hand against his cheek and nodded. "I know. Just let me be here with you."

He watched me for another few moments before turning back to look at his drink. We went back to sitting in silence, for much longer this time.

I wished he would let his drink go, but he didn't. He kept his hand around the glass the entire time, and I felt every bit of his silent battle. I also felt completely useless, not knowing how to help him through this fight.

So I waited.

I remained quiet.

And I prayed that my presence would be enough for him to win this round.

Finally, he asked, "What the fuck am I gonna do if she's not mine?"

I closed my eyes, forcing my tears away. Now was not the time to cry. Now was the time for strength. When he couldn't be strong enough to get himself through, I'd be strong for him.

I opened my eyes and looked at him. "You'll do what you've always done. You'll get through it."

He lifted the glass. "*She's* the reason I fucking got through."

I stared at the whisky, feeling like he was slipping through my fingers. "So you're gonna empty that bottle, then? Make yourself feel better with all that whisky in you?"

He scowled again. "You got a problem with that?"

I didn't want to fight with him. Not tonight. But I was so deep in this with him that all I could do was fight back. *Fight for him.*

"That whisky isn't going to solve a goddam problem of yours."

He swirled the amber liquid in the glass. "It'll sure as fuck make me feel better."

I gripped his bicep hard, desperate to make him hear me. “Let *me* help you feel better.”

His eyes bored into mine. “Don’t you fucking get it? Nothing you say can fucking help me feel better.”

“I know that, Hyde. But tell me something—how many days has it been since you’ve had a drink?”

He shifted his gaze from mine and stared straight ahead. “Almost two.”

I let his arm go. “I guarantee you that you’ll regret taking even a sip.”

His jaw clenched, and he slammed the glass down. Whisky spilt over his hand and the counter. “Fuck!” he roared, pushing himself off the stool.

His eyes found mine, and I sucked in a breath at the torment I saw there. His pain cut right through my heart, and I wondered how we would ever get through this night.

“I’m not my fucking mother, Roe!” He jabbed his finger at the whisky. “I don’t want that fucking shit, but my body craves it like nothing else.”

He pulled deep breaths in, struggling to get his breathing under control. Grasping the back of his neck, he walked away from me before turning and coming back my way. He paced like this for a good five minutes while I remained silent and waited while he did whatever he needed to do.

The silence was shattered when he stalked back to the bar, picked up the glass and threw it at the wall. He then wrapped his hand around the neck of the whisky bottle and hurled it at the wall, too.

Fire flared in his eyes. Anger and so much pain. “I’m struggling, red. Like I’ve never fucking struggled. I have no idea how to even come back from the shit that happened today. This fucking pain is pulling me under. And all I wanna do is drink myself into oblivion.”

There he was.

I went to him, my heart breaking for him all over again. I gripped his shirt. “You do it one day at a time. You lean on me. You lean on King and Nitro and all your other brothers. But no fucking way do you go near that bottle again. You get your ass to an AA meeting if that’s what you need, and you accept there’s no shame in asking for whatever help you need.” I moved a hand to his chest. “And you

start sharing more from here. You don't carry your burdens by yourself anymore. That's what I'm here for."

His eyes searched mine while he listened intently to what I said. Resting his forehead against mine and wrapping his arms around me, he exhaled a long breath. He didn't say anything, but he didn't need to. His arms around me rather than that glass of whisky did all the speaking we needed.

We clung to each other for a long time, foreheads resting together. It was in that quiet space that I felt like we'd taken a huge step forward. There really was beauty to be found in pain.

When he lifted his head to look at me, he said, "Come home with me."

I curved my hands around his neck and nodded. I pulled his face down and brushed my lips over his. I had fallen so deeply for this beautiful, broken man, and I would love him so big until he could find a way back to himself.

CHAPTER 35

Hyde

I ran my hand over Monroe's ass before reaching for her leg and pulling it over my own. "Morning, sugar."

I'd been awake for a good hour or more, but I hadn't wanted to wake her too soon. She needed her sleep after last night. Not waking her had also given me time to get my head together.

I'd woken with a million thoughts. Most of them dark. Many of them about finding the closest bottle of whisky. I had a long road ahead of me to win this battle—the drink, the family shit, my relationship with Monroe—but she'd made me understand I didn't have to do it on my own. And for the first time in my life, I was ready to share that fucking burden.

She angled her head so she could look up at me, hitting me with a smile. "Morning."

"You hungry?"

She rolled so her stomach met mine, her pussy teasing the fuck out of my dick. Reaching her hand around my neck, she pulled my lips to hers and kissed me. "Sorry about the morning breath, but I needed those lips of yours."

I gripped her ass. "Fuck morning breath. Give me back that mouth." When she hesitated, I ordered, "Now, red."

A sexy smile spread across her face, and she gave me what I wanted. Waking up with her was the best fucking way to wake up. When she ended the kiss, she said, "I'm impressed."

"What, with my kissing abilities?"

"No, with your restraint. You've got your hands all over me, your mouth on mine, your dick almost inside me, and yet you're offering me food."

"Jesus, woman, don't tempt me."

She grew quiet. "I know you're doing it because it's the first morning we've woken up together in your home, and your daughter is close. And that impresses the hell out of me."

"How do you know all of that?"

"It's the only explanation that makes sense, because you're not a man to walk away from a sure thing like this."

I struggled against the desire to flip her on her back and fuck the hell out of her. That pussy of hers called to me. But she was right, Charlie being in the house changed things. I dropped my lips to hers and gave her one last kiss before smacking her ass. "Time to move this ass, sugar. You're gonna make me bacon and eggs."

She arched a brow, an amused look crossing her face. "Oh, am I? You're fucking dreaming out loud this morning, tiger."

I chuckled as she rolled off me and watched as she reached for her clothes. I'd never get enough time with my eyes on Monroe's naked body. Her curves drove my dick wilder than it ever had been.

Once we were dressed, she came to me and took my hands in hers. Looking down at my bruised and cut knuckles, she asked softly, "How are you this morning?"

That she didn't ask about my knuckles or my face, but simply accepted that shit had gone down, meant the fucking world to me. "I'm fucking lucky to have you, Roe."

She looked up at me. "Well, yeah..." She paused with a smile before continuing, "But that doesn't tell me how you are."

I slid my arm around her waist and pulled her close. "I know that you know I'm in a dark place, and I'm fucking grateful that you're in the corner with me, fighting for me to be a better man. I'm done with yesterday, and I'm moving forward." I bent my face to hers, and my lips grazed her ear when I murmured, "Thank you."

Her eyes misted with tears. "I'm always here for you."

I wiped away the few tears that escaped. "Don't cry, sugar. We're gonna beat this shit. And we're gonna get that paternity test and prove that Charlie is mine."

She smiled and nodded. "Yes, we are."

We.

I fucking loved it more than I ever thought possible.

Smacking her ass again, I said, "Right, kitchen, now."

She bit her lip. "Umm, is Tenille gonna be out there?"

"Fuck no. I kicked her out yesterday."

Her eyes widened. "Really?"

"Roe, there's something you need to know about me. I'm loyal to a fucking fault, but I'm not a man to be crossed. Tenille will always be the woman I loved first, and it'll take me time to move past that shit, but I had to remove her from my home for her safety more than anything else."

She let out a long breath. It was like she'd been holding it for a long time. "Thank God. I didn't like her. And honestly, I wasn't sure I'd be able to hold my tongue if I saw her again. Maybe even not my hands."

My lips twitched. "Going to battle for your man, huh?"

She fired up. "You fucking bet. No one messes with you and gets away with it."

Fuck.

She really was something else.

We found Charlie in the kitchen a few minutes later, pulling eggs out of the fridge. Guilt flooded me as I watched her. She'd been awake when I'd arrived home last night, and we'd spoken briefly, but the fact I hadn't stayed with her yesterday proved to me that I had a long fucking way to go while learning how to be a good father.

Her gaze met mine and she jerked her chin at me. "This shit ain't gonna cook itself."

Monroe laughed, and I grinned. Fuck, she had to be mine. She'd even started talking like me. "Monroe's ready to get acquainted with our kitchen."

Charlie paused and gave me a look that said I had to be kidding. "Our kitchen is a little dirty for Monroe to cook in today. *Someone*

didn't clean it up when he came home last night."

My heart thumped in my chest. This was Charlie letting me know we were good. Hell, it was her letting me know we were better than good.

I jabbed my finger at Monroe and then pointed at a stool. "You sit your gorgeous ass there." I then jabbed it at Charlie. "And you get me the bacon and some plates. You can also set the table."

She frowned. "Hate to tell you, but there's no bacon left. I ate it all for dinner last night."

I ignored the guilt that reared its ugly head again. I'd lived with guilt over Charlie for a long time, but she'd signalled that it was time to move on, so I would.

"Scrambled eggs are good," Monroe said, watching Charlie and me with a happy expression.

I rattled off a list of ingredients for Charlie to grab, and a minute later, I started preparing breakfast for my girls. After fourteen years of living on my own, I hadn't thought I'd ever want to live with anyone again. I'd thought wrong. I wanted to move them both in today.

"What are you thinking there, tiger?" Monroe asked while I watched her, contemplating that thought.

Charlie burst out laughing. "Tiger?"

Monroe grinned at her. "Yeah, he's very growly when he's being bossy. Have you noticed that?"

"God, yes! I guess that name kinda suits him."

Monroe looked back at me. "So? Your thoughts?"

I met her gaze as I stopped chopping onions. Placing the knife down, I said, "I'm moving you in, red."

She stared at me, surprised. I couldn't tell if she liked that idea or not, but whether she came willingly or kicking and screaming, I'd make damn sure it happened.

"Really? Just like that?" she finally asked, with the attitude my cock liked.

"Yeah," I growled. "Just like that."

She glanced around the kitchen before looking back at me. "Well, we'd need to get rid of some of these old appliances and stuff. And we'd need to move mine in. I hope you're ready for some colour in this place. And candles. And bras hanging in the shower. And my toys." She frowned a little. "Might have to rethink that last one with Charlie living here, too."

"Geez, you people don't move slowly, do you?" Charlie said.

"Life's too short to move slowly, kiddo," I said.

"Yeah, I guess so."

Monroe turned to her. "Your dad told me you're moving to Sydney. Are you okay with me living here with you guys?"

Charlie thought about that. "Yeah, I'm cool." Looking at me, she said, "But do me a favour, Aiden?"

If I'd thought my heart thumped before, it fucking ricocheted around in my chest at that. We hadn't discussed getting a paternity test yet, but she seemed to accept that I was her father as much as I believed she was my daughter.

I held my cool. I'd figured out teens weren't so much into parents being excited about shit. "Depends what this favour is."

"Don't call me kiddo again. If you must call me something every now and then, you can call me baby. But don't make a habit out of it, okay?"

Fuck.

Did she have any idea that what she'd just said to me was everything?

I jerked my chin at her. "Noted. Now fill the sink with detergent. You've got shit to wash up before we eat."

CHAPTER 36

Hyde

I arrived at the clubhouse around nine that morning. King exited his office as I walked towards it. "Wasn't sure when you'd get in today," he said.

After we'd taken care of Gibson's body yesterday, I'd come back to the clubhouse and gone over some club business with him that couldn't be put off, but he'd left me alone all night once I'd made it clear I didn't want company.

"You let Monroe in last night?"

"Yeah, she called Nitro and asked him to organise it with me."

I nodded. King and I rarely exchanged thanks, but we knew when the other offered it.

"Where are you at with your ex and your daughter?"

"I've organised a paternity test. We'll have the results in five to ten days according to their website. Far as I know, Tenille's gonna stick around in Sydney until they come back."

"You think she's yours?"

"I'm running with that thought, yeah." The alternative had been too fucking painful, so I'd pushed it out of my mind.

Nitro joined us. Looking at King, he asked, "You heard from Kick? They had that baby yet?"

King grinned. "Yeah, had her this morning around five."

"You got a name? Tatum's gonna hound me until I give her one."

"Jesus, Nitro, I never asked, he never said," King muttered. "That woman has you fucking wound around her finger."

Nitro shot him a filthy glare, but Devil interrupted us before he could respond.

"Spoke to Bronze this morning. He wanted me to let you know that he still doesn't have anything on Ryland."

"Why haven't we heard even a whisper from the fucking feds?" I asked. As far as Bronze had led us to believe, that would have been a given after we dealt with the Italians.

"Yeah, that's been on my mind, too," King said.

"We need to keep moving," I said. "Get Marx out there again to keep showing us all the places where he met with those assholes. It's only a matter of time before Ryland shows his face again, so the more we can get done before then, the better." Devil and Nitro had taken Marx out for a few hours yesterday, but hadn't come up with much.

King nodded his agreement. Jerking his chin at me, he said, "You and Nitro take him out. I've gotta take Jen to her ultrasound this morning."

It surprised me that he was so involved in her pregnancy. But that was King—doing shit you never expected from him.



I entered my home late that afternoon after a long fucking day of club work that yielded no results. Morale in the club was dropping with each passing day that we couldn't figure out who the fuck was behind all the shit going on.

I dumped my keys and phone on the kitchen counter and went in search of Charlie. Finding her in the lounge room, I collapsed onto the couch next to her.

"You look like shit," she said.

I glanced her way, doing a double take when I saw her hair. "You coloured your hair?"

She touched it. "Yeah. Do you like it?"

I knew I had to tread carefully with this. Females were fucking touchy about their hair. "It's different."

Her eyes widened. "Different?"

Fuck. By her reaction, I'd screwed that up. "I like it, Charlie."

"You're just saying that now. You hate it."

I scrubbed my face. The long day, coupled with not a drop of fucking whisky, meant my levels of patience were at a low. But I kept a leash on my frustration for her. "I'm not just saying it. I never say shit I don't mean. I just preferred it darker. This blonde thing you've got going is nice."

"Oh God! Nice is the worst possible word to describe hair!"

Fuck, it was worse than different? A teen dictionary would be useful right about now.

"Your mother paid for it, huh?"

"Yeah, she's bribing me into being nice to her after yesterday. For the record, I'm all about bribing."

"What happened to the balay-colour-thing you wanted?"

"*This* is balayage, Aiden. Keep up."

I frowned. "Looks fucking blonde to me."

She rolled her eyes, and I knew this conversation was done.

"I got your text about dinner," she said, confirming I was right about the conversation shifting gears.

"You're good with that?" Monroe had asked us both to dinner at her place that night.

"I don't know.... Did you say her family will be there, too?"

"Yeah."

She grinned. "Okay, I'm in, then."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "What's that grin for?"

"I'm all about watching you handle her family. I hope she's got one of those overprotective dads. You know, kinda like you and the way you are with Jamie."

"Smartass," I muttered. "That little shit hasn't fucked off yet?"

She stood. "Nope."

As she took a step to leave, I grabbed her hand and stopped her. "You okay, baby?"

Looking down at me, she nodded, knowing exactly what I meant. "Kinda. It sucks, though."

She wasn't wrong there. "Yeah, it does. But we're gonna get that test done and it'll prove I'm your dad. And then we're gonna forget about all this shit."

She was silent for a few moments. "I'm sorry Mum did this to you," she said softly.

I stood. "Charlie, I don't want you to think about me in all of this. Not in that way. Let me deal with that."

Her voice wobbled on her next question. "What if you're not my dad?"

There wasn't anything in life quite like watching your child struggle. It broke me in ways I'd never been broken. The urge to protect kicked in fiercely, and I pulled her into my arms. I wanted nothing more than to tell her it wasn't fucking true, that it would all work out. But I knew that wasn't what she was looking for. She needed me to be the strong one here, to be the one she could count on to know what to do if everything turned to shit.

With one arm tightly around her and a hand smoothing her hair, I said, "If we get to that point, we'll deal with it together. I will never walk away from you. Ever. I will be right here, still your dad as far as I'm fucking concerned, ready to be in your life however you'll let me."

She blinked a few times before nodding and resting her head against my chest. She didn't try to move out of my hold, and I didn't give her the option. We held each other for a long time, taking the strength and comfort we both desperately needed. Life sure as shit had a funny way of bringing people together.

CHAPTER 37

Monroe

Dad's eyes bulged. "You're moving in with him?"

I put down the tea towel I held and gave my father a look. "Yes, and I don't want you going on about that all night, okay? I've invited you for dinner so you can all start to get to know him."

"You've just met the man, Monroe. Why on earth would you think it's a good idea to move in with him so soon?"

We'd been going back and forth about Hyde for a good ten minutes while Dad drilled me before he arrived for dinner. Both of us had gotten worked up, but this question calmed me down. I smiled at him and gave him the best answer I had. "Because I just know."

Dad frowned. "You know what?"

"That he's the one."

Dad drew a long breath. I knew it was one of his stalling moves when he grew frustrated. I hated it when we argued like this, but I wouldn't back down from this disagreement.

Mum placed her hand on Dad's arm as she joined in. She knew he was reaching his breaking point, too. "What makes you so sure, honey?"

"I know you just see his roughness and what he shows the world, but there's a whole other man underneath all that. He's thoughtful, and caring, and giving. He accepts me for who I am and doesn't try

to change me. He puts up with my demanding side and doesn't complain. He listens to what I have to say about things. He stands up to me and fights me on the things that are important to him. He admits when he's wrong, and he tries to be a better man. He's a good dad. *And* he gives me the fireworks I've always wanted." There were so many other little things about Hyde that I loved. And I knew there would be a million more things I'd discover along the way. People could think we were moving way too fast, but they didn't know what we already had, and they sure as hell didn't know what was in my heart.

Mum's face lit up while I shared my thoughts. "I like him, Col. I saw the way he made Monroe sparkle. I think you should look for that tonight rather than focusing on Hyde so much. Look at your daughter and see that this man makes her feel good about herself. At the end of the day, it's not whether we like him so much as how he makes Monroe's life better by being in it."

Dad looked at her. "You just quoted your mother, didn't you?"

Mum nodded. "Remember how much my father disliked you when you two first met? That's how you're acting now. Think about that before you give Hyde too much hell tonight."

He shook his head. "You'll be the death of me, woman."

She grinned. "I do my best, darling." I wanted to high five my mother, but a knock at the front door distracted me.

Butterflies swarmed in my belly.

Hyde.

Today had been a write-off at work thanks to him. I'd planned on tackling tax stuff but hadn't been able to concentrate after he'd bossed me into moving in. Not that he really had to do much bossing. I just let him think he did.

His intense gaze captured mine the minute I opened the door. I was surprised to find him on his own.

"Where's Charlie?"

His hand curled around my waist, and he pulled me outside. Drawing me close, he bent so he could speak against my ear. "She asked me to drop her at the service station around the corner, so she could buy some drinks, which means I've got you alone for a good few minutes. I've been thinking about those lips of yours all fucking day."

"I like your thinking." I *really* freaking liked it. I needed this time with him before venturing back inside where my father lay in wait.

He captured my mouth in a kiss that took my breath away. "Fuck, sugar, you make a man wanna dedicate days to you."

Happiness hummed through me. I loved his desire for me. Looping my hands around his neck, I hit him with a sexy smile. "How about dedicating something else to me?"

"Why do I suddenly feel like I need to be careful about what I agree to here?"

"I have no idea."

He ground himself against me. "Okay, hit me, but I'm not saying yes until I know what it is."

I pouted. "You're no fun."

"Spit it out, Roe."

"Well," I started, "I was thinking it could be fun if you got your cock pierced."

He stared at me like I had two heads. "You're fucking shitting me, right?"

"No. The sex would be so good."

"That's easy for you to say when you're not the fucker who has to stick a fucking hole through your dick."

Even though he was grumbling, I knew I had him. It would take me some time to coax him, but he was using the tone that told me he'd do anything for me.

My sister walked up my front path. "Did you just say you're sticking a hole through your dick?" she asked Hyde.

"Fuck no," he said, his eyes firmly on mine still. "Your sister is trying to convince me, though."

"You won't regret it," Savannah said.

Hyde moved away from me so he could look at her. "You've fucked a guy with one?"

Savannah smiled. "No, but Roe has. She told me how good it—"

Hyde cut her off with a growl. "Stop talking. I never want to hear about Monroe fucking another man again."

Savannah's brows lifted. "We've got a possessive one here, I see."

I took a step towards him and patted his chest. "You have no idea, Sav." I caught Charlie coming down the street out of the corner of my eye. "Ooh, I love her hair, Hyde."

"Yeah, just don't mention that it's blonde. She's touchy about that."

I frowned. "That's not blonde. It's balayage."

He shook his head and swore under his breath about fucking women and hair. I ignored him and greeted Charlie, "Hey, girl, I love your hair!"

Her beautiful smile filled her face. "Thanks, Roe."

Putting my arm around her shoulder, I guided her inside, leaving Hyde with Savannah. "Come in and meet my family. Well, my brother and his wife aren't here. You'll get to meet them another time."

I smiled as I heard Savannah grilling Hyde about me moving in with him. Unlike my father, she'd been excited when I'd told her the news. I loved that she threw a million questions at Hyde, though. He could do with an inquisition from her. It'd keep him on his toes.

"Oh my God," Charlie exclaimed as she looked around my kitchen. "I love your style! These colours are amazing in here."

I glanced at the teals and reds in my kitchen. "Yeah, we're gonna have to add a lot of colour to your dad's house. That white and grey he's got going on is yawn-worthy."

I made all the necessary introductions before saying, "Right, let's get the food on the table and then see if we can all get along." I stared pointedly at Dad as I said this. He nodded, and I breathed a sigh of relief. It didn't mean he'd go easy on Hyde, but it did mean he'd give him a chance.

CHAPTER 38

Hyde

"This is fun," Monroe said a few days later at a last-minute club get-together King had organised at the clubhouse. It was one of his efforts to boost club morale. "I mean, it doesn't beat what I had planned for us today, but it's still fun."

I pulled her close. "What did you have planned, sugar?"

"My mouth around your cock. That kind of thing."

I eyed the exit. "We could find a room. You could still take care of that."

"Stop dreaming, tiger. Tatum just walked in, and I wanna meet Evie and her baby. And Hailee's there, too. I've got secret women's business to get involved in."

I tracked her ass while she made her way to Tatum, only dragging my eyes from her when King interrupted me.

"Just had an interesting call with Billy," he said.

"Tatum's boss?"

He nodded. "He may have some information for us in the next hour or so."

"About the motherfucker screwing with the club?"

"Yeah." He took a long swig of his beer, shifting his gaze to Jen who'd just exited the room. "Fuck, I told her to stay home," he muttered before stalking towards her. He'd been in a foul mood for days

because of her. I was looking forward to her giving birth to that baby and leaving him in peace. But that was months away.

I moved to where Kick and Nitro stood in the corner of the room. Kick could hardly take his eyes off Evie and their baby daughter. I didn't blame him. There was nothing like a newborn and their mother. On top of that, Evie'd had complications with her pregnancy, so I figured he was being extra cautious. Exactly how I'd be if I had more kids.

"Kick!" Evie called out. "Can you come and take Elizabeth for a moment?"

Nitro and I watched in amusement as Kick covered the distance between him and his family in a matter of seconds.

"Wanna place bets on how long it takes him to knock her up again?" Devil asked, joining us.

"You reckon six months?" I suggested.

"If that, brother," he said.

Nitro changed the subject. "Where's King at with Marx? Are we done with him yet?"

Marx hadn't proved useful at all. "As far as I'm concerned, we are. But King hasn't mentioned any decision yet. I'll bring it up with him later."

"We need to get him out of here as soon as possible," Nitro said. "The last fucking thing we need on these premises if the feds raid us is him."

The screech of tyres and a bloodcurdling scream from outside cut through the air. The sound of gunfire followed close behind.

"Fuck," I yelled, my entire body alert. Moving swiftly to the clubhouse bar exit, I met Monroe's gaze and ordered, "Stay here! Do not come outside!"

I ran the distance of the driveway, searching for the source of the screaming and gunfire. Nitro and Devil were right behind me.

"What the fuck?" I said when we reached the end of the driveway. There was no one in sight.

"Where's King?" Nitro asked.

"Last I knew, he was with Jen."

"I saw them come out here a little while ago," Devil said.

They definitely weren't here now.

My gut churned with apprehension. We'd all heard the sounds. So where the fuck did they come from?

"Hyde!"

King.

We moved further outside the perimeter to look down the road and made a gruesome discovery, one I knew would completely change the path our club was on.

"Fuck me," Nitro swore, echoing my thoughts as we watched King approach.

"Motherfucker," Devil cursed, too.

This shit wasn't happening.

It couldn't be.

King walked our way carrying Jen's limp body. Her blood-soaked clothes hung from her, and I knew from the amount of blood that there was no way her heart, or her baby's, was still beating.

I'd seen my president handle some bad shit. Had watched many times while he allowed his madness to take over. I watched now as that madness circled, claiming him.

It was in the rigid set of his shoulders.

The harsh lines etched into his face.

The savage hollow of his eyes.

King would go on a rampage to avenge these deaths.

I strode towards him, meeting him halfway.

"Who the fuck did this? Did you get a look at them?" I demanded, taking in the blood covering him, trying to figure out if he'd also been shot. *Trying to figure out what the hell was going on.*

He exploded with deranged anger. The veins in his neck strained against his skin, and his lips pulled back, baring his teeth. "I don't know who it was, but they fucking messed with the wrong man."

Blood roared in my ears as I balled my fists. The need for vengeance surged through my veins as I stared at Jen lying in King's arms.

Where the fuck would this end? We now had the blood of a woman and her unborn child on our hands. The body count was adding up too fucking fast.

"Let's move this the fuck off the road." Nitro rounded us up and pulled the clubhouse gate closed behind us.

When we were safely inside the compound, King knelt and placed Jen on the grass. He pressed a hand to her belly and kept it there. His jaw clenched as he looked up at us with cold, hard eyes.

He didn't say a word, but we all read his silence. No words were needed.

Our club was in turmoil, and anarchy would follow. It wouldn't matter that the feds were watching, or that picking off enemies could bring new ones. King's wrath would dictate our actions from here on out, and as brothers, we would all stand behind him. We would be ruthless and uncompromising to the bitter end.

"Fuck!" Devil thundered, nostrils flaring. "We're done trying to fucking pander to Ryland. We need to take that fucker out once and for all."

King grunted as he stood. Ignoring Devil, he pulled out his phone and made a call. "Billy. Tell me you fucking have something for me," he barked when Billy answered.

When he ended the call, his eyes met mine. "We have an address."

"For?"

"Someone tied to the motherfucker who did this."

King inhaled sharply, determination filling his face. "This guy wants a war? He's fucking got one."



It was a two-storey building we were sent to. In a quiet, unsuspecting suburb full of soccer mums. Dusk had fallen on the busy street as people arrived home from work. There were far too many people around for what we had to do.

King didn't care. He'd pulled fifteen club members from the get-together for this. We roared in on our bikes, not even trying to draw attention away from us.

"You take the back, I'll come in from the front," King said, and I directed members to where he wanted them.

There was no silent entry. We kicked in doors and filed into the house, spreading out as we went. It was a huge place with numerous rooms to check. No furniture, though, so nothing slowed us.

The lower level of the house was clear. Not a person in sight, silence consumed the place. I met King at the bottom of the staircase. He pointed up, and most of us followed him. Devil stayed down-

stairs with another member to ensure no one came at us while upstairs.

We checked every room methodically and came up with nothing. There was no one in the house. I pulled the curtain across in the last bedroom we checked, to see if anyone was outside.

"It's fucking clear," I said to King who paced the bedroom we stood in with Nitro. The rest of the club members waited outside in the hallway, ready for King's next order.

He slowed and glanced up. Pointing, he said, "Here."

I followed his gaze to an attic ladder.

Nodding, I said, "I'm with you, brother." I signalled to Nitro, letting him know we were going up.

King pulled the ladder down while Nitro moved to the bottom of the ladder, his gun aimed up. I followed King, wondering what the hell we'd find. Hoping like fuck it wasn't a trap.

"Fucking hell," King muttered when he reached the attic. I took the last couple of steps, shocked to shit when I reached the top and discovered what King already had.

"Hello, King. It's been a long time."

No fucking shit it had been a long time.

A woman stood in the empty room watching us.

Ivy.

The fucking love of King's life.

I pointed my gun at her, fully expecting King to as well, but he didn't. Instead, he simply stared at her in silence. Stunned. I'd never seen him lost for words like this.

She didn't acknowledge me, but rather kept her eyes firmly glued to King. She had no weapons; truth be told, she *was* a weapon. To King, anyway. Fuck knew how many ways she could screw with him. I imagined she could wreak more havoc on him than any man-made weapon. "Are you going to say anything?"

He took a step closer to her. She allowed that. Didn't flinch. Didn't appear to be concerned that a gun was pointed at her either.

"You look well," King finally said.

Ivy was a beautiful woman. Stunning, in fact, with her olive skin, long legs, toned body, sultry eyes, and dark hair that fell to her waist. And he was right—she did look well. The last time I'd seen her was over a decade ago when King had walked away from her.

He'd broken her back then, and I wasn't sure I'd ever seen someone so ruined by a breakup as she had been.

"Looks can be deceiving," she said.

"What's going on, Ivy? Are you not well?" he demanded, concern lacing his question. He was wound tight, the muscles in his back bunched, his arms locked by his side.

"Nothing that would ever concern you. But I didn't come here to talk to you about that." She was all business with her flat eyes, blank face and cool tone.

She knew we were coming?

"Ivy," King said in a low, warning tone. "I asked you a question."

Her eyes blazed with bitterness. "You gave up that right a long time ago, King."

"Answer me!" he roared, his body coming to life with an urgent ferocity.

Ivy snapped as fast as King did. Hostility radiated from her as she took the last step that closed the distance between them and went head to head with the man she'd once loved and promised forever to. "You don't get to demand answers from me, King, so don't fucking ask them! Now, if you want me to tell you what I know about the shit going down with your club, have Hyde take his gun off me."

"I'm fucking confused here, Ivy. You came here, knowing we'd be here? And what the fuck are you doing in the attic?" I shared all his confusion. Was this a fucking setup?

"Yes, I organised this meeting. This is a house I own. And I waited up here because I didn't want all of your men pointing their guns at me."

King was silent for a few moments. The only sounds coming from him were the heavy breaths he took. He surprised me for the second time since we'd made our way into the attic when he ordered, "Put the gun down, Hyde."

I kept my aim on Ivy. "You sure about that, brother?" It felt like a bad fucking idea to me.

"Yes," he barked.

"Fuck," I muttered as I did what he said.

Ivy watched me for a beat before looking back at King. I kept my eyes fucking cemented to her, watching for any sign that she was about to turn on us.

"There's an attack coming," she finally said. "I don't know when and I don't know how, but I've heard him talk about it for weeks. And it won't be just on your club, it'll be on your families, too. He wants them all dead." She paused. "He wants to wipe everyone and everything you care about off the face of the earth. And I believe he could do it."

Jesus fucking Christ.

King forced out a harsh breath. "Who?" he demanded through clenched teeth. "Who the fuck are you talking about? And why?"

Her eyes bored into his. "My husband. You took what was his, so now he wants to take what is yours."

"Fuck! Tony is the one behind all this?"

Ivy was married to Tony Romano, one of Australia's biggest crime bosses. He lived in Melbourne, which was why he hadn't been on our list of Italians to check into. I only knew this because King had made me track her movements for a few years after he'd left her. Her marriage had tipped him over the edge, and I'd convinced him to stop tracking her.

I stepped forward, anger spiking through me. "What the fuck did King take?"

She turned her face to look at me. "He took me."

"How the fuck did I take you?" King growled.

Her eyes met his again, still blazing with a fierce intensity. "You didn't, but he thinks you did. He thinks I'm leaving him because I never stopped loving you."

EPILOGUE

Hyde

3 months later

Monroe hit me with the sexy look she pulled out when she wanted something. I'd just walked in the door after a long day out on club business. I hadn't even had a chance to put my feet up yet, and I knew she was gonna blast me with requests to do shit around the house. I knew this because it had been going on for almost two weeks while she renovated parts of our house.

I rested my shoulder against the doorjamb and crossed my arms over my chest. "What?"

Her lips twitched as she fought a smile. She fucking knew what she was doing. She also fucking knew I'd cave to her demands. I always did.

She came to me and rubbed her body against mine while looping her arms around my neck, making real sure to get that sweet pussy of hers against my dick. "It's not so much a what as it is a my-parents-are-coming-for-dinner."

"Fuck, sugar, I was looking forward to a little couch time and then a whole lot of time between your legs." Charlie was away on school camp until tomorrow, so I wanted to make the most of the

night. Fuck knew, with all the club shit that had gone down recently, we could do with a night together, just the two of us.

She pulled a face. "Ah, well that was never gonna happen. Charlie came home a day early. She's in her bedroom."

My brows pulled together as I pushed off the doorjamb and straightened, ready to go find her. "She okay?"

Monroe gripped my shirt. "Steady, tiger, she's fine. Two of the teachers fell sick, so the trip ended a day early."

Thank fuck she was okay.

I ran my hand over her hair. "She called you when she got back?"

Monroe's face lit up with a smile. "Yeah," she said softly.

I fucking loved the shit out of the way Monroe and Charlie had bonded. The day we received the paternity test results that confirmed I *was* her father, Monroe celebrated by throwing a party. She made a big fucking deal about Charlie in an effort to make her feel special. Hell, the kid deserved it after everything she'd been through. Once we'd moved all of Charlie's stuff in, they'd decorated our house together and spent hours with each other doing the kind of shit females loved to do.

Bending to kiss her, I murmured, "Our kids are gonna be the luckiest kids on the planet, red. Having you for a mother." I knew she thought of Charlie like a daughter, but I also understood that she wanted her own babies. And I was gonna give them to her when she was ready.

"Oh," she said, remembering something, "Tenille called just before. She'll be here just after lunch tomorrow."

We were navigating shared parenting with Tenille while she and Charlie smoothed out their relationship. Craig had moved to Perth and hadn't kept in touch with either of them. Charlie was disappointed, but I did everything I could to be the father she needed.

"She better not be hours later again. I can't sit and watch Charlie get upset all over again."

She smiled up at me. "I can't wait to see you with a baby. I think it might just melt my heart once and for all."

I smacked her ass. I fucking loved that ass. "You let me know when you're ready to get started on that. But for now, I'm gonna take a shower and get ready to face your dad."

She bit her lip. "Ah, yeah, no."

"No?"

She glanced at the clock on the kitchen wall. The large-as-fuck teal clock that took up half the fucking wall. I'd asked her if she was blind when she asked me to put it up, because surely we didn't need a clock that size in the kitchen. She'd just laughed at me and carried on. I'd put the fucking clock up for her, figuring that at least we'd still be able to read the time when we hit ninety.

Pointing at it, she said, "They'll be here in like two minutes, maybe one. There's no time for you to do anything except get the barbeque ready."

I scrubbed my face. "So let me get this straight. I've been working all day, I'm exhausted, with no pussy in sight, I've no time for a shower or a minute to myself, I have to be nice to your father all night, *and* I'm the sucker who has to fucking cook dinner, too?"

She smiled like the world was running exactly how it should be. "Yes." And then she added, "Because you love me."

She was fucking right about that.

I backed her up against the wall and dropped my lips to hers. After I had kissed her, I said, "I love you like nothing fucking else, woman. But there's gonna be some serious time dedicated to my dick later tonight. Just so you're aware."

"You say that like it's you getting the better end of the deal. I would have thought you'd know by now that if I could dedicate every second of the day to your dick, I would. Especially since you got that piercing."

Another thing I'd caved on for her. My prince albert was never far from her mind. Or her pussy.

"Okay," I said, moving away from her. "You got the meat ready for the barbie?" Fuck knew I needed a moment alone to get my dick under control. Throwing the fucking front door open to her father, sporting a raging hard-on was not on my list of priorities.

She reached for my shirt. "Just one other thing, baby."

I hung my head. She only pulled the baby word out when she *really* wanted something. Looking back up at her, I said, "What?"

"I need another room built in the shop. A little bigger than the waxing room you built. I wanna bring a beautician in, too."

I would give Monroe the fucking world if I could. She'd sure as shit given it to me. "How many more rooms you reckon you could use in the shop?"

She frowned. "Why?"

"I figure I'll build them all at once. That way they're done, and you won't ask to cut in on pussy time again."

The doorbell sounded as she pressed a kiss to my lips and said, "You speak my language, Mr. McVeigh." She turned towards the front of the house. "Will you let them in while I stir the sauce on the stove?"

"You're fucking kidding me, red. My dick is hard for you right now. I don't need to give your father a reason to bust my balls today." If Colin Lee had been any man other than Monroe's father, I wouldn't have given two shits what he thought of me. But he was, so I did.

She pushed me away. "Okay, go take care of that. I'll hold the fort until you get back."

I grabbed the meat out of the fridge and headed outside to the barbeque. Ten minutes passed, in which time I got myself under control and the meat cooking.

Charlie brought out a plate of chopped onions. As she passed it to me, I took in the expression on her face. It was the one she wore when she had to bring up a conversation she really didn't want to have.

"Spit it out," I said.

"Ugh."

I would never understand teen talk. "Ugh, what?"

She shifted nervously on her feet before finally saying, "Okay, so you know this fishing trip we have planned?"

"Yeah."

"I don't think I can go."

"Don't think or can't?"

She pulled a pained expression. "Don't think, but technically can't."

"So you're telling me you could go, but you're choosing not to? What's the reason?"

"Well there's this guy at school who I really like. I mean, *really*. And he asked me out on a date, but it's for the Saturday night we would have been away. We could do fishing another weekend."

"That little shit from Melbourne is out of the picture finally?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yes."

"Thank fuck for that." It had amazed me that relationship had lasted as long as it did once she'd moved to Sydney.

"So are you cool with changing the weekend for the trip?"

"Yeah, but I'm gonna need something out of it." I'd learnt her negotiating trick and had started using it.

She rolled her eyes again. I fucking hated this eye rolling shit, but Monroe kept telling me it was a phase that all girls went through and that she'd grow out of it. Couldn't fucking happen fast enough as far as I was concerned.

"What do you want?"

"This new kid is gonna have to come for dinner here before your date so that Monroe and I can meet him. I wanna know all the details of where he's taking you for the date. And I want you home by ten on the night of the date. Plus a guarantee that you'll answer your phone should I call you."

"Oh God, you're killing me here. Okay, how about he just comes for like ten minutes before the date so you can meet him? I'll tell you the main place we're going. I mean, I won't know everywhere because there has to be some spontaneity. Home by ten thirty. And no phone call." This was our new style of negotiating—I asked for the world and she tried to bargain me down.

I met her gaze. "Sorry, baby, but on this, there's no negotiating. Those are my terms. Take them or leave them." This was her first real life date since she'd moved in with me. If I could go on it with her, I fucking would.

Her eyes widened. "I thought we had this negotiating thing down pat? Why you gotta go break it?"

"Take it or leave it."

She scowled at me for a moment. "Ugh. You used to be kinda cool when I first came, but now you are turning into such a dad."

I watched her as she stormed off. This wasn't anything unusual for us these days. She'd cool down quickly and be back to try to renegotiate terms. On this one, though, she had Buckley's. We'd be meeting that kid before I allowed him any alone time with my daughter.

She passed Monroe's father on her way inside. My chest tightened when I heard her say, "Maybe you could talk to Dad for me. He's being difficult about me dating."

Dad.

It was the first time she'd called me that. I'd do anything to hear it again.

"Good luck with the dating thing," Colin said, joining me at the barbeque.

I eyed him. "Yeah. Charlie's not gonna like how it all goes down."

"She'll thank you one day. Parenthood is a long game. Some strategies you try don't pay off for decades."

I nodded. "Yeah."

We turned silent for a little while. The only thing Colin and I had in common was Monroe, so conversation with him was difficult.

"Looks like you need a new barbeque," he finally said.

I checked my irritation at that statement. "Had this one for seven years, Col. She doesn't need replacing yet."

"Doesn't hurt to upgrade every now and then."

"I don't upgrade old faithfuls."

He pointed at the wooden trolley. "That wood's seen better days."

"Nothing I can't fix."

He was quiet for a moment. "You always this argumentative, Aiden?" I'd given him my name in the first round of twenty-questions after I'd moved Monroe in. He'd refused to call me by anything else since then.

"Only when people don't listen to what I'm saying."

"Mmm."

We stood in silence while I finished cooking the meat. I threw the mushrooms and onions on the barbie that Monroe had chopped.

"So you've been going to AA?" he said.

I inhaled a long breath. This wasn't a secret, but I didn't love discussing the fact I struggled with alcohol. "Yeah."

Silence again for a long few minutes.

And then—"How long until you decide to marry my daughter?"

I turned to face him. Hadn't seen that question coming. "I've already decided, Col." I was just waiting for my divorce from Tenille to go through.

"I figured as much. But I need to know when it'll happen so I can start getting the cash ready to pay for it."

Hadn't seen that coming either. "There's no need. I'll pay for it."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "You and I are going to have a problem if you argue with me over that."

"What? Different to the problem we have over me being with your daughter?"

"I have no problem with that anymore. You've proven yourself."

"Jesus, you have a fucking funny way of showing it, then."

Before he could respond to that, Monroe and Charlie interrupted us. I narrowed my eyes at Charlie. She appeared happier than when she'd stomped away from me. I wouldn't have put it past her to try to con Monroe into agreeing to this date. The two of them often took sides against me. What neither of my girls understood was that there were some things I was happy to let them have, but others were a hard no. This was a fucking hell no.

"You finished with the meat?" Monroe asked.

"Yeah. Just about done with the mushrooms and onions, too."

Col passed her the tray of cooked meat and then said to Charlie, "I've got something for you, Charlie."

She smiled at him. Charlie liked Col, and I didn't think it was just because she liked watching him give me a hard time. I had to give the guy credit for taking the time to get to know her. It was still early days, but he was shaping up to be the grandparent she'd never had.

He pulled a photo out of his wallet and passed it to her. I couldn't see what it was, but the way her face broke out into a wide smile told me it was something she loved.

She looked at him hopefully. "Is this what I think it is?"

He nodded. "Yes. Don't get too excited. She's an old car, but I figure you and I'll have plenty of time to work on her before you get your licence."

"You bought a car?" Monroe asked, full of surprise.

Col looked at his daughter with the kind of look I watched Charlie with. The one that revealed the unconditional love we felt for our child. "Yes." He glanced at Charlie. "Angela has more photos on her phone if you want to see them."

"Cool," Charlie said, her face full of more excitement than I'd ever seen on her.

They left us to go and look at car photos, and I pulled Monroe close, settling my hand on her ass. "We're getting married, sugar."

She pulled her head back so she could look up at me. "Oh, really? Are we? You just decided that, did you?"

I tightened my hold on her. "No, not just now. I decided that a long fucking time ago, but your father has just given his blessing."

Her eyes widened. "Really?"

"Really." I dipped my face to hers so I could catch her lips in a kiss. When I'd had my fill, I said, "I love you, and I respect your father, but just so you know, no one would have kept me from marrying you. You're the woman who showed me there's good out there when all I fucking saw was bad. I can't do this life without you."

She hit me with a smile that reached every corner of my dark soul. "I can't do it without you, either. I love you, Aiden McVeigh, even if you are the bossiest damn man I have ever met."

KING'S WRATH

KING'S WRATH

Finally meet the enigma that is King.

Our love wasn't like everyone else's.
There wasn't a first date or flowers and gifts.
We didn't have a song or cute nicknames for each other.
There were no calls during the day to check in with me, no coming home to cook me dinner, and no foot massages at the end of a long day.
That wasn't how he loved.
But love me he did.
Madly, deeply, passionately, completely.
King loved with everything he had.
He just loved a little differently to most.

This is King's story. From the beginning. All the ugly and all the beautiful, by the end of his story you will come to understand the man behind the club.

Dear Reader,

Thank you for taking this journey with me. For letting King into your heart. He's my most complex character to date and whether you love him or are just interested to see where his story goes, you will at least have a greater understanding of him by the end of this book.

King has been in my head since 2014. I thought I knew him well. It turns out I'd barely scratched the surface of this beautiful man. You may think beautiful is an odd word to describe King, but I see him as beautiful in so many ways.

This story really brings home how much the people in our lives influence our story. How they shape us, bend us, help define us, and how they help us to be either better or worse versions of ourselves.

May you always choose those people who make you love yourself better when you're with them.

I hope you love King as much as I do.

Nina x

Our love wasn't like everyone else's.
There wasn't a first date or flowers and gifts.
We didn't have a song or cute nicknames for each other.
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home to cook me dinner, and no foot massages at the end of a long
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He just loved a little differently to most.

THE EARLY YEARS

CHAPTER ONE

*Zachary King
Thirty Years Ago
Aged 9*

Her screams called me.

They woke me in the night. It had been months since the last time, so I'd expected them for weeks. Dad had been getting angrier every day, and I knew that meant screams would come soon. Either from me or from them. I didn't know which type Dad preferred more.

I left my bed and crept down the hallway. It was a bad idea. I'd never done it before, but I wanted to know what was happening to make those girls scream and cry so bad.

If Mum or Dad caught me, I knew I'd be in for it. Dad would probably burn more cigarettes into my skin, or break my arm again, but I was getting good at zoning out when he did that. I'd found a way to ignore the pain. I'd found the voices in my head to talk to while he hurt me. They never let me down.

A loud scream came from the room at the bottom of the stairs—the room I wasn't ever allowed in. I froze. My head felt really warm. Full. Like hot, thick liquid filled it. And my heart beat fast and hard. I worried that it might get too big for my chest. I wasn't sure if that could happen, but it really felt like it could.

When the screams stopped, I carefully stepped onto the first step of the staircase. I made sure to be very quiet. I even held my breath. That wasn't hard to do. Being scared often made me do that. I could hold my breath for longer than anyone I knew.

I'd almost made it to the bottom when another scream sounded. My father spoke then, causing me to freeze again. "You think you're leaving here, bitch? No one fucking leaves here. I'm going to choke the fucking life out of you while I fuck you."

My arms and legs turned to jelly, and my whole body felt hot. I knew what fucking was. My school friends talked about sex. Mikey had even shown me one of his dad's videos. But somehow I knew this wasn't what we talked about at school. Something in the way my dad said that she wasn't leaving here made me think this was very bad. It was the same way he spoke to me when he hurt me.

"Lois!" my father barked. "Pass me that fucking knife."

The sounds of my mother doing as he'd said came through the wall in between us.

And then the screams came again.

I heard a funny grunting noise after that, and I couldn't stop myself—I took the last few steps so I could see what they were doing.

I stood completely still when I finally saw what my parents did in this room to make girls scream. Mum sat in a chair in the corner of the room watching my father having sex with a naked girl on a mattress on the floor. The girl's hands were tied together above her head, and her body jerked all over the place. Dad's hands squeezed her neck, and I knew he was making it really hard for her to breathe.

I wanted to yell at him to stop.

He was hurting her so bad.

I wanted to run back up the stairs and hide under my covers.

I wanted to leave this house and never come back again.

But I did nothing.

I watched my father.

And I hated myself.

I hated that I liked watching him hurt her.

I hated that I was glad he was hurting her rather than me.

CHAPTER TWO

*King
Seventeen Years Ago
Aged 22*

Rage was better than misery.

And blood was better than tears.

My president and I agreed upon that.

Jethro stood over Shark, who lay sprawled on the dirt out the back of the clubhouse, his angry red face glaring down at the club member who'd provoked his rage. "Did you really think you'd get away with peddling that shit on the side? You thought I'd never find out?"

Shark, the idiot, had been selling coke for the past month to a bunch of kids from the local high school. He'd skimmed some off the club supply and pocketed the cash for himself. At first, it had been such a small amount that it had gone undetected. But greed always won in life, and he'd taken enough last week for Jethro to notice. Our president's ruthless way of dealing with betrayal like this meant it had only taken him a day to find out who was responsible.

And here we were, watching Shark's punishment.

Or should I say, his torture, because Jethro was just getting started. By the time he was done, Shark wouldn't be recognisable. He also wouldn't be breathing.

Every cell in my body roared to life as I watched Jethro deliver the punishment. I hungered for this kind of violence, the kind inflicted as retribution, and although I wasn't the one to deliver it, I could taste the sweet victory of it as I zeroed in on the blood dripping from his mouth.

When Shark didn't answer him, Jethro smashed his heavy boot down onto Shark's face, grinding it harder into the ground. "Answer me!"

My restraint stretched close to breaking point. It took everything to hold myself back. To not push Jethro out of the way and shove *my* boot in Shark's face.

Shark writhed on the ground and tried like hell to push Jethro off him, but our president's strength was unrivalled. When Shark wasn't forthcoming with an answer, Jethro yanked him up off the ground and slammed him against the brick wall of the clubhouse.

He gripped the front of Shark's shirt. "You wanna know what we do to members who betray the club?"

Struggling for breath, with his face swelling and cut to shit, Shark managed to get out, "I swear I'll never do it again, Jethro. I swear!"

Jethro's eyes turned wild. Frenzied. Like a fucking madman—something I recognised and related to. "I don't fucking believe you!"

Without waiting for a response, he pummelled Shark's face until it was a bloody pulp. Two other members had to move into place to hold Shark up as Jethro unleashed his fury. Almost unconscious, the only sounds coming from him were grunts of pain and cries that turned to whimpers and pleas for mercy.

Jethro scowled at him in disgust. "Have some fucking self-respect and stop your fucking crying." He grabbed Shark's chin and pulled his face up. "It's time to settle in. We've got a long night ahead of us."

I'd been told what happens when a member is disloyal to the club, but this was the first time I'd witnessed it. It was also my first week as a prospect, and I knew I'd never make the same mistake as Shark. Fuck, I knew that before witnessing his death. I may have only been a prospect for a short time, but I'd been a hangaround for a while, and I knew I'd live and breathe for this club. I'd fucking live and breathe for anyone who was as loyal to me as I was to them.



"How was your day?" Ivy asked when I joined her in the kitchen of our tiny home later that night.

She stood at the sink, back to me, washing dishes, and my gaze dropped to her ass. Five years of that ass being mine, and I still couldn't get enough of it or of her. Getting engaged to her two years ago was one of the smartest things I'd ever done. The sooner I had a wedding ring on her finger, the better.

Keeping my eye trained on the short denim skirt she wore, I grabbed the tub of ice cream I'd picked up on my way home and a spoon from the rack where she was placing clean dishes to dry. I popped the lid and moved to where she stood, pressing myself to her back. Ivy had a thing for short skirts and loose tank tops that gave me perfect access to all my favourite places. Today she wore both, and my gaze dropped to her chest. She had on the pink lacy bra I loved, and my dick hardened while I thought about ripping it off her soon.

As I manoeuvred my arms around her, ice cream in one hand, spoon in the other, I answered her question. "Long." *And fucking satisfying.* "Here," I said as I brought a spoon of ice cream to her mouth. "It's your favourite." Ivy had an obsession with banana ice cream from Baskin Robbins, and I tried to feed it to her as often as I could. It made her happy, and I fucking loved seeing her happy.

"Mmm," she murmured after her first spoonful.

She stopped washing dishes as I continued feeding her. Hands still in the sink, she rested her head against my chest and gazed up at me.

After her fourth spoonful, she said, "It's been exactly three days since I've had ice cream."

"I know," I said around a smile as I scooped more from the tub for her. "Too long to go without something you love."

I bent my face to her hair. Fuck, she smelt good. I dropped a kiss there before lifting my head and sliding the spoon into her mouth again.

It was moments like these with her that I lived for. Ivy's moods shifted so fast some days that I couldn't keep up. Add to that my moods, and we spent a lot of fucking time arguing over stupid shit.

As much as we tried, we were both too damn stubborn and unable to control our tempers to stop the unnecessary arguments.

Placing the tub and spoon on the counter, I slipped my hand down the front of her skirt and dipped my head again so I could kiss the bare skin on her shoulder. Not only had it been three days since she'd had ice cream, it had also been that long since she'd had my cock. Not by my fucking choice, though. If I had my way, I'd be inside her morning and night. And in-between if I could swing it, too.

"King," she grumbled, pulling my hands from her skirt, "I've got all these dishes to wash and then I've got study to do."

I glanced at the huge pile of baking dishes she referred to. "Why the fuck are there so many dirty dishes?" I'd known Ivy for eleven years and lived with her for four; she didn't love baking.

She turned in my arms, placing her hands on my chest. Bubbles from the sink soaked into my shirt and some floated in the air between us. But I wasn't looking at those bubbles; my gaze was focused entirely on the happiness radiating from my woman.

Smiling, she caught me up. "Our mothers spent the day with me. The girls, too. We made shortbread, white Christmas, rum balls, Christmas pudding, and a gingerbread house. You should have seen Skylar. I don't think I've seen her as excited for something as she was for that gingerbread house. Even Nik was happy to spend the whole day with us." My sister, Annika, had just turned seventeen and tried to spend as much time as she could with her dickhead boyfriend. She argued a lot with me and our foster mum, so it surprised me she'd stayed all day. Skylar, on the other hand, was only seven and desperately craved family time and attention, so I could imagine her eating up every minute of the day with everyone.

Time slowed while I captured everything good about this moment. From the first day I met her, Ivy had drowned out some of the bad in my world. I was eleven, she was ten, and she'd looked at me like she knew what wounds were etched into my soul. All I'd said to her was "Don't touch my shit, and I won't touch yours. And anytime you want to whinge about your life, I'm not interested. I already know that life sucks." That had been the day my foster mother's sister, Ivy's new foster mother, brought her over to our house and introduced everyone. She'd listened to what I said before replying, "Deal. And if you touch me, I'll kick you so hard in the balls they'll fall off." The way she'd said it was as if she truly believed that would hap-

pen, and for one brief moment, she'd flooded my mind with bright light, dulling the darkness in there.

I gripped her waist and lifted her onto the kitchen counter next to the sink. A second later, my hands slid up her thighs and under her skirt, and before she managed to protest, I had a thumb on her clit and my lips to hers.

Pulling one of her legs around my waist, I groaned into her mouth, "Fuck, I will never get enough of you."

She kissed me back, but her usual enthusiasm was missing. When the kiss ended, she said, "I don't have time for this, King. I told you that."

I rubbed her clit and slid a finger inside her. "You're wet for me so I'd say you should make the time for this."

Her lips flattened in the way that told me we were in for a fucker of an argument if I continued to push the point. Smacking her hands against my chest, she threw out, "Everything always revolves around what you want. What about what *I* want? Does that ever matter to you?"

Fuck, something had her worked up. Letting her go, I took a step back. "What's going on here, Ivy? What's pissed you off today?"

Her eyes widened. "*Today*? You make me sound like I'm a bitch who is always pissed off."

I raked my fingers through my hair, not wanting to get into this with her. Not tonight. Not after the events of the day that had me wired for blood. I'd come home hoping that some time with her would trip that switch.

"I'm not doing this with you tonight." I turned to leave the kitchen. To put some space between us.

I'd only made it two steps out of the room when she wrapped her hand around my bicep and yelled, "Don't you walk away from me! I want to know what you meant!"

I clenched my jaw and counted to ten, willing her to let this shit go. She didn't, though, and I didn't make it to ten before she'd convinced me to have it out with her.

Spinning back around, I glared at her, resentment and frustration choking the air around us. Why did we always—*always*—have to hurl our pain at each other like this? Why the fuck couldn't we express ourselves without all this extra bullshit?

I slammed my hand down on the table next to us. "All right, let's get this shit out then."

She flinched before quickly recovering, every inch of her body tense and ready for battle. "I told you I have study and that I want to finish cleaning the kitchen, but no, you decide—and like always, it's *your* decision—that we're going to have sex. I'm sick of never getting a say, King. And I don't like that you accused me of always being pissed off. I'll admit I'm stressed with my study and work, but I'm not always going off at you about stuff."

I wanted to tread carefully with her, but she'd worked me up so much that I didn't have that in me anymore. "Almost every fucking day lately, I come home to a new fight with you, and the thing I've worked out is that whatever the fuck you're arguing with me over isn't actually the issue. So dig deep and figure out what it really is, and spit that shit out fast because I'm running out of patience for all of this."

She took a long breath and stared at me like she was trying to figure out which way to go now. Finally, she spat out, "Fuck you and your patience!"

A second later, she attempted to barrel past me out of the kitchen, clearly having changed her mind about wanting to get into this with me, but there was no way she was leaving until I got to the bottom of whatever her issue was. I was done with coming home to yet another tongue-lashing.

Scooping her around the waist, I lifted her and carried her into the living room. She kicked and fought me, but she was no match for my strength. Depositing her on the couch, I straddled her and pinned her in place so she couldn't escape. Gripping her chin hard, I stared into her eyes and demanded, "What's really going on?"

Winded, she fought for breath, remaining silent while glaring back at me.

"I've got all fucking night, Ivy. I'm not moving until we sort this out."

She continued to glare silently at me, until finally she exhaled and said, "You told your mum you don't want me taking that job at the hospital."

"Yeah."

"Well, it's the job I'm going to take, and I know you're going to make it hard for me to do that. And it pisses me off that you always

do this and—”

I placed a finger to her lips to quieten her. “It’s not safe for you to work there. Not when I can’t guarantee I’ll always be available to come pick you up when you finish your shift in the middle of the night.”

“I don’t need you to come and pick me up. They have security for nurses who work that shift. I’ll be fine.”

Ivy wanted two things in life. Me, and a job in nursing. She had both, but she’d decided to do further studies, which meant she wanted to switch jobs so she could work nights and have the days to study. She’d found a job, but I didn’t like the fact she’d be walking out of work at 2:00 a.m. alone. Now that I’d been made a prospect, who the fuck knew when I’d be called out at night for club business.

“I don’t know that for sure, and I won’t allow something I’m not one hundred percent on.”

“Oh my God, you can be an ass!” She pushed hard against my chest, trying to move me, but I resisted.

Taking hold of her arms, I held them by her side. “I’m not fucking putting you out there on the street for any motherfucker to do what they want to you. Do you have any idea of the kind of men who walk those streets?”

Her eyes flashed with wild anger. “Do *you* realise how impossible you’re being? And that this is how you always handle me?”

“Now you’re being dramatic. I don’t *handle* you.”

“Yes! You do! It’s like you’re saying I’m a weak woman who can’t fucking look out for herself, and I’m over it. I’m not doing what you say this time, King.”

My chest tightened at the loss of control I felt. Keeping her safe was *all* I fucking cared about. It was my goddam mission in life to never let hurt come to her again. Under my watch, she would never experience the kind of pain her parents had permitted. After they’d fucking rented her out as a child to men on weekends to do whatever they wanted to her, I’d looked out for her and dedicated time helping her find a way through that. And I’d continue doing that for eternity.

My hands crushed harder around her wrists, ensuring she couldn’t leave. Not until I’d made her understand I was right. “You *will* do as I say, Ivy. And if you go against me, I’ll take you out there

myself and show you the kind of shit that goes on. You'll change your mind real fucking fast."

Her eyes bored into mine while she considered that. If hate were a physical thing, it would have been smashing into me. That knowledge scared the fuck out of me because it was the first time Ivy had ever looked at me this way.

Finally, she nodded and said, "Fine. You win." Jerking her wrists, she added in the coldest tone she'd ever taken with me, "You can let me go now."

My eyes searched hers, needing to read the truth in her agreement. "You won't take that job?"

"I won't take that job." Her voice turned flat, resigned.

I wanted to figure out how to get us both on the same page happily, but right now I had the answer I needed, so that could wait for another time. And bringing up the fact that she sounded so down about it would only stir this argument more. Letting her go, I sat back. "Good."

She watched me for another moment before saying, "Get off me, King. I can't stand looking at you for another minute tonight."

I ignored her attitude. All I cared about was that she'd come around to my way of thinking. She'd get over whatever anger she felt soon enough.

She didn't waste time leaving the room, and as she went, she glanced back at me and said, "Don't bother coming to bed tonight. There's no way I'm letting you anywhere near me."

CHAPTER THREE

King
Six Months Later

"You're with me, King."

I eyed Jethro, watching him closely as he walked towards his bike. It had been just over six months since I was made a prospect, and today I'd been voted in as a full patch member.

Ghost scowled at me. He'd made it clear how unimpressed he was that Jethro had moved me up so fast. Usually, it took Jethro over a year to agree to a vote on a prospect.

Ignoring Ghost, I followed my president.

"Stick close to me," he said as he got on his bike. "We've got business to take care of, and then we're meeting Breaker."

Breaker, the Black Deeds president. That surprised me, because Jethro usually took his VP with him when he met Breaker, but I kept my surprise to myself.

Just under an hour later, we pulled into an out-of-the-way construction site. A lone car waited for us, the owner perched on the hood. He turned as he heard our bikes rumble in.

"Dash," Jethro greeted him. "You've got the package?"

Dash narrowed his eyes at me before glancing back at Jethro, distrust clear in his gaze. "Who the fuck is this? We have a deal, Jethro. You come alone."

"King will be with me from now on." His tone signalled he wouldn't get into a discussion on this.

I had no idea who Dash was or what the fuck was going on, so I kept quiet.

Raking his fingers madly through his hair, sweat forming on his brow, Dash muttered, "Fuck, this changes shit, Jethro. If they find out—"

Jethro grunted his displeasure with the conversation as he scrunched a handful of Dash's shirt into his grip and pulled him close. "King's not spilling a word of this, but yeah, if they find out some other way, you're dead. If you don't do as I say, I'll fucking make sure they know about our little visits, so give me the fucking package and get on board with this."

Dash crossed his arms, a smug expression on his face. "You're full of shit. You've got nothing worth shit on me, and without the info I've got for you today, you can't prove a thing about Breaker."

Jethro bared his teeth as his lips pulled back in a sneer. "Show him what happens to men who don't honour their commitments, King," he barked.

Over the past six months, I'd been called upon numerous times to deal with assholes who tried to fuck the club over, but this was the first time Jethro had personally asked me to step up.

Not wasting a second, I swapped places with Jethro and landed my first punch. Adrenaline blazed through me, and my lust for violence took over.

I smashed my fist into his face repeatedly, barely registering his cries of pain as bloodlust filled my mind. While every one of my senses picked up on his pain, I needed only the visual and touch to keep me locked into what I was doing.

It was the blood, the agony on his face, and the feel of inflicting pain that got me off.

And that made me want more.

So much more.

Most days I walked the tightrope of controlling my urges. They had grown over the last six months since I'd deepened my ties to the club. If it weren't for Ivy and my family, I'd give in to them completely. My love for a few kept my madness in check, but it was in these moments with the club that I could surrender and own my insanity.

Dash was unrecognisable by the time Jethro pulled me off him. Swollen eyes glued shut with blood, broken bones, teeth missing, crooked nose, and a complete and utter sense of defeat made up the man who'd dared argue with the Storm president. The message was unmistakable.

As I fought to get myself under control again, Jethro crouched in front of Dash and said, "Give me the package, Dash, or else I'll let him loose on you again."

One of Dash's eye's cracked open to a slit. He rattled off an address for where he'd left the package, struggling to get his words out. When he was done, his body sagged more than it already had, like a deep silent sigh of anguish. I recognised his pain for what it was because I'd experienced the same pain at the hands of my father. It was emotional more than physical. Your mind could find a way to cope with physical pain, but it could never fully survive the emotional trauma another person inflicted on you.

Jethro called Ghost and had him retrieve the package. We waited in silence while he did so. Jethro retreated to his bike, and I rested against Dash's car while watching him. My mind swam with questions about why we were here collecting a package, but I knew not to ask. Jethro kept his cards close to his chest and pounced on anyone who dared question him over anything. I chose to trust my president, so while I wondered what we were doing, I never doubted it was for the good of the club.

Fifteen minutes passed before Jethro received the call that Ghost was in possession of the package. His eyes found mine as he ended the call. Coming my way, he said, "We're good to go. Just need to take care of one last loose end."

Dash.

I moved off the hood of Dash's car and waited for Jethro to tie up his loose end. Instead of doing that, though, he nodded at me, eyes going to where I kept my gun holstered and said, "This one's yours, King."

My hand slowly curled into a fist, more than ready to do as he'd said.

Dash would be my first.

For as long as I could remember, I'd hungered for the death of someone on my hands. It had been my father's blood I'd wanted. Even though I hadn't seen him since I was nine, and even though

he'd finally been locked up for life two years ago, not a night went by where I didn't think about the ways I would end his miserable fucking life.

I had plotted his death in minute detail at least twenty different ways. I'd even started trying to figure out ways to break him out of prison just so I could taste his blood on my hands. *After I tortured every last part of his fucking body.*

"King," Jethro barked. "Now!"

Although he lay almost unconscious on the dirt, Dash made one final plea for grace. His words were incomprehensible. His attempt to save his life, futile. Once the Storm president made up his mind, he didn't ever waver. His actions drilled into me the importance of never backing down when enforcing a plan. I'd seen the loyalty he had from all club members and the way we looked to him for leadership because of his ruthless determination and decisiveness. Jethro was the reason Storm was a force to be reckoned with; the reason why so many in Sydney feared us. And that shit right there was the reason why I did anything and everything asked of me.

I never wanted to be in a position of weakness again.

I would *never* allow anyone to hurt me the way my father had.

I'd fight to my dying breath to protect the power my club had because it meant I too would have power.

Dash slowly gave in, surrendering, understanding what would happen next.

His eyes met mine, hopeless and tormented.

I felt anything but.

Reaching for my gun, I aimed it at his head and pulled the trigger.

My first kill.

The rush of power kicked in fast. A new type of high. One that obliterated so much of the chaos that flowed through my veins every minute of every day.

I'll never be the weaker one again.

CHAPTER FOUR

King

I often wondered what the inside of my head would look like if I'd been born to different humans rather than the motherfuckers I was given. Would it be as murky as it was? Filled with as much grime and as many fucked-up thoughts? The nature versus nurture debate could probably be settled once and for all if people like me were given two lives with two sets of parents. But fuck, maybe I'd be the mess I was regardless.

Maybe killing was in my blood anyway. Maybe it was my fate. The only thing I knew for certain, after the events of this morning, was that killing was in my blood *now*. One taste had unlocked a whole new room in my mind, and the views were mind-blowing.

Jethro had watched me with a knowing look after I'd fired my gun and killed Dash. With a quick nod, he'd turned to walk back to his bike. No words were exchanged, but I had the understanding that he'd brought me with him for a reason. A test. One I'd passed. And then I'd passed another when we met with the Black Deeds president.

Jethro had threatened him over his club's violation of the territory agreements set in place years ago for drug deals done in Sydney. The package from Dash had confirmed that. When Breaker had refused to back down, Jethro didn't waste a minute before taking his

life. I hadn't seen it coming—because it would stir a fuckload of shit for Storm—but I hadn't hesitated in backing him up. My instincts had kicked in fast, and I took care of the two club members Breaker had with him before they could retaliate and kill Jethro.

Three lives taken in one day.

That shit fucking lit me up in ways I'd never been lit up.

It cleared pathways in my brain that had been tangled my whole life.

I sensed a new purpose.

I finally knew my path forward.

"Why are you sitting over here all by yourself?"

I glanced up to find one of the club whores looking down at me with eyes that said she wanted my dick. I'd arrived back at the clubhouse an hour ago and searched out some peace and quiet in the corner of the bar. Lifting my almost-empty beer to my mouth, I tipped the rest of it down my throat before saying, "Because I want to be by myself." It didn't seem to matter how often I told her I wasn't interested, she kept circling.

The seductive smile she always used spread across her face as she straddled me on the couch. Making sure to press her pussy against my dick, she ran her hands up my shoulders to my neck before looping them at the back of it. "Come on, King, let me show you how much you're missing every time you say no to me. You think your woman can give it to you good? She's got nothing on me."

I clenched my jaw as I pulled her arms from my neck. "Get the fuck off me," I said slowly, harshly. "I'm not fucking interested in you, and if you ever say shit like that about my woman again, you'll fucking wish you didn't."

She took her sweet time moving off me, grumbling about what an asshole I was. It took everything in me not to shove her off, but I managed to keep my anger in check. By the time she'd done what I'd asked, Ivy had entered the clubhouse bar and stood in the doorway staring at me with the jealousy we seemed to be bogged down in these days.

Fuck.

I raked my fingers through my hair as I stood and walked her way. Her eyes remained glued to me as she angrily folded her arms in the way she did when I'd upset her. It told me we were in for another fucking fight. That seemed to be the story of our lives for the

last six months, ever since that night I'd forbidden her from taking the night shift job she wanted. Ivy had wrapped her disappointment and anger at me up and kept it inside. She pulled it out every time I did something wrong and every time she *thought* I did something wrong. Like tonight.

"You finished work early," I said, moving close to slide my hand around her waist. Instead of the nursing job she'd wanted, she had taken a job in a nursing home with shifts that ended no later than 9:00 p.m.

She jerked out of my hold and smacked my hand away. "I would have stayed at work if I'd known what I was going to walk in on."

My patience for this old argument had worn thin, and my temper flared fast. "I don't fuck club whores, Ivy. You fucking know this."

"I don't fucking know this, King. All I know is what you tell me, but what I'm *seeing* is a different story," she spat back, eyes flashing with hostility.

"What you're seeing is nothing. She sat on me, she tried to fuck me, I said no. You can't keep throwing fucking accusations at me and expect me to keep defending myself when I'm not doing anything wrong. At some fucking point, you have to decide to trust me, and I'd like it if you got to that point soon because all this bitching and moaning is doing my fucking head in."

Her eyes widened, and she smacked my chest with both hands as if she was trying to push me away. I wasn't fucking moving, though. No fucking way. "I hate you sometimes. Why can't you understand what I'm going through? There are sluts everywhere here, and almost every time I come by, they are fucking on you. Can you not see how that makes me feel and why I'm struggling with this?"

"Jesus, Ivy, you're being fucking dramatic now. They might be here, but they're not fucking *on* me."

"They are!" she screamed, drawing attention to us. Her body was wound tight with all the emotions engulfing her, and I knew from experience that she would likely only get louder and more antagonistic the longer we argued.

I grabbed her arm and dragged her outside away from watchful eyes. Jethro had made it crystal clear he didn't want old ladies causing trouble in the club. I didn't need this on his radar.

"Let me go!" She fought me every step of the way, but I gripped her hard and forced her away from the building towards the shed

around the side. The outside lights of the clubhouse threw a little light on the area, but I steered her to a darker spot for privacy.

When we were alone, I loosened my grip and said, "Can you calm down for one fucking minute and listen to me?"

"I do listen to you. It's you who doesn't listen to me." She said this with total conviction, the anger in her eyes shifting to something else. Sadness maybe.

I took a step back, hit hard by what I saw there. The last thing I ever wanted was Ivy sad. It was clear though that she wasn't happy and hadn't been so for at least the last six months. Fuck, maybe more. I would have sworn against what she'd just said, but she honestly believed I didn't listen to her.

Scrubbing a hand over my face, I contemplated how to react. Holding her gaze, I finally blew out a long frustrated breath and asked, "Do you really believe I would screw around on you?"

She blinked, seemingly unsure, and wrapped her arms around her body. My question managed to cut through the argument and give us the space to stop and think, to try and get our heads together and see things clearer. Fuck knew our tempers were our greatest flaws and did neither of us any favours.

"I don't want to," she said, her voice quieter, the hostile edge gone. In its place was the vulnerability that shot straight to my heart every time. This was the Ivy I loved.

I reached out and pulled her close, my hand cupping the back of her head. "Fuck, Ivy, what are we doing?"

She buried her face against my chest, not answering me. When her body shuddered with a sob, I wrapped my other arm around her waist and held her to me. Ivy didn't like crying. She said it made her feel weak. So I knew shit was bad if she was crying.

I pressed a kiss to the top of her head, her long dark hair whispering across my face. "I don't want to fight with you anymore. It's fucking killing us. How can I make you understand that you're the only woman I want in my life and in my bed? Tell me, and I'll do it. I'll do any-fucking-thing to make you happy."

She scrunched my shirt in her hands, thumbs digging into my chest as she sobbed. I hated it when she cried, too. It reminded me of all the times she wept when she first came to live with her foster mother. She cried back then because of the horrific things her parents

had allowed to be done to her, and no fucking way did I want to be the cause of more tears.

I pulled away and took hold of her chin. Angling her face up to mine, I said, "Don't cry. I'll fix this. You've just gotta tell me how to do that."

She wiped the tears from her cheeks and took a breath. "I know you love me, but when I see those women near you, it does something to me. I know my jealousy is extreme, but I can't control it, King. I try, but I can't. And then you fire up at me, and that just makes it worse." She stopped for a moment, looking at me with uncertainty, as if she was unsure how to go on, but then she said, "You yell at me, and I feel like you don't hear what I am trying to say to you. You're so set on trying to make me bend however you need me to that you don't listen to what *I* need. I'm tired of being the one who always does the bending."

I knew our arguments were about so much more than whatever we were fighting over. This was the first time Ivy had given me any hint as to what that was.

"Are we talking about that night shift job?" I asked.

She sighed. "Yes. And other things."

"What other things?" *Jesus, just fucking tell me.*

Her forehead creased in a frown. "Don't get shitty with me again. I'm just trying to be honest here."

"And I don't want to have to pry this shit from you kicking and fucking screaming," I muttered, working like fuck to keep a leash on my impatience.

"You are such a fucking ass." She glared at me. "It's almost everything you do, King. You're demanding and always want things your way. You wanna be the one to drive when we go out, and drop me off and pick me up when I'm out with friends, and choose what mobile phone I get, and tell me when you don't want me to wear a certain skirt or dress when we go out... things like that. And on top of that, you usually assume you're right and don't always listen to what I have to say. It's too much. You need to let me be me. And you need to let me show you that sometimes I do know things."

Fuck.

The way she saw things was a whole lot fucking different to the way I saw it. "The reason I do all that shit is to keep you safe and protected—"

Wild energy rushed between us as her mood swung back to hostile. "So choosing my phone is to keep me safe? That's bullshit, and you know it. And again, you're not listening to me!"

Fucking hell, I had whiplash. Turning, I took a few steps away from her. I had to; otherwise, I'd lash out. Not physically, but verbally, and that would only move us further away from each other.

I paced back and forth a few times before coming back to her. My eyes met hers again, full of determination. I had to make her understand me. "All I've ever wanted was to keep you safe. Hand on my fucking heart, I do all that shit with that goal in mind. I know I'm bossy and demanding and a pain in your ass, and I wish I could tell you I'll change and things will be different and all that shit that men tell their women whenever they fight, but I can't. I'm not going to change because my goal isn't going to change."

She remained silent while she processed that, but Ivy had the kind of face that displayed all her emotions, and they all ran across it while she did her thinking. So much so that I knew I'd failed to make her see where I was coming from. "So that's it then? Things stay the same, you get everything you want, and I just have to make you happy?" She crossed her arms again in that same furious manner as before and waited for my response.

Give and take wasn't one of my strengths, but I knew I had to meet her somewhere in the middle. Fuck knew how, though, because I'd meant every word about not budging from trying to keep her safe. "I'm shit out of ideas for how to manoeuvre through this, but we're equals here, so no, you don't just have to make me happy. You have to be happy too. All I ask is that you're also safe." *And you let me do what I need to do to make that happen.*

She stared at me like I had two heads. "Fuck me, is that you compromising, baby?" Her lips twitched with the hint of a smile. It was her use of "baby" that really caught my attention. I couldn't recall the last time she'd used it; she'd been pissed off at me for that fucking long.

The way we watched each other changed. Softened. Anger faded as hope flared. "Don't get fucking used to it."

Edging closer to me, she said, "Those things I mentioned that you do, they don't always bother me." She took hold of the hem of my shirt with one of her hands. The other one stayed by her side. "I

just want you to give me the choice, you know? Don't always barrel in all protective and shit. It makes me feel powerless."

Her last statement was the puzzle piece I needed. Everything she'd been trying to tell me finally fell into place in my fucked-up brain. Why hadn't I seen it before? Of course Ivy would lash out if she felt powerless. After having her power stripped from her as a child, it was the one thing she held onto tightly.

Fuck.

I knew I didn't have it in me to change completely, but I could try to rein my shit in for her.

My arms circled her so I could hold her close. "I love you," I murmured, before my mouth found hers in the kind of kiss we hadn't shared for months.

Deep and slow at first, the kiss turned desperate and frantic as I backed her up against the clubhouse shed. Soon we were tearing at each other's clothes, the need to fuck overwhelming.

It had been months since we'd been like this. Sex had become a purely physical release for us—we got off as fast as we could and we moved on—but this, this was raw and carnal.

Ivy's clothes and my shirt landed on the ground. She undid my zip and pulled out my cock, eyes to mine. Pumping me, she bit my bottom lip and kissed me before saying, "I can't drag this out, King. I need you now."

Within a moment, I had her in my arms and up against the wall, her legs tightly around me. Thrusting my cock deep inside her, I growled, "Fuck!" before losing myself in the act completely.

I slammed into her furiously, needing my fill.

Her fingers dug into my back as she held on, blissful moans matching my groans. Ivy loved it when I fucked her like this.

My eyes closed as the pleasure built.

Up my spine and out to every nerve ending.

I needed more.

Craved the dark shit.

The shit I never touched.

Refused to touch.

Grunting, I grabbed hold of her hair and yanked her head back before sinking my teeth into her neck. I barely heard her whimpers. Between the brutal way I fucked her, the savage marking of her skin,

and the roar of need raging through my head, I was oblivious to everything but my filthy desires.

I was a fucking time bomb waiting to detonate with the hunger that breathed deep inside me. I never gave it air. Didn't want to inflict it on the woman I loved, but something had triggered inside me today, and I was helpless to stop the course I was on.

I was unravelling.

Coming undone.

Unable to stop myself from taking what I wanted.

It wasn't until Ivy bucked violently against me that I was dragged from the dark haze I'd allowed to take over.

My eyes snapped open.

Hers stared back at me with fear.

And panic.

My fucking hands were around her neck.

Choking her.

She clawed at me trying to loosen my grip, but my strength was too much for her. She could hardly fucking breathe.

My body had her pinned against the shed while I fucked and choked her. And I hadn't fucking realised it was happening.

"Fuck," I muttered, letting her go and stumbling backwards once she was standing on her own, out of my hold. No other words came out. I struggled to fight the mess of thoughts in my mind.

How the fuck did that happen?

This was the shit I kept a tight fucking lock on. It was the shit my father did, not the shit *I* did.

I dragged my fingers through my hair, clawing at my scalp.

Fuck.

No.

Ivy collapsed to the ground, huddling into a crouch. When she had her breathing back under control, she looked up at me with confusion, completely stricken. "King," she started, her voice cracking. "What's going on?"

I stared at her, battling my way through the mental fog blanketing me. "That shit will never happen again." I never made promises unless I intended to keep them, and this was one promise I would never break. Jesus, *I* was the one who kept her safe. I would never be the one who hurt her.

Tears streamed down her cheeks as we watched each other, a deathly silence hanging between us. I wished she would stop looking at me with those eyes full of terror.

We stayed like that for what felt like forever. When she finally stood, she quietly dressed before wrapping her arms around her body and asking, "Have you done that before? With someone else? I mean, is that something you want in sex?"

I'd slept with a handful of girls before Ivy, but had never done that with any of them. I shook my head. "Never."

She moved closer to me, looking up into my eyes with a questioning look. "Did you like it?"

"Fuck, Ivy," I said, unsure of what to say. I did fucking like it; I was getting off on it like I'd never gotten off. But that didn't mean I wanted to do it again. What the fuck would happen if I went too far? I didn't want to think about that. The average male could play with it in their sex life, but I wasn't the average man. I was fucked-up and craved shit no one should ever crave. I'd likely go to the extremes like I did with everything else in my life. I couldn't chance that with her.

"Tell me," she demanded. "I need to know if I should be prepared for this."

My eyes searched hers, looking for what, I wasn't sure. An interest in being choked? Fuck that, I needed to shut this shit down now.

"It doesn't matter if I liked it, we won't be fucking doing it again," I snapped. I couldn't stop the hard tone from colouring my words, and I didn't blame her for flinching, but fuck, it felt like we'd taken three steps forward tonight and then two back. Just when we'd sorted out one problem, I'd fucked up and caused a new one.

She turned silent again. I wondered what thoughts ran through her mind, but before I had a chance to find out, her lips flattened, and she muttered, "I'm going home."

I exhaled sharply as I watched her walk to her car. What a clusterfuck.

Needing a drink, I headed back into the clubhouse. I wouldn't be going home tonight. Ivy and I needed some space, and I needed to know she was safe from me.

CHAPTER FIVE

King

I quietly watched Ivy from where I sat at my foster mother's dining table. Margreet had her best china laid out for today's lunch. Sunday lunch was a tradition in our family for as long as I had lived with her. I'd only missed five lunches in that time, but Ivy had made it to every single one. She and Margreet had a special bond. One I loved to watch, which I did now as I drank a beer.

They sat together on the couch, talking excitedly about something they were doing together next week. It was the first time in a week I'd seen Ivy light up. *Since I'd wrapped my hands around her throat and lost my footing with her.* We'd hardly connected during the last seven days. She'd pulled away, I'd been busy with club stuff, and I hadn't trusted that we could get through a discussion about it without ending up in another argument. So, I'd kept my distance.

Skylar wandered into the room and plopped herself on the chair opposite me. Sliding a piece of paper across the table, she asked, "Can you please help me with this?"

I took the paper from her. Dropping my gaze to read it, I said, "Mum or Nik can't help?" It was an assignment about her family.

"Mum said I had to ask you about some of it. The stuff about you."

I met her gaze again and nodded. "Yeah, okay. When's it due?"

"In two weeks."

I'd given my full attention to Skylar so had failed to notice Ivy walking my way. It wasn't until she ran her hand across my back and said, "We can stay after lunch and do it," that I noticed.

Our eyes met. The warmth I found in hers took me by surprise, and I returned it. Fuck, we needed this today.

Looking back at Skylar, I said, "You wanna do this today?"

"Hell no, but Mum said I couldn't leave it until the last minute this time."

"Skylar," Mum said in a warning tone as she joined us, "don't use that language please."

My sister pulled a face. "King swears all the time. It's not fair that I get into trouble for it when he doesn't."

My lips twitched as I tried not to chuckle. The hell I'd caused Margreet as a teen had equipped her with the necessary mental and emotional tools to deal with any misbehaviour from her other foster kids. She'd been tough as nails from the day I met her, but after raising me, she'd learnt how to be smart about it, too.

"He doesn't swear in my house," Mum said as she tied her apron, preparing to finish cooking the roast lamb and vegetables for lunch. Her gaze landed on me. "And he knows the rules and what will happen if he does." She looked back at Skylar. "Same as you do, young lady. Your decision to use that word just now has earned you a half-hour deduction of your television time today."

Skylar groaned as she slouched in her seat. "That's not fair! That wasn't even a real swear word!"

"Don't argue with me, child," Mum said as she bustled into the kitchen. "You know full well that word is not permitted in our house. If you keep arguing, you'll lose another half hour."

As Skylar's mouth opened to argue back, I reached across the table and placed my hand over it. "Enough."

She shot daggers at me, but she shut her mouth and did as she'd been told. Snatching her assignment sheet off the table, she shoved her chair back and grumbled, "I don't need your help anymore," before stomping off towards her bedroom.

I leaned back against my seat, my eyes meeting Ivy's. She'd taken the seat next to me. "And you want kids?" I wasn't convinced we could handle them. Hell, we could barely handle our own relationship. Adding children to that mix could end us.

A slow smile graced her face, and she leaned into me, hands curving around my neck. "I don't just want kids, I want *your* kids. You're going to make the best father."

If we weren't sitting in my mother's home, I'd have pulled her onto my lap and kissed the fuck out of her. Instead, I brushed my lips across hers and said as quietly as I could, "We're never doing a week like this again, Ivy. This radio silence almost killed me."

She swallowed hard and nodded as her fingers splayed across the nape of my neck and threaded through my hair there. "I've missed you," she whispered.

I placed my hands on her legs before slowly running them up her thighs. It was a good thing she had jeans on, or I'd have seriously struggled keeping myself out of trouble. "I'm taking you home after lunch, and we're talking this out. And we're not doing anything besides talking until it's sorted."

Her brows arched. "Umm, it's not just me who has trouble keeping their hands to themselves."

Mum cut into our conversation when she called out from the kitchen, "Zachary, I need your help in here, please."

I kept my gaze trained on my woman as I called back, "I'll be there in a minute." Then to Ivy, I said with fierce conviction, "I love you."

With that, I stood and headed into the kitchen. The tension I'd carried with me for the last week hadn't eased completely, but it had lifted somewhat. I didn't feel like I was drowning in the ocean while ten fucking sharks circled me, which was how I'd felt while Ivy refused to come near me. I'd do everything in my power to ensure we never went through that again.

Mum lifted her chin up towards the top of her pantry. "Can you please get that sugar down from up there?"

"Why do you put it all the way up the top?" It beat me why women did anything half the time, but it seemed like sugar should live on a lower shelf.

Her lips flattened, and she placed her hands on her tiny hips. She may have been short and little, but Margreet King wasn't a woman to mess with. "Don't give me grief, Zachary. You know I don't use sugar very often."

"I wasn't aware of that fact," I muttered as I grabbed the sugar down for her.

"Thank you." She took it from me. "I've spent the last three months cutting it out of our diet as much as I could. Skylar's behaviour has improved dramatically since I did that. You should consider doing the same. The amount of sugar you and Ivy consume in soft drink is probably enough to kill you both one day."

I rested my ass against the counter while I watched her add a small amount of sugar to the batter she had in a mixing bowl, making fuck knew what. Probably her famous shortbread biscuits. Whatever it was, it would be good. That was a guarantee whenever Mum cooked.

Crossing my arms, I said with a grin, "Well, if it's not the smokes or any of the other sh— stuff, it'll be the sugar that'll get me in the end."

She shook her head while hitting me with the frustrated look I seemed to encourage. "I love you, but boy, you test me. I don't know why you won't give that filthy habit up. I've prayed to God ever since you took it up that he'll find a way into your heart and convince you to stop."

Fuck, she'd been praying for a long time then. I'd started smoking when I was sixteen.

"King quit smoking?" My other sister's voice floated into the kitchen, and a moment later, her dark eyes found mine. Settling against the counter next to me, she nudged my shoulder with hers. "I don't suppose you have a spare fifty you could lend me."

"Annika!" Mum looked up at her, horrified. "What do you need fifty dollars for?" She puffed out a breath in an effort to blow the stray hair that had fallen across her face. The only thing it achieved, though, was to shift the flour from her nose. The hair continued to bug her, but her hands were busy in dough.

I chuckled as I leaned across and moved the hair off her face, tucking it behind her ear. "What seventeen-year-old *doesn't* need fifty bucks, Mum?"

"Your sister does not require money for anything, so don't you be giving it to her."

Annika scowled at our mother. "Why do you *always* do this to me?"

"Always do what?"

"You never let me have anything!"

Hurt flashed in Mum's eyes as she watched her daughter. Not only had Margreet fostered us all, but she'd also adopted the three of us along with our brother, Axe. She'd gone without many things to give the four of us the kind of childhood none of us would have had otherwise. I knew from conversations I'd had with her over the past few months that Annika was pushing her harder than either Axe or I had. "It's a girl thing," she'd said. "We'll get through it." But by the expression she wore, I wondered how battered she'd be by the time they did get through it.

Before Mum could reply, I stepped in. "That's not fair, Nik. Mum's given us everything."

Irritation flared in Annika's eyes as she turned her angry glare towards me. "This has nothing to do with you!"

"I'm fucking standing right here in the middle of it. I'd say it has something to do with me."

"Zachary," Mum chastised, "enough with the swearing, please."

Annika barely allowed her a word in before launching a tirade at me. "I'm sick of you always butting in and trying to take over. You're not the dad of us, okay?"

"When you treat our mother like shit, I'm gonna step in. Deal with that. And stop being a bitch to her and start being grateful for what she does for you."

"Zachary!" Mum raised her voice in a way she didn't often do. If there was one thing she was known for, it was her ability to run a family without the use of yelling. She was a gentle woman who usually got her point across with calm but firm discussions. Right now, though, she appeared completely flustered, and I had to wonder just how much hell Annika had been giving her.

I raised my hands, signalling my surrender. "No more swearing. I know."

Mum exhaled a long breath and started to say something, but Annika cut her off.

"I'm not being a bitch. I just wish she would think about letting me have the clothes I want rather than clothes from the thrift store."

Mum untied her apron, a look of complete defeat on her fifty-year-old face. Glancing between us, she said, "I'm disappointed in the both of you today. I don't ask for much, but what I do ask for is respect while you are in our home. Lunch is ready, but I need a moment or two to myself. When I return, I expect you both to have

yourselves under control so we can discuss our problems in a more civilised manner."

In other words, she needed to pray.

And we needed to sort our shit out.

After she left the room, I turned to Annika. "You know she can't afford the clothes you want, so why are you giving her so much hell for it?"

Six months after I'd come to live with Margreet, her husband died from a severe asthma attack, forcing her back to work. Raising four kids as a single mother meant there wasn't a cent spare most weeks. Neither Axe nor I had ever asked her for more than she gave, but I finally understood why Mum and Annika were clashing so much.

My sister's face crumpled into a mess of tears.

Fuck.

I was far from capable of dealing with this, but I pulled her into my arms and gave it a shot. "Nik, what's going on?"

She clung to me and cried for a good few minutes before looking up at me. "You don't understand what it's like for me at school. The girls are so bitchy, and because I don't measure up to their standards, they pick on me every single day. It's been like this since the middle of last year, and I can't take it anymore."

Her tone concerned me. It sounded like she was ready to give up. No fucking way would I allow that. "What do you need?"

That seemed to throw her. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, what will it take for you to feel confident enough to get to school every day this year and get the shit done that you need to get done in order to not fuck the rest of your life up by failing?"

Her shoulders slumped and she moved out of my embrace. "You can't fix everything for everyone, King. This isn't the kind of situation where you can just make a few changes and poof, it's all good."

I crossed my arms and planted my feet wide, ready to do battle with her. "Tell me what you need, Annika, and I'll make sure it happens. Sure, shit won't ever be 100 percent the way you want it to be, but there's gotta be some things we can do that will allow you to take care of business."

She threw her arms up in the air. "Oh my God! Take care of my business? What does that even mean? Is that biker talk or something?"

"Let me help, King," Ivy said, moving next to me. She didn't like to step on toes, so she usually stayed out of arguments, but I was fucking glad for any help she wanted to offer.

Thankfully Annika loved Ivy. "Please tell him that teenage girls are the meanest humans on the planet and that this is the kind of problem that even the almighty King can't fix."

Ivy smiled, but she didn't give Annika an inch. "I'll agree that teenage girls are mean, but you should never think that your problems can't be worked on, Nik. A few fashion and beauty tweaks, and you'll be fine. And I can tell you how to make them happen without costing the earth."

That caught Annika's attention. "Really?"

Ivy nodded. "Yes. Trust me, I've been through all the same stuff with my mum. I know the ways around this."

I wasn't sure why my offer of help didn't result in the same level of excitement as Ivy's, but however the fuck we got there didn't matter. The main thing was that Annika had her arms around Ivy, a huge smile on her face, and those defeated shoulders were gone.

Thank fuck.

My gaze met Ivy's in appreciation while I jerked my chin towards the kitchen door. "I'll be back soon," I mouthed. In other words: you sort my sister out because I have no fucking idea how to do that.

I went in search of Mum, finding her on the wooden bench in the garden she loved. She sat with her back hunched, hands curled around the seat gripping it tightly, head down. Everything about the way she sat led me to believe she wasn't doing so well.

I sat next to her, noticing for the first time the worn dress that hung from her tiny frame. Fuck, how had I missed her struggle? I'd been so wrapped up in the club and my problems with Ivy that I'd neglected the other woman I cared for most in the world. In that time, she'd not only been dealing with a teenage girl, she'd also been through a falling out with her closest sister.

"I'm sorry about before."

She looked up at me, surprise clear in her eyes. It wasn't often anyone got an apology out of me. "Thank you," she said softly, her voice laced with exhaustion.

"You need a break from the girls."

Her chest rose and fell as she took a deep breath. "I can afford neither the time nor the money, Zachary. And besides, your sisters need me. I can't just take off on a holiday whenever I feel like it."

She might not have been my birth mother, but we shared the same stubborn streak. I readied for a fight. "One week. I'll pay for it and stay with the girls while you're gone. Ivy will help. She's in there now helping solve Nik's problems. If she can manage that, she and I can manage them for a week." At the pursing of her lips, I added, "I'm not taking no for an answer, so don't even try to argue with me about this."

The time that passed between my offer and her response felt like forever. She watched me silently for the longest time before gazing out at her rose bushes. A few birds landed on the birdbath next to the rose garden, drawing her attention there while cold wind sliced through the air scattering chills over our skin. And all the while I thought about my life before her, which only added to the bite of the wind making me cold.

I'd had six month's experience with the foster care system and the streets by the time I landed on Margreet and Dale King's doorstep. While those six months hadn't been anywhere near as bad as living with my parents, they'd been fucked up. Three sets of foster parents who didn't know how to handle an angry nine-year-old boy, one filthy cop who'd handled me in ways a cop never should, and a fourth foster father who'd tried to beat the anger out of my system added another layer of damage to that already inflicted by Carl and Lois Brown, my biological parents. To say I'd been filled with mistrust was an understatement.

Dale had been a good father in the time we had before he passed away, but it was Margreet who found a way to connect with me. Compassion, love, and patience were things I never knew until I met her. I hadn't the first idea of what those words even fucking meant before her. She showed me and taught me how to love. And although I wasn't the best at it, I was far better than if she'd never been my role model.

Turning to face me, she murmured, "You were my most difficult child."

I wasn't sure where she was taking this. "And?" That wasn't news to me, so why voice it now?

She placed her palm on my cheek. "And look at you now."

My thoughts faltered, and my breathing slowed. Carl and Lois had fucked me up to the point that I didn't know how to accept kindness, and although Margreet had done her best, I still didn't know what to do with it most of the time. My mind was conditioned to expect and deal with cuts, bruises, beatings, burns, broken bones, and unimaginable other shit. Cruelty was the currency I dealt in. My brain misfired when presented with anything else. Sometimes I figured it out; sometimes I refused and clung to the familiar.

When I didn't reply, Mum nodded and said, "I'll go away for a week. Perhaps I'll go see Janet."

"No, I'm getting you a room at that resort in Port Douglas that you've always wanted to stay at." Janet, her sister, was a lazy bitch. She'd take advantage of Mum.

Her eyes widened, shocked. "That resort is far too expensive, Zachary. I'll just find a motel on the Gold Coast. I can lie on the beach all day and read."

I stood, and with a shake of my head, I said, "Nope, you're going to Port Douglas." *And I don't give a flying fuck how expensive it is.* She deserved it. Hell, she deserved so much more, but I wasn't a man who engaged in battles I figured I couldn't win. A week was all I knew I could push her for.

As I walked away from her, she called out, "Don't ever believe those voices in your head. They're wrong."

I paused for only a moment before continuing. She knew about the voices because I'd shared that information after I'd lived with her for a few years. I'd volunteered that the voices had helped me survive Carl's abuse, that they'd helped me understand why he inflicted it.

That I deserved it.

That I was a bad person.

I didn't hear the voices these days, and I didn't believe that I'd deserved Carl's abuse. Not anymore. But I did know I wasn't a good person. *She* was wrong about that, not me.

CHAPTER SIX

King

“Is your mum okay?” Ivy asked later that afternoon when we arrived home.

Lunch had turned out to be full of laughter after Ivy and I ran interference with Mum and Annika. Skylar had even asked me again to help with her assignment. Peace had been restored in the King house. Fuck knew how long for, but we’d make the most of it while we had it.

I’d collapsed onto the couch as soon as we walked in our front door, pulling Ivy with me. The plan had been to have the talk I’d promised her, but that plan flew out the window the minute she was in my arms. Hell, it’d been more than seven days since I’d had her. I didn’t care if all we did was kiss; I just needed to touch her.

I needed my hands on her body. Touch calmed me in a way not much else did. Fuck if I understood why, but it was how I knew things were okay in my world. A week without it, and I was climbing walls. Going out of my mind.

Ivy gave me a good five minutes of getting my fill before she pushed me away and asked about my mother. My dick was hard as fuck, and I could barely think straight while working out all the dirty shit I wanted to do to her, but she was right—we needed to talk.

I moved to the other end of the couch. At her questioning look, I muttered, "I'm too tempted to spread your legs and fucking devour you. I need to be as far from that pussy as possible."

Her lips pulled up at the ends in a smile as she stretched her legs out, rested them on the coffee table and pulled a pillow onto her lap. "I get it, you want me too much. I mean, who wouldn't?"

Although I'd proposed to her two years ago, and told her I loved her as often as I could, Ivy had no idea just how much I wanted her. I'd known her half my life; she was etched in my heart like no one else. Our lives were entwined, past and future. And my journey through life was something I couldn't imagine taking without her.

"Mum will be okay." I finally answered her question. "Thanks for your help with Nik today." It meant everything that she wanted to help my family. The falling out our mothers had experienced a few months ago had been hard on us, challenging our relationship in new ways, but she'd never once stopped being there for my mother and siblings.

"Always, baby."

Baby.

It lingered in my mind.

I had to find a way for her to want to call me that every damn day. I had to find a way to quieten the unpredictable thunder between us.

Fuck, I'd just put space between us when that was the last thing we needed. I stood and closed that distance again. Scooping my arms under and around her, I lifted her and walked us upstairs to our bedroom.

Her eyes questioned me. "I thought we were talking."

"We are." I placed her down, sat on the edge of the bed and pulled her to stand between my legs. Taking hold of her hips, I said, "We've been engaged for two years, and I've been a patient man while you slowed the process down, but I'm done waiting. I want my ring on your finger, and I want it there within the next month."

Her mouth fell open. "Totally not what I thought we were going to talk about."

"We'll get to that, but I need to get this sorted before we move on." My eyes bored into hers, demanding an answer.

She tried to move out of my hold. When I gripped her harder so she couldn't, she placed her hands on mine and attempted to pull

them from her hips. "Let me go, King."

I did as she asked and then stood. "Why are you stalling?"

Dropping her gaze to the ground, she bit her bottom lip and avoided my question.

I tipped her chin up so I could have her eyes again. "Talk to me, Ivy. What's going on?"

It took her a few moments, but she finally asked, "How can you still want to marry me when I can't even give you what you want?"

I had no idea what she was talking about. "What can't you give me?"

She crossed her arms so that each hand gripped the opposite forearm. Rubbing her hands up and down her arms in her nervous way, she said, "I know you like rough sex, and I do too, but I can't do the choking thing, King. I've thought about it all week, and—"

Jesus fuck, no wonder she'd pulled away. "That's why you've been distant?"

"I needed space to figure it out." She paused and took a deep breath, looking up at me with tears in her eyes. "I want to be able to give you whatever sex you want, and I thought maybe I could do it, but I can't. I'm sorry." The crack in her voice shattered through my soul reminding me I was a fucking bastard.

I needed to touch her, needed that contact, but I instinctively knew that *that* was the last thing Ivy needed. We'd been having sex for five years, and it had taken me a good three years to gain her complete trust. After her traumatic childhood filled with sexual abuse, sex had been hard for her. She wanted physical intimacy with me, but something as simple as my hands on her body had been difficult for her. Touching her during this conversation didn't feel like the right thing to do, so I pushed my needs aside in an effort to give her what she needed.

It was fucking hard not to pull her into my arms, though, when she stood in front of me crying.

"I don't need that. All I need is you, Ivy, however you want to give yourself to me." I watched her reaction closely, and when she looked at me like she didn't believe a word I said, I repeated with greater force, "I want *you*. I will never ask you to let me do that again or anything else you're not comfortable with. That shit should never have happened."

"But don't you see, King? It did happen, because rough sex is such an instinctual thing for you. I don't care what you try to tell me, you liked it. Why should I expect you to spend the rest of your life with me if I'm not willing or able to do things with you that you like?"

"That doesn't make any sense. That's like saying you should be willing to go fishing with me or spend hours working on cars with me simply because I like to do those things."

She finally stopped rubbing her arms and dropped her hands to her side. "Those are things I *could* do with you if you really wanted me to," she said softly. "This isn't something I could ever do. When you started squeezing my throat the other night, it hurled me right back to the bad parts of my childhood." Her voice cracked again, and more tears slid down her cheeks. Madly wiping them away, she continued, "I can't... I can't go back there again, King. Not ever." Her last four words were barely audible—"Not even for you."

Ice slithered down my spine. I wasn't fucking losing her over this. No way would I allow that. I hated that I'd done this to her, and I would find a way to make things right again. But there wasn't any way in hell she'd be walking away from this relationship.

Unable to stop myself any longer, I reached for her. Sliding an arm around her waist, I pulled her body to mine. The way she came easily told me I'd done the right thing. "Do you remember the first time we had sex?"

She nodded. "Yes."

I traced a finger down her cheek. "Remember how you were scared out of your fucking mind? And how I didn't force you to do anything you didn't want to do?"

"Yes," she whispered, her gaze glued to mine.

Running my finger across her collarbone, I continued, "Let's back this shit up and forget last weekend. Let me show you just how right we are together. I haven't needed anything but what you wanted to give for the last five years, and I sure as fuck don't need it now. I'm more than fucking happy with what we have, Ivy. *You* are everything I have ever wanted, and I'm not letting you go."

Her entire body sighed. I felt it clear as fucking day. It was like she exhaled a breath she'd been holding for a long fucking time. Bringing her hands up to clutch my shirt, she said, "But—"

I pressed a finger to her lips. "No buts. I'm not backing down on this. And I'm also not backing down on us getting married."

She watched me silently for a beat before slowly nodding. "Okay."

I then exhaled the breath *I'd* been holding.



I learnt a hard lesson the next day. One I'd already learnt at the hands of my biological parents. Somewhere along the way, I'd forgotten that lesson. I'd never fucking forget it again.

The worst kind of betrayal comes from those you love.

Ivy's foster mum, Bethany, and I had always been close. The falling out she'd had with my mum had been challenging for our families, but through it all, she and I had remained solid. Mum had encouraged it; the falling out wasn't her choice. They'd argued over some seemingly insignificant thing that had then blown up into the kind of argument most relationships struggled to come back from. Mum held out hope, but Bethany had stayed firm—she didn't want anything to do with her sister again.

After a night of endless sex, Ivy and I left home early that morning to head to work. I had a busy day ahead of me taking care of a few cleaning jobs Jethro had assigned me. He'd been using me for them a lot more lately. "Cleaning up people's sins and making sure no fucker finds out what they did is something you're fucking talented at," he'd said. What he really meant was that I never hesitated to do the dirty shit others didn't want to do. Some jobs called for a phone call, others, a bullet. I gave no fucks which, I just did it.

I'd kissed Ivy goodbye and said, "Call your mum. Tell her we've got news for her tonight."

She blasted a sexy grin at me. "I could just tell her over the phone. That way we don't have to leave the house tonight, and you can spend the night between my legs."

While that option appealed, I wanted to do this shit right. Bethany deserved more than a phone call for this kind of news. I shook my head. "No, we do it together in person. I'll swing by home after work to pick you up. After we see her, we'll drop by Mum's and tell her and the girls."

"You know," she murmured before kissing me, "for an asshole, you can be thoughtful."

I smacked her ass. "I'll see you tonight." As I walked towards my bike, I called out, "And Ivy?"

She looked up as she got in her car. "Yeah?"

"Take a nap today if you get a chance. You're gonna need it." *Because the shit I want to do to you tonight will require some fucking stamina.*

She smiled knowingly before pulling out of the driveway. I sat on my bike and watched her drive away. Something had shifted between us last night. She'd opened back up to me and allowed me to peel back another layer of her. The thing with Ivy, though, was that it felt like I still had a thousand layers to get through. She had every piece of me, but I knew I didn't have all of her. And I fucking wanted every last piece.

I took care of two jobs that morning and was on my way back to the clubhouse when Ivy called. The way she stumbled over her words told me something was very wrong.

"King... shit... I, um, fuck...." Her voice trailed off before I heard crying.

Every instinct I had screamed at me to tread carefully, but I was never good at that. My preference was to invade and interrogate. I was the storm that refused to relent. "What's going on?" I demanded, my voice harsher than necessary, but fuck, she had me twisted up with unease.

"Don't yell at me!"

"I'm not fucking yelling, Ivy. I'm just—"

"Mum won't give us her support to get married," she blurted. "She wants me to leave you and move back in with her."

My body tensed for the fight it knew was coming.

"What the fuck?" I roared, trying desperately to control both the thoughts raging through my mind and my response to Ivy. "You spoke to her already? Without me?"

"That's not the point here, King."

She was right, it wasn't, but it pissed me off that she'd done what I asked her not to. I shoved my fingers through my hair. "What did she say?" Fuck, I'd go over there myself and sort this shit out if I had to. I refused to allow anyone to come between Ivy and me.

Her hesitation almost caused me to explode, but I managed to keep my frustration in. When she finally answered me, I heard every ounce of distress she was feeling. "She said that you've changed since you joined Storm and she doesn't want me to marry you if you stay in the club."

"How the fuck have I changed?"

"She didn't say—"

"You didn't ask her?"

"I didn't get a chance. King—"

"Why? What the fuck else did she say?"

"King! This isn't my fault! I hate that—"

Fuck it, I was going over there. "Don't worry about it, I'll sort this out."

"No! Don't you go over there! You'll just make it worse. Let me talk to her again."

"It's me she has a problem with, Ivy, not you. I need to go and see her and find out what's going on."

"Please don't go. I really think you'll just upset her."

"I'm going now," I said forcefully. "I'll call you once it's done." I hung up without waiting for her response. Before we got into a fight over it.

Half an hour later, I stood at Bethany's front door, fuming with anger over what she'd said. I clenched my fists by my side as I attempted to rein that anger in. This had to be a huge misunderstanding, one that a conversation would solve. Fuck, Bethany had always been there for me. Why would she turn on me now?

"Zachary," she said curtly when she opened her door to me. "I don't know why you are here. I've said everything I'm going to say to Ivy."

I stared at her in shock. And not fucking much shocked me anymore. Where was the kind woman who'd patched my cuts and bruises when I fell off my bike as a child? Or the woman who'd asked me to look out for her daughter at school when her friends turned against her?

I didn't wait for an invitation; I pushed my way into her house as I said, "And now you can say it to me."

Bethany's home had always felt warm to me. Welcoming. Between the multitude of quilts strewn across her well-worn floral couches, the white lacy curtains, lamps dotted all through the house,

and dog-eared books piled in every spare cranny, Bethany's house was more than a building where she raised ten foster kids. It was the home those kids never had a shot at without her. The place they came home to after school, with warmed Milo and homemade cookies waiting on the kitchen table where their foster mum would help them complete their homework. A complete contrast to what they would have come home to at the hands of their own parents.

She sighed and closed the door after me, following me into the kitchen.

I turned to her when we reached the kitchen. "You don't want Ivy with me anymore. Why? What's changed? And don't give me any shit about you and Mum. That's got nothing to do with *me* and you."

Her lips flattened in distaste. Bethany and Mum had been raised strict Catholics, and both hated my swearing. Usually, I tried to respect their wishes, but I didn't have it in me when I was this worked up.

"You've changed," she said, as if those two words would be enough to explain her stance. They were far from enough.

I pushed my shoulders back and demanded, "How?"

She motioned at the table. "Please sit, Zachary. I don't want to argue with you over this. I'd rather do it as civilised adults."

Fuck that. "I'm not sitting, Bethany. I just want you to tell me what you have against me being with Ivy."

Her eyes turned cold, shocking me again. It was a slap in the face, but it was nothing compared to what was coming. "I always sensed the danger in you, always worried that Margreet wouldn't be able to stop you from becoming who your father's genes had destined you to be. I'd hoped the love we gave you would be enough, but it wasn't. I can see that now. I can see that motorcycle club is no good for you, and that the evil there is infecting Ivy, too." She crossed her arms and straightened in a rigid stance. "I won't allow you to drag my daughter down with you into that cesspool of sin you've chosen to be a part of."

Her words sliced through me.

Painful.

They were like acid burning me.

Cruelty really was the currency I dealt in, though, so my mind and every muscle in my body fell into line and prepared for war. I

was like a well-oiled machine moving into preservation mode in a cold and calculating way.

Ivy had always been Bethany's favourite foster child. The others had come and gone, but Ivy had stayed until she was an adult. Ivy was the only one who thought of Bethany as a mother. They were close as fuck, and while I'd always respected that, Bethany had to understand and support Ivy's choice to make a family with me.

Ice laced my words when I spoke next. "Ivy has made her choice, and you need to respect that choice in the same way she has always respected your choices and decisions."

She dropped her arms to her side, her body stiff and defensive. "I don't have to do anything, Zachary. I certainly don't take directions from you."

I clenched my jaw. "No, but Ivy does."

Her eyes widened. "Oh I see, you've turned into one of those men now. The kind who like to control and order their women around." Contempt crept into her tone when she added, "I should have known that would happen."

I wasn't that kind of man and never would be, but this was combat, and I wasn't above using whatever method I needed to win. "Ivy loves me, Bethany. She has for a good eleven years, and it's the kind of love that not even a mother can come between. You wanna try, be ready for me to unleash a holy fucking war on you."

My entire fucking body strained as violent anger raged through me. I would claw and tear and smash my way into getting what I wanted before I'd ever walk away from Ivy.

Bethany's nostrils flared as she took a step closer to me. "You can threaten me all you like. I'm not scared of you. I will fight for my daughter until the end because that's what a mother does. Now, I want you to turn around, leave my house and never come back. And get ready for your war."

I watched her for one more tense moment before leaving. That would have been the end of it for today, but it turned out we had one more round left in us.

Ivy flew through the front door just as I reached for the handle. Her wild eyes met mine. One look and she knew the situation had escalated. "Oh God, what did you do, King?"

I ignored the panic in her voice and wrapped my hand around her arm. "I took care of shit, and we're leaving now." My voice was

hard, my position unyielding.

"Ivy," Bethany called out, coming into view as she made her way down the hallway to where we were.

Ivy pulled out of my hold. "What's happened?" It was a plea, but deep down she had to know what had happened. I wasn't the kind of man to retreat, and her mother wasn't the kind of woman to abandon her child.

"Your fiancé has made it clear he won't be walking away from you, Ivy. I'm disappointed because I'd hoped my sister had raised a man who would choose to do the right thing, but it seems she failed —"

I turned on her, my chest exploding with fury and fire. How fucking dare she utter a bad word about my mother? Drawing close, I loomed over her, glaring down with daggers, and warned, "I would be very careful if I were you, Bethany. Do not drag Margreet into this. Say whatever the fuck you want about me, but you will never speak badly of her."

Her earlier declaration that she wasn't scared of me proved incorrect. She flinched and took a step away from me.

"King! Can we please calm down and talk this out?" Ivy begged me with her words and her body, but I was past talking. Her mother had been crystal fucking clear in what she wanted, and no amount of talking would change this situation. The only thing that would make her happy was Ivy walking away from me, and I would make fucking sure that never happened.

My eyes bored into Ivy's as I issued my final command. "I'm leaving, and you're coming with me."

She stared at me with shock. She knew what I meant. *Make a choice now. Your mother or me.*

Swallowing hard, she gave her mother one last pleading look. When Bethany wrapped her arms around her body and refused to budge, Ivy's face crumpled, and a tear slid down her face. More came, but that was after she took my hand and exited her mother's home.

The worst kind of betrayal comes from those you love.

I'd opened myself up to Bethany and allowed her to rip a piece of my heart out when she decided I wasn't good enough for her.

I was tired of learning my lessons.

There would be no more pieces of my heart shredded at another's hand. I would make damn sure of that.

CHAPTER SEVEN

King
Sixteen Years Ago
Aged 23
Six Months Later

Addictions were a habit that would leave you desperate and willing to crawl to your death for just one more hit.

They made you reckless.

Foolish.

Un-fucking-hinged.

I knew all about them. I was addicted to Ivy in ways that were beyond my comprehension. I looked at my behaviour some days and wondered who the fuck I was and what the fuck inspired me to do most of the shit I did.

But I knew why.

And still, I didn't change a fucking thing.

The day, six months ago, that I'd stood in her mother's house and forced Ivy to choose between us was my lowest point. I hadn't been able to think straight that day, let alone make rash decisions. All because I feared never having another hit.

Our relationship had almost become a casualty of my ultimatum. Ivy chose me and hated me for it every day for a good four months. I fucking hated me for it, but I couldn't bring myself to take the de-

mand back. She spent her days and nights working and studying. I spent all my time at the clubhouse. We were ships in the night. And as far as our wedding was concerned, neither of us brought it up.

Without my drug of choice, I found another way to medicate myself and quiet my demons. I turned to violence and went on a four-month rampage delivering death and destruction for Jethro in his war with the new Black Deeds president, Zero. It had been a bloody and vicious war, and it honed my skills in the way only four straight months of day in, day out depravity could.

I hardly recognised myself when I looked in the mirror each day. Cold, soulless eyes stared back at me, void of any remorse for the things I did. Without Ivy to hold me at the end of the day, I forgot what compassion was. I had no need for mercy, so I dispensed with it.

My days held one clear goal: protect my club. And I became the master at it.

It took an argument with Margreet to pull me back into line. My mother saved me for the second time in my life.

It was the day that Jethro and Zero called a truce. I turned up at Mum's place that night, late and half-cut. I'd missed all her Sunday lunches for the past four months and skipped every dinner she'd asked us to attend. Ivy went to all of them, but I couldn't sit next to her at my mother's house and pretend shit wasn't fucked up. I couldn't sit under the weight of my mother's gaze and pretend I hadn't fucked up as badly as I had.

I stumbled into the house just over an hour late, heading straight to the kitchen in an effort to avoid Ivy. The only reason I'd turned up at all was that I needed my birth certificate for some bank account bullshit, and Mum had it.

"Zachary." Mum's voice sounded behind me as I bent over to search her fridge for something to eat.

I gripped the fridge door harder, willing her to leave it alone, but I knew she wouldn't. She'd blown up my phone for the past four months with demands for me to *come to my senses*, and I'd ignored all of them. This was her first opportunity to tell me exactly what she thought of everything I'd done.

Straightening, I turned to find her watching me, arms crossed over her chest, a stern expression on her face. "Do we have to do this?"

Her brows lifted. "You thought you could show up at my house, drunk, raid my fridge, grab your birth certificate and leave without me asking you to explain your actions? I raised you better than that."

I walked the couple of steps backward I needed to rest against the kitchen counter. Scrubbing a hand over my face, I blew out a harsh breath. "I'm not in the mood for this tonight."

"It seems you're not in the mood for a lot of things lately. Not for your girlfriend or your family anyway."

I narrowed my eyes at her, wondering how much she knew about my relationship with Ivy. Resting my hands either side of me on the counter, I said, "I've been busy with the club."

She pressed her lips together. "Don't insult my intelligence, Zac."

I threw my hands up and pushed off from the counter. "Fuck, Mum, what do you want me to tell you? Do you want to know how badly I screwed shit up with Ivy four months ago? That I'm a bastard who ordered his girlfriend to choose him over her mother? Or maybe you'd like to know how I fill my days doing anything that will drown out the shit that fills my head? You tell me, and I'll do my best to lay it all out for you in fucking detail."

I expected her to lay into me for disrespecting her, and I wouldn't have blamed her, but she surprised me when she uncrossed her arms and came towards me. "Well, that's a start at least. I can't say I have much tolerance for your language, but since I haven't heard your voice for almost four months, I'll take what I can get at this point."

Fuck, I was an asshole.

I dropped my head to each side, stretching my sore neck muscles before saying, "I'm sorry I haven't been around. I couldn't."

She nodded. "Ivy has kept me updated on what's happening."

"Really?" That surprised me. I thought she'd have locked that shit down deep and avoided talking about it at all costs.

"Well, I've had to drag it from her. You two are as guarded and stubborn as each other. I'm sure she's only giving me just enough to satisfy my questions, but it's more than I've heard from you."

"And Bethany? She still not talking to you?"

Sadness filled her eyes. "I haven't heard from her."

Fuck, I wanted to throttle that woman.

I jerked my chin towards the dining room where Ivy was. "How is she?"

"How do you think she is?"

My chest tightened at the thought of how my woman was doing. I hadn't touched her, kissed her or been with her in four months, and we'd barely spoken a word except to discuss household issues. We may as well have been housemates. We weren't even sharing a bed. I'd gotten to know the fucking couch better than Ivy over the past months.

When I didn't answer her, she nudged, "Go in and see her. I know she'd like you to."

I wasn't convinced. Scrubbing my face again, I shook my head. "No, I'll just grab my birth certificate and head out. I don't want to —"

It wasn't often my mother lost her temper, and when she did, I knew I'd *really* upset her. This was one of those occasions. Her steely expression more than caught my attention, but it was the way she snapped at me that glued my attention to her. "I don't know what thoughts are running through your head these days, Zachary, but let me tell you I'm not a fan of them. And I know I taught you how to show people you love them, so I'm uncertain as to why you're treating Ivy the way you have been for the last four months. You will not be leaving this house tonight until you walk yourself into that room and sit your behind down next to your girlfriend and engage in a conversation with her. Talk about the weather for all I care, but you look her in the eyes and show her that you're still in this with her. Because if you don't, you are going to lose that beautiful girl, and only God knows what that will do to the both of you. I do not want to lose my son to the evil in this world, and that is the one thing I *do* know will happen if you don't have the love of that woman behind you."

She *had* taught me how to show people I loved them, and it was because of the unconditional love we shared that I did as she said. She asked me to do something, I did it. That was one of the only rules I had for myself, and I wasn't about to break it now.

Ivy looked up the moment I entered the dining room. Her eyes met mine and didn't let go. She seemed uncertain and didn't say anything as I took the seat next to her. No one said anything; they simply stared at me waiting for my next move. I didn't care about them, though. Not right now. The only person on my radar was Ivy.

My gaze roamed over her, taking in everything I hadn't been paying attention to. Fuck, she'd lost weight, and she didn't have any spare to begin with. I ran a finger down her cheek as I noted the exhaustion lining it. She didn't flinch away from me. Instead, she appeared to welcome it, like she'd been waiting forever for my touch.

Before I could draw my hand away from her, she reached up and covered it with her hand. "King," she whispered, and my soul shattered.

I closed my eyes, unable to let the world in any longer. An ache like I'd never known consumed me. It bled into my bones, ate at my heart, and made me question why the fuck I'd allowed this distance between us to grow. Four fucking months wasted.

When I opened my eyes again, I shifted to the edge of my seat so I could be closer and took hold of her other hand. "I've missed you."

The brush of skin against skin shifted things in my head. Started clearing the confusion I'd existed in for months. When we were good, *I* was good. And while we weren't even close to good right now, her touch waved a white flag.

The conversation at the table started up again, allowing us the space to talk between ourselves. Not that I cared if my family listened to what we said. I barely noticed them there. All I saw and felt was Ivy and the desperate need sitting between us to fix the cracks we'd sledgehammered in our relationship.

She squeezed my hand. "Can we go home now?"

I nodded and pushed my chair back, more than ready to take her home.

Mum looked up with a hopeful glint in her eyes. "Ivy has your birth certificate." *Of course she did.* I wondered how many times Mum had practiced the speech she'd delivered. She'd managed to hit my triggers, and thank fuck for that.

As we exited the house, Ivy squeezed my hand again. When I looked back at her, she said, "I'm driving. There's no way I'm letting you get back on that bike tonight." Her tone was forceful, but I saw the hesitation in her eyes. Her doubt slayed me. We might have lost our way for a while, but I'd never once considered the relationship over. It sucker-punched me that she didn't know where we stood.

I took her face in both my hands and backed her up against the house. A ferocious urgency consumed me—she had to understand I wasn't going anywhere.

“I’m sorry I’ve been a bastard and shit all over us, Ivy, but I’m here now, and I’m one-hundred-fucking percent back in this with you. You do what you need to do with your mother, mend that fence or whatever, but know this—I will never make you choose between me and anyone ever again. You want me, I’m yours. However you’ll take me. Just fucking promise me you’ll take me. I never wanna be out in the cold again.”

Our bodies were smashed together, our breaths coming hard and fast, and my blood roared in my ears while I waited for her response.

She flung her arms around me as tears streamed down her cheeks. Her mouth crashed to mine, and she kissed me like she hadn’t kissed me in years. She fucking breathed life back into me with that kiss.

We didn’t need words.

We never had.

They just got in our way.

All Ivy and I needed was this.

We needed hands and mouths and to just shut the fucking world out while we showed each other our feelings.

And so my addiction only grew.

My drug of choice came back to me.

The problem with addictions is that in the end they always get you. They shred you, rip your life apart, eat you the fuck up and spit you back out. They consume you, and before you realise what’s happening, you hit rock bottom, and you’re left with nothing. You’re out in the cold without any hope of ever getting another hit.

CHAPTER EIGHT

King

I surveyed the Christmas tree standing in my lounge room. “Jesus fucking Christ, Ivy, this must have cost the fucking bank.” The tree touched the roof and felt like it filled half of the room. And the number of decorations on it was beyond anything I’d seen on a tree before. A fucking rainbow had vomited in my lounge room.

“Stop your bitching, King,” Annika called out from the kitchen where I figured she was helping Ivy cook dinner. “You told Ivy to sort the tree so she sorted it.”

It was Christmas Eve, and Ivy had insisted she wanted to start a new tradition of Christmas Eve dinner at our place. It had been two months since we’d patched up our relationship, and she’d reached out to her mother a few times, but Bethany didn’t want anything to do with her. Not while she stayed with me. I’d done everything I could to try to fix the situation. Nothing worked. It pissed me off that this would be Ivy’s first Christmas without her mother. However, I kept my anger to myself in an effort to keep the peace in my home.

I entered the kitchen expecting to find my mother having words with her daughter over her language. Frowning when I didn’t see her there, I asked, “Where’s Mum?”

Ivy glanced up from the potatoes she was chopping and leant over to brush a kiss on my lips. I slid my hand around her waist and down to her ass as she did this. The last two months had consisted of my hands on her and my dick in her as often as I could manage. We'd had a lot of time to make up for, and I'd made sure I showed her just how fucking much I wanted her. Shit was improving between us.

Mostly.

Her mother had managed to get her hooks into us without even trying. While I'd done what I could to fix the divide between Ivy and me, some cracks remained. My woman still held me at a distance some days. I wasn't giving up, though. Far fucking from it. Thank fuck I had decades ahead with Ivy—I was sure as shit gonna need them to peel back all her layers.

She smiled up at me. "Margreet dropped the girls off about an hour and a half ago. She said she had something to do so that our first Christmas Eve dinner here could be perfect."

Keeping my hand on her ass and her body against mine, I reached for the glass of whisky she had on the counter. I threw some down my throat as I watched her. "Did you have a good day?"

"Yeah. I finished wrapping all the presents, did all the laundry, made shortbread, and packed for our trip. Did you?"

She didn't want to know what I'd spent my day doing. My hands had gotten dirty today, taking care of club business. I let her go so I could pour myself a drink. "My day is done, and that's all that matters."

She frowned at me. Ivy never pushed me to share club shit with her, but that was because I usually gave her something. Nothing I shouldn't, but some story about what I'd done during my day. Since we'd reconnected two months ago, I'd shut down on discussing Storm business. Things had changed for me at the club—Jethro had me doing all kinds of things I'd never talk about—and all I wanted to do when I came home at night was get my fill of her. Sex at night balanced out the violence of my days, and it eased the tension that club problems knotted in my body.

Reaching for the hem of my shirt, she tugged it gently and asked, "Did you have a bad day?"

"No. I just don't want to discuss it."

Her frown deepened and hurt flashed briefly in her eyes. Letting go of my shirt, she turned back to the potatoes. I knew by the way she started a conversation with Annika about girl shit that she'd erected one of her walls between us again. She was blocking me out because I hadn't engaged how she wanted me to. This was classic Ivy, a game of silent treatment she liked to occasionally play. One that pissed me off. Not that her games played a huge part in our relationship anymore, but I'd noticed some shit creeping back in over the last couple of months.

Swiping my glass of whisky from the counter, I left the room and headed upstairs to take a shower. The peace and fucking quiet would help me get my shit together. That we still swung between good and bad so fast and easily did my head in. *Would we always be a hurricane of emotions like this?* I liked some fight in my woman, but the moods our relationship suffered exhausted me.

I pulled my shirt over my head as I took the stairs two at a time, dumping it in the laundry basket and then stripping the rest of my clothes from my body. Blood from a beating I'd given one of Storm's drug customers earlier had splattered on my jeans, so I kept them to the side. I'd wash those rather than leaving them for Ivy. I'd rather avoid her questions.

I rested my arms against the tiled shower wall, dropped my head and stood under the hot water for ten solid minutes to soothe my aching muscles. When I was done, I pulled on clean jeans and the black AC/DC shirt Ivy gave me for my last birthday, grabbed my dirty laundry and headed back downstairs.

Skylar smiled conspiratorially at me when I sat down on the couch next to her after loading the washing machine. "Are you avoiding Ivy?"

I scooped some popcorn from the bowl in her lap and eyed her. "You think she's still shitty with me?"

Her smile morphed into a full grin. "Yeah. Of course. She was complaining to Nik that you always eat her Fruit Loops and that you bring the stray cat inside when you know she hates that."

I grinned back at her. Skye and I always stuck together. Even when I pissed her off, she'd come through for me if I needed her. I'd been seventeen when Margreet fostered her; she'd been two. Six years of me looking out for her and helping Mum raise her meant we shared a special bond.

I shovelled popcorn into my mouth. "Don't tell her, but sometimes I eat those Fruit Loops just to piss her off." It usually ended with my hands in her pants. First came her complaints, then the sex.

Skylar raised her brows as if to say she thought I was an idiot. One day she'd understand the dynamics of sex, but if I had my way, that wouldn't be until she was at least forty. Until then I'd just let her think I had no clue about women.

"Do you think Ivy will ever let you keep Booeey inside?"

The stray cat that had wormed his way into my heart a year ago would never find his way into Ivy's good graces. For one, he was a cranky motherfucker. Even after a year, he greeted me with a hiss before demanding food. When he saw Ivy, she received more than a hiss. He didn't seem to like anyone but me. And two, she was allergic to cats. Booeey, named by Skylar, was destined to live on my front step.

"I doubt it, Skye. He makes her sneeze too much."

"Can't she take allergy pills or something?"

I smiled down at her. The kid loved cats. Mum wouldn't have one at her place, so Skylar looked forward to visiting Booeey and me. "It's not fair for me to expect her to have him inside."

She smooshed her lips together disapprovingly. "He needs a home. He's cold outside."

I ruffled her hair as I put my feet up on the coffee table. Jerking my chin at the cartoons on the television, I asked, "You watching this or can we find something else?"

Her eyes lit up. "You wanna watch wrestling?"

I nodded. "Yeah." I checked my watch. "Do you know where Mum was going?"

Her hesitation told me she did, but that it was probably supposed to be a secret. "She said not to tell you guys in case she couldn't make her agree."

"Make who agree?"

She took a deep breath and exhaled loudly, seemingly torn about telling me. "Fine, I'll tell you, but don't tell Ivy, okay?" At my nod, she continued, "She was going over to Bethany's to ask her to come here."

Jesus, she'd been gone awhile.

I pulled my phone out and dialled her number. It rang out, so I tried again. After doing this three times, I said, "I'll be back soon."

Standing and motioning at the television, I added, "Find the wrestler."

I headed into the kitchen and said to Ivy, "Mum dropped the girls off about two hours ago, right?"

She had her hands in the sink, washing up. Glancing around at me, she nodded. "Yes." Then, taking in the concern on my face, she asked, "Why? What's wrong?"

"Skye said she went to see your mum. She's trying to convince her to come for dinner. But fuck, two hours... she should be here by now." My gut churned with worry that they'd gotten into it. The situation with Bethany was already bad; I'd be pissed off if that woman tore Mum to pieces more than she already had.

Wiping her hands on a tea towel, she came my way with a smile. "Maybe they're talking and sorting things out. God, I love your Mum. This is such a sweet thing to do."

I hadn't considered that option, but deep down I didn't believe it to be the case. Dialling Mum's number again, I put my phone to my ear and hoped to hell she answered and was okay.

When I stabbed at the phone, frustrated, Ivy said, "You want me to call Mum and check on them?"

"Yeah."

She rummaged in her bag and pulled her phone out.

No answer.

She tried again.

Still no answer.

Fuck it. "I'm going over there."

Ivy gripped my shirt. "That's not a great idea, King. Let me go."

I shook my head. "No, you finish what you're doing."

She followed me as I stalked out of the house. "King!"

Turning to face her, I said, "Ivy, I've got this. I'll be back soon."

Pursing her lips, she said, "You'll screw everything up. Please don't go."

Shoving my fingers through my hair, I demanded, "How the fuck will I screw it up? It's already screwed up. I just want to—"

"Mum called me today," she blurted before stopping herself and biting her lip in the way she did when she'd said something she regretted.

I closed the distance between us, my shoulders tensing as I waited to hear what she had to say. "And?"

"She just wished me a Merry Christmas, that's all," she said a little too quickly for me to believe that was all that had been discussed.

"Jesus, Ivy, just fucking tell me everything."

I saw the moment she decided to let it all out. Her expression flashed from frustration to anger to determination in the space of two seconds. Straightening, she said with force, "She told me how hurt she was about everything that's happened this year with your mum and with me. She misses me and wants to fix things between us. I'm going to see her tomorrow."

That last bit threw me—we were supposed to be leaving on our road trip tomorrow. But what really pissed me off was that she thought I'd screw this up for her. I planted my feet wide and crossed my arms, settling in for a long discussion. "You don't want me to go there now because you assume I'll fuck shit up?"

"Well, you did last time."

And there it was.

Would we ever move past my last transgression?

"I thought we'd moved on from that." My tone had turned cold. I tried like hell to curtail it, but when Ivy cut deep, I retaliated with ice.

She stared at me in silence, and I saw all the anger she still carried about this situation. I saw her judgement and her lack of faith in me. And when she finally spoke, I heard her resentment. "You might have, but I'm the one without my mother, not you."

Every ounce of self-control I had snapped. Anger rushed through my veins and required an outlet. I'd discussed this with Ivy until I was blue in the fucking face over the last two months. I'd apologised. I'd told her I'd do whatever she needed. I'd tried to fix shit with Bethany myself. There wasn't anything I wouldn't have done for her if she'd asked.

But she didn't fucking ask.

She'd cried and held me at a distance and played her games with me. And all the while, she'd told me we would get through this. And now she wanted to throw this shit in my face.

I turned away from her and punched the brick wall behind me. I'd fucking regret that later, but for now it was what I needed. I then stalked to my bike without even so much as a glance back at her.

She came after me, though. "So that's it then? You're just going to walk away from me?"

I spun around, anger rolling off me in waves I wasn't sure I could control. "It's safer for all of us if I get the fuck out of here."

She flinched. It was the first time she ever had. But she recovered fast and kept on coming. Slapping her hands against my chest, she yelled, "Do you want to hit me, King? Would that make you feel better?"

I took a step back from her, my jaw clenching. There was no way in hell I'd ever hit a woman. But I needed to get out of here before I started tearing our relationship apart more than we already had.

Fuck.

I turned my back on her again, but she grabbed my arm and pulled me around to face her. Wild fury blew between us. "I miss my mother! Do you even get that? Or do you just care that you have me where you want me, and fuck everyone else?"

"Of course I fucking get that you miss her! Where the fuck is this coming from?"

"I've been telling you for weeks that I wanted her here tonight, but you hardly even listened to me. I feel so alone, King. You never talk to me about this!"

"Fuck, you've told me twice that you wanted her here. Fucking twice! Not multiple times over weeks. And I don't talk to you about her because it only ends in you shutting me out for days afterwards. You tell me, would you want to bring shit up with me if you knew I'd stop talking to you and touching you for days on end?"

"I do not shut you out!"

I threw my arms up in the air. Why the fuck did we always—*always*—see shit completely differently? "The last time I spoke to you about this was three weeks ago. Do you know how I know *exactly* what day that was?" I paused for a beat before pointing my finger at her and continuing. "You came home from work wearing a flower in your hair. A pink rose. You were sad because your mum had left you that nasty message on your phone. Remember? So I made you get changed into that red dress that I know makes you feel good, and I took you to see that movie you'd been jabbering on about for days. The chick flick with the woman whose husband screwed around on her." I stepped closer to her and angled my face closer to hers. "You hated the fucking movie after all that, you hated the pork belly I bought you for dinner, and you cried when I asked you what the fuck was really going on. We talked about your mum and then you

refused to talk to me or let me fuck you for three fucking days. I slept on the couch for three nights. Tell me you remember that, Ivy, because if I'm recalling this incorrectly, I'd really like to fucking know."

Before she had a chance to respond, Annika ran out of the house and flew down the front stairs, a look of complete terror on her face. Holding the phone out to me, she cried, "It's Bethany!" Sobs blurred her words. "Mum's been in a crash!"

The world spun, anger and fear colliding as I took the phone from her. "Bethany," I barked, "Tell me she's okay."

Silence.

Blood roared in my ears.

"Tell me!" I thundered. "Fucking tell me my mother is okay!"

A sob ripped through the phone. "Zachary...."

I knew.

I fucking felt it deep in my bones.

Gripping the phone harder, I demanded, "Where?" When all I heard were sobs and no answer, I repeated, "Where is she?"

"Oh, God... it was a drunk driver.... Margreet was turning out of my street when he hit her. Just smashed straight into the side of her car...."

I passed the phone back to Annika. I didn't want to hear another word that woman said. If it wasn't for her, my mother wouldn't be dead. If Bethany hadn't insisted on this fucking cold war with Mum and Ivy, none of this would have happened.

I had to go to her.

To Mum.

I had to see for myself.

Fuck.

It slammed into me.

Like a movie, my life with Margreet rolled through my mind.

The day I came to live with her.

The times she held me when the night terrors claimed me.

The days she collected me from school because I got myself into another fight, and still loved me anyway.

My last day of high school when she told me she was proud of me. And that she believed I could achieve anything.

I saw the Band-Aids, the cooked meals, the kisses, the time she gave, the sacrifices, and even the lectures.

Margreet loved unconditionally.

She fucking laid her heart down and let it bleed love.

She was my one person.

The one who, no matter what I did and what I fucked up, I knew would never walk away from me. *Would never hurt me.*

And now she was gone.

As I got on my bike, voices drifted in and out, faces flashed in front of me, and hands reached for me. I zoned the fuck out until Ivy's eyes came into focus.

"King! Where are you going?"

I blinked.

Where the fuck did she think?

I was going to see my mother.

And then I was going to rain destruction down on those who took her from me.

CHAPTER NINE

King
Three Months Later

Lifting the glass of whisky that had been placed in front of me on the clubhouse bar, I threw it down my throat in one gulp. I ground my teeth together at the burn and jerked my chin at Sadie for another one.

She lifted her brows but did as I wanted. Sliding it across the bar, she said, "This is your last. Jethro will have my ass for this."

"Why?" I demanded before draining half the glass.

"He told me last week to cut you back. Said he's given you a three-month pass, but now he's done. That it's time for you to clean yourself up." She nodded at the drink in my hand and added, "That's more than half a bottle you've drunk tonight, so I'm not giving you any more."

I emptied the glass and slammed it down before moving off the stool. "Fucking asshole," I muttered. If I wanted to fucking drink ten bottles, I fucking would.

"King." Jethro's voice sounded behind me. "A word."

Turning, I scowled at him. "I'm busy, Jethro. What do you want?" Anger slid across his face. "My fucking office!" he barked.

Less than a minute later, I stood in front of him and demanded, "What the fuck with the drinking? You slapping limits on any other

fucker around here or just on me?"

Jethro never tolerated this kind of outburst, and tonight was no different. "You'd do well not to test me, King. Not after all the shit I've had to deal with over the last few months while you've been drinking yourself almost to death. I've let it go because you're dealing with your mother's death, but that was three months ago. It's time to get yourself straightened out."

"What shit are we talking about, Jethro? I've done everything you've asked of me. I've cleaned up a fuckload of messes for you and taken care of anyone you needed taking care of."

"The problem is that you've taken care of them a little too well. Your bloodbath across Sydney is starting to bite the club in the ass. We've got too much heat on us. You need to tone that shit down, brother."

"That bloodbath was at your request, *brother*."

His mouth pulled into a flat line. "If I say to tone it down, tone it the fuck down."

The tension between us crackled through the office. I'd had just enough to drink that I was willing to tell him to fuck off, but I hadn't had enough that I forgot my respect for him, so I backed down and nodded.

His hard gaze didn't ease. "We need to discuss Ivy."

"What about her?"

He studied me for a moment, like he was assessing how to proceed with this conversation. His tense shoulders dropped and his gaze thawed. "It's no secret that I have plans for you, King. I recognised your strengths the day I met you, and I've been training you up ever since. The things you're capable of are things this club needs if it's going to hold its own, so I've worked to draw them out in you." He paused for a beat. "Those things are good for the club, but they're not good for Ivy."

I crossed my arms. "What the fuck are you talking about, Jethro?"

"I've been watching your relationship, and I'm concerned about what I'm seeing. Ivy used to turn up here happy to see you. You used to make all the time in the world for her. Sure, you two fought, but I never saw you lose your shit at her in a way that I feared for her safety. Something's shifted between the two of you, King. She's

not happy, and you're angry with her all the time. And to be fucking honest, I think you'll go too far one day and hurt her."

My breathing slowed. His words rang with an honesty I didn't want to admit. My mother's death, and my subsequent quest to punish those I believed responsible had taken the kind of toll on my relationship with Ivy that I feared we couldn't come back from. On top of that, we were raising Skylar together after Mum's death. Between our work and family commitments, our anguish and my bitterness over Mum's death, we were crumbling. These days, we didn't fight so much as move through life disconnected from each other. I couldn't recall the last time we'd even mentioned our engagement.

The drunk driver who killed Margreet had disappeared, and I had been unable to track him down. Prevented from delivering the punishment he deserved, I'd fixated on the other person I blamed. Ivy's mother. It was a fucked-up mess because as much as I wanted to destroy her for the part she played, my love for Ivy stopped me. And so we existed in a toxic bubble of resentment, hate, love, and an inability to reach the other. Physically, we came together, but our sex had disintegrated to irregular, violent encounters.

Jethro was right.

Even I was concerned I'd go too far with her one day.

I blew out a long breath. "Fuck." Eyeing the man I trusted the most in the world, I admitted something I never admitted to anyone, ever. "I don't know what to do."

He watched me earnestly. "If you love Ivy, you'll walk away from her. You'll put her safety before everything else. The path you're on is a dangerous one, brother. Don't force her to deal with the repercussions of that."

I'd heard about Jethro's old lady, but since she was dead, I hadn't met her. The story went that they'd endured a violent marriage. I'd heard rumours he'd beaten her so badly one night that she'd ended up in a coma and died the next day. I had never been convinced the story was true, but listening to him now, I contemplated that maybe it was.

A knock on the office door ended our conversation, but I couldn't get his words out of my head for the rest of the night. By the time I arrived home three hours later, completely shitfaced after visiting a pub on the way, I was a wreck of confused thoughts and denial over the state of my relationship.

I could never give Ivy up.

She was mine, forever.

Fuck, but what if Jethro was right?

What if I did the unthinkable one day?

"King? Is that you?" Ivy's voice floated downstairs as I stumbled through the house knocking shit over as I went.

"Fuck," I muttered. "Yeah," I called up to her. I vaguely recalled that Skylar was at a sleepover with a friend. Thank fuck, because my crashing and banging would have woken her, and she had enough trouble sleeping these days. Mum's death had devastated her to the point it affected every part of her life but especially her sleep.

When I didn't hear from Ivy again, I figured she'd gone back to sleep. Probably hopeful that I'd leave her alone. But fuck if thinking about her all night hadn't given me a hard-on that I desperately needed her to take care of. I hadn't been inside my woman for a good two weeks, and I fucking needed her. Needed her touch.

I staggered up the stairs, tugging my shirt over my head as I went. Dropping it on the floor of our bedroom as I entered, I then reached for my belt. Fuck, Ivy lay naked on the bed, with the sheets kicked off. Every inch of her beautiful body displayed to me. And that sweet cunt I would never get enough of calling to me.

I moved faster, shedding my clothes, and climbing on top of her. She lay face down, and I spread her legs as I ran my hard dick along her pussy.

"King," she mumbled, sleepily. "Don't."

My mind, fuzzy from too much alcohol, tried to keep up, but my need for her controlled me. I ground myself against her, groaning at how fucking good she felt. "I need you, Ivy." I peppered kisses down her back. "I need this sweet fucking cunt."

She swatted me away. "Not tonight," she mumbled again.

Taking hold of her arms, I pressed them into the bed either side of her as I continued to grind against her. Jesus, I fucking needed inside her fast. "Yes, tonight. You haven't fucking let me near you for two weeks. Tonight, you're letting me fuck you."

"King!" She woke up and bucked under me. "Fucking stop it! I don't want to have sex with you tonight."

I was so fucking tanked and screwed up over the state of our relationship and everything I'd discussed with Jethro that her refusal pissed me off. Pushing my body forcefully down onto hers and grip-

ping her wrists hard, I demanded, "When the fuck do you think you might want to fuck me again, Ivy? This year? Next year? Fucking ever? I'm getting tired of this game."

She jerked under me and started a full-force battle to shift me off her. When I refused to budge, she bit my arm and screamed, "Get off me!"

"Fucking hell!" I roared, letting her go. "Why the fuck did you do that?"

She scrambled off the bed, staring at me angrily. "Why the fuck do you think? You wanna force yourself on me, you should expect me to fight back! Just FYI!"

I moved off the bed and lurched towards her. "Don't be fucking dramatic. I wasn't fucking trying to force myself on you."

Her eyes widened. "Well, what the hell would you call it when a woman says no and her man doesn't listen?" She screamed her question at me, almost out of breath because she was that worked up.

I moved in close to her, backing her into the corner where she pressed herself against the wall like she was trying to escape me. "I'd fucking call it desperation. I'm so fucking hard for you, every fucking day, and every time I manage to get close to you, you shut me the fuck down." My eyes bored into hers. "At some point, you need to give me what I want."

She glared back at me. "Or what, King? You'll just take it?"

I glared back at her, my blood pumping hard, my head pounding.

Fuck.

How the hell had we gotten here?

How the fuck had I become this man?

I stumbled backwards, like I'd been punched hard in the gut.

I would never just take it from her.

Fucking never.

But would I have if she hadn't been able to fight me off?

Bile lodged in my throat, and my mind raced to catch up with everything happening.

Fuck.

I had to get out of here.

I needed to put distance between us and get my fucking head together.

I had to figure out if I was willing to put Ivy at risk again.

At risk of being hurt by me.

CHAPTER TEN

*King
Fifteen Years Ago
Age 24*

There were moments in your life that changed everything. Sometimes they were planned. Sometimes fate dealt them. As I leaned back against the clubhouse couch and forced the club whore's mouth down over my dick, I closed my eyes and drew in a long breath. This was a moment I would never forget.

Planned? Yes.

Life altering? Yes.

Fucked up? Fuck yes.

But then, fucked up was my style. So Ivy shouldn't have ever figured me for anything else.

I'd spent nearly six months working up to this moment. *After the night I almost forced myself on her.* Hell, I'd tried to do this in a civilised manner, but she hadn't accepted that. It turned out that although she'd thrown her walls up at me for months, she blanched at the idea of us walking away from each other. She'd refused to accept a break-up, declaring her love for me and promising to try harder. Never wanting to imagine a life without her, I'd allowed our dysfunction to continue. So here we were about to spiral into poison and a betrayal we were guaranteed to never recover from.

My only option to keep her safe.

Fuck.

Just the thought of what I was doing to Ivy caused my dick to shit itself and soften in the whore's mouth.

I pressed harder on her head. "Suck it, bitch. If you can't make me fucking hard, I'll find someone who can."

She glanced up at me with a scowl. "Screw you, King. I'm fucking trying here. It's not my fault if you can't get it up. How long's it been since you've had a decent blow job anyway?"

I eased my body to a sitting position and wrapped my hand around her neck. Squeezing her hard, I snarled, "You wanna keep that shit up about my woman, and I'll make fucking sure your ass is out of this club faster than you can open your fucking legs. I asked you to suck me off. I didn't fucking ask you to argue with me or speak to me." My fingers dug harder into her skin. "You think you can manage that?"

Fear crawled across her face. She nodded, but her previous confidence disappeared. When she answered me, her voice held the hesitation I could see in her eyes. "Yes."

Thank fuck for that. I needed this shit to happen now. There wasn't any time to fucking waste.

I let her go and sprawled back against the couch. I reached for the bottle of whisky that sat next to me, and took a long swig of it while she got to work.

Another club whore came into view, smiling down at me. "Sorry I'm late, King. I got sidetracked doin—"

I motioned for her to get her ass onto the couch next to me. "Just get your tits out and put them in my mouth." I didn't have time to listen to her bullshit.

The fact she didn't argue with me made my fucking day.

By the time Ivy entered the clubhouse bar where I lounged with my dick in one whore's mouth and my lips wrapped around another whore's tits, I'd zoned the fuck out. I wasn't getting off on any of it. Instead, I was counting down the minutes until Ivy found me.

My eyes met hers as she came to an abrupt stop. I didn't move. I simply kept sucking the tit in my mouth. Kept fingering the cunt riding my hand. And kept fucking the mouth wrapped around my dick.

Seven years flashed right before my eyes, though.

Seven years of loving Ivy.

Fuck, if we were really counting the years I'd loved her, it was more like thirteen.

I watched as the shock, anger, and utter disappointment hit her. I took in the way her face contorted, and her shoulders slumped for a moment before she squared them again and prepared to go to battle with me.

Always fighting me.

"You fucking bastard!" Her pain screeched out of her, slamming into me. I was deeply intimate with Ivy's pain, but this was a whole new type of hurt for her.

I had never once cheated on her. I knew she still wondered about it, because club whores could be summoned with the click of a finger, but I'd sworn my loyalty to her when I was seventeen. And I fucking lived by that loyalty. It was the one thing I believed in. The code I lived by. When I swore loyalty, I fucking meant it.

And yet, there I was.

Breaking that code and shitting all over the one relationship that meant the most to me.

Ivy's madness consumed her as she ripped both the whores away from me. Her eyes dropped to my dick before straying to my hand that had just been inside a pussy that wasn't hers. Her face curved in disgust and disbelief right before her hands pummelled my chest.

"How could you do this to us?" she yelled as she straddled me, still beating her hands against my chest.

Fuck, there was the fight I craved.

But it was also the fight that I knew would be the death of us eventually.

Ivy and I were on a path of destruction. We loved each other too much. Too fiercely. Too fucking savagely. We would never survive this kind of love.

Jethro had made me understand that. He'd shown me how I was slowly killing Ivy. We weren't a match made in heaven. We were each made in hell—our parents saw to that—and we would burn there together if we continued pushing each other to the edge of crazy.

I allowed her to continue her tirade, only stopping her when she slapped my face and yelled, "I gave you everything. Everything!"

And you knew how hard that was for me. You told me you'd never fuck us up!"

I gripped both her wrists and stopped her. "I told you last week I wanted to end this, but you didn't listen."

Her eyes widened. "And I told you I was willing to change, to work on us, because I love you. I thought that's what we were doing."

"No, that's what *you* were doing. I never agreed to that."

She tried to wiggle out of my hold, but I tightened my grasp on her wrists and held her in place. I needed her to take this in.

Her breathing grew ragged. She blinked rapidly to stop tears from falling. Ivy hated crying. That she was close to it now told me I was on the right track. I just needed to push her harder.

"Why are you doing this, King?" she begged. "I don't understand."

My chest tightened at her plea. *Fuck*. This was more difficult than I'd prepared myself for. "All we do is argue. I'm sick to fucking God of it." *And I'll probably kill you one day if we keep dancing this dance*. No fucking way would I allow myself to kill the woman I loved. I needed to know she was safe. *Safe from me*.

"You're not sick of it. There's something else going on here. I want you to tell me what it is." Her eyes implored me just as much as her words did. Ivy wasn't giving up without a fight. Because that was what we did. We fought not only over random meaningless shit, but we went to battle for each other. *For us*.

Jesus, was the threesome not enough to make her walk? To make her hate me? I clenched my jaw. "Ivy. We're done." My tone was low, full of warning. I needed her to take note. I did not want to have to speak any more lies to force her hand. Lies that would, by necessity, shatter her.

She yanked her wrists from my hold. Her eyes flashed with the passion that called to me. Fuck, how I loved Ivy's fire. "We are not done! We've been through too much together to ever be done, King. You might be an asshole and possessive as hell and fucked up, but you are also the man who has made me feel more loved than anyone ever has."

"If you really wanna know what's going on here, I'll tell you." Sucking in a deep breath, I steeled myself to inflict a level of hurt on her that would kill me to do. "I've spent thirteen fucking years prop-

ping you up, Ivy. You're weak. I need a stronger woman by my side. So you need to pack your fucking bags and get the fuck out of my life. This thing between us is over."

My words hit their intended mark. She froze as they sliced and suffocated her. And those tears of hers finally fell. She wasn't done with me yet, though. In true Ivy fashion, she had to have the last say. "I tried hard to be the woman you needed, King. I wasn't perfect, but I fucking tried. You are a hard man to love, let me tell you. Demanding, bossy, irrational, and I'm almost certain you're half insane. And yet I still loved you through all of that. Even your fucked-up needs when it came to sex weren't enough to push me away. I might have failed you there, but I fucking *tried!*" She jabbed a finger at me. "Fuck you for being a motherfucker who can't keep his dick in his pants. I thought you were so much more than that."

By the time she was done, black tears streamed down her face as her body shook with anger and hurt. She looked at me like I'd driven a knife through her heart. Like I'd pierced her soul and drained every last drop of love and trust she'd ever been able to find in her darkness.

The worst kind of betrayal comes from those you love.

I'd achieved my goal.

Ivy walked out of my life without a backwards glance.

I stood rooted to the spot watching her leave. Watching my reason for fucking living exit my life. And I vowed never to fall in fucking love again.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

King
Eight Years Ago
Age 31

You couldn't fucking trust people.

Unfortunately, that was a lesson I had to keep learning over and fucking over—from the day I was born to today. This time the lesson came from a man I'd trusted with my life, obliterating any desire I might have had to ever put my faith in anyone again.

I'd dedicated almost a decade to Jethro, believing him and blindly following his directions. After I'd ended my relationship with Ivy, my focus had been completely on him. I'd descended into the pits of hell for him, taking care of the filthy shit he didn't want to.

I used to think Jethro was everything. He'd been Storm's president for fifteen years and had taken me in when I'd shown up at the clubhouse with a friend who wanted to join the club. I'd come for a drink and left with a burning desire to be part of a brotherhood unlike any I'd known before. Jethro taught me everything he knew about life and the club. Or so I thought. Turned out he'd only shown me the side of himself he wanted to. He'd kept hidden the fact he stole from the club and harassed members behind closed doors to get them to do shit he wanted. Shit that benefitted him, not the club.

Jethro sneered at me. "Giving up the presidency to you wasn't enough, huh, King? Now you're gonna kill me?"

I clenched my jaw. "You gave up the presidency because you're a lying, thieving motherfucker and wanted to keep the money you've stolen from the club more than you wanted to remain president. If you ever thought I'd simply allow you to make me president in return for my silence forever, you were mistaken. That shit will come out in the open tonight. But this between us now, this is for what you did to me and Ivy."

"What the fuck did I do to you and that bitch?"

I sucked in a deep breath and stopped myself from punching him. Why, I wasn't fucking sure. I had no reason to contain my need for revenge anymore. Tonight I would finally do what I'd been planning for the last week. "You pushed me into leaving her."

"Fuck, that was seven years ago. You're still holding onto that shit? And besides, I didn't push you into doing anything. That was all on you."

Rage breathed down on me. It threatened to smother me with its need for retribution. My skin crawled with anger until I finally snapped and allowed my darkness out to play.

Taking the few steps between us, I grabbed Jethro's shirt and yanked his body against mine. Our eyes met, and I showed him the thunder roaring in me. He may have thought he'd witnessed the depths of my crazy, but he hadn't. I kept the extent of my madness carefully concealed. Jethro would wish he'd never met it. Would fucking wish he'd never crossed me.

"You manipulated me, Ivy, and half the fucking club so I'd think leaving her was for the best. I bought into what you were selling. And what the fuck for?" I gripped his shirt harder. "What the fuck did *you* get out of Ivy leaving?"

Distaste painted his face. "That bitch was your one weakness. I simply helped you see that and deal with it. She was fucking tenacious, though. I'll give her that."

His words shattered my focus. "What did you do to her?" I demanded on a harsh breath. I would kill him slower for this. I'd find a way to draw his blood so it hurt ten times more than I had planned.

He only hesitated for a moment. Jethro liked people to know the shit he'd done. "No matter what I did to her or what I had club members do to her, Ivy never fucking ran to you and dogged on

anyone. That bitch told me that even though she hated me and half the club, nothing would force her to leave your side. She said you two had been through everything together and she'd be there until the day you died." His lips flattened. "*That* was why you needed to get rid of her. She would have dragged you and the club down because you would never have been able to put the club first."

I saw fucking red. Without another thought, I smashed my head against his nose. As he reeled back, I roared, "No one makes decisions for me!"

Before he had a moment to recover and get his mind back in the game, I punched his face. He continued stumbling backwards, towards the brick wall in the filthy alley where I'd met him, while I continued punching him.

I'd unleashed my demons, and they weren't retreating anytime soon. They would see this through.

I lost myself to the violence. After being raised on a diet of brutality and cruelty, this savage fury was ingrained in me. It lived deep in my soul. *In my fucking bones.* I dedicated effort to keeping it locked up, but Jethro had hit the trigger, and I was helpless to stop it.

The one thing I knew without a doubt in life was that you should take the time to identify the monsters that walked among you and then do everything in your power not to wake them. If you did disturb them, that shit was on you.

By the time I was done with him, Jethro lay at my feet, a bloody mess of slashed skin, broken bones, and damage I hardly recognised as coming from my hands.

I took a few minutes to get my breathing under control and my thoughts back in focus. It'd take me hours to come down from this, but I needed to concentrate enough to call Hyde.

Hyde answered straight away. "You're done?"

"Yeah, brother, I'm fucking done. Just need your help getting rid of this body."

"Text me the address. I'll be there." He paused for a moment. "And King, you did the right thing. I've got your back on this."

I'd told Hyde of my discoveries regarding Jethro, and he'd helped me investigate to confirm. He'd wanted to watch the mother-fucker die, had wanted to help, but this was something I needed to do on my own. That he'd taken my back wouldn't be forgotten anytime soon.

While I waited for him, I crouched down next to Jethro and allowed the memories of the shit we'd done together to come. I needed to do that. Needed to remember so I wouldn't make the same mistakes again. Promises made flashed through my mind, and I noted them too.

I wouldn't go down this path again.

I would never hand the gun to someone and load the bullets for them.

I'd rather aim that gun at myself and blow my own fucking brains out.

Betrayal was worse than death, and the only way to avoid it was to never trust anyone but yourself.

PRESENT TIME

CHAPTER TWELVE

King

I stood rooted to the spot staring at the woman who had haunted my dreams for over a decade. Hell, she'd haunted them even when we were together. Ivy wasn't a woman you simply forgot, not even in your sleep while she lay next to you.

I'd never wanted to forget her.

Nor had I tried.

I'd always welcomed the raging torrent of memories, even on the days they almost strangled the breath from me. They served as a reminder never to trust people or love again. Those memories were a tangled vine of Ivy, Jethro, Bethany, and my mother. Love, hate, lies, betrayal and death, all wrapped together in my head. Although I'd fucked up and fallen in love again after Ivy, I'd tried like hell to never go down that path again. Nothing good came from it.

"Hello, King. It's been a long time."

I'd stopped counting the days years ago. The years, however, sat between us, a harsh reminder of the choices I'd made. Choices she knew nothing of.

She watched me closely. When I found no words, because she'd caught me completely fucking off guard, she spoke again. "Are you going to say anything?"

The room had swallowed me. Consumed every thought I had. Jen's death—*her baby's death*—vanished from my mind.

I took a step towards her. "You look well."

Ivy would be thirty-eight soon. She looked all of thirty. The beauty she wore today was a far cry from the ravaged beauty she'd walked out of my life wearing. I'd never forgiven myself for breaking her.

"Looks can be deceiving."

My mouth turned dry, and I had difficulty swallowing. "What's going on, Ivy? Are you not well?" What the fuck did she mean by that? Was she not fucking well? My mind raced with the possibilities of what could be wrong. The thoughts flying at me, though, became one big fucking jumbled mess.

Nothing fucking made sense right now.

Why the fuck was she here?

"Nothing that would ever concern you," she snapped. "But I didn't come here to talk to you about that."

I restrained my frustration. Ivy always had liked to stretch me to breaking point. "Ivy," I warned. "I asked you a question."

The dull tone disappeared from her eyes. Resentment slashed the air between us as her hostility roared to life. "You gave up that right a long time ago, King."

Fuck.

Ivy was the lightning to my thunder. When she sparked, I rumbled. And she had just fucking sparked. The raging storm inside me exploded out. I couldn't hold it back any longer. "Answer me!" I needed to fucking know that she was okay.

She moved towards me, our bodies unbearably close. Her eyes were cold. The only time I remembered her looking at me with these dead eyes was the day I told her to get out of my life. "You don't get to demand answers from me, King, so don't fucking ask them. Now, if you want me to tell you what I know about the shit going down with your club, have Hyde take his gun off me."

"I'm fucking confused here, Ivy. You came here, knowing we'd be here? And what the fuck are you doing in the attic?" She would at least answer those questions before I made my next move.

"Yes, I organised this meeting. This is a house I own. And I waited up here because I didn't want all of your men pointing their guns at me."

More confusion snaked through my mind. It made no fucking sense for her to have organised this meeting. "Put the gun down, Hyde."

"You sure about that, brother?"

"Yes," I barked, not removing my eyes from Ivy. I didn't believe she would have a gun, but I wouldn't have believed she could have anything to do with the shit Storm was in, either, so it was best to take precautions. Watching her closely was the only one available to me. I knew she wouldn't talk until Hyde did what she wanted. Stubbornness was a classic Ivy trait.

"Fuck," Hyde muttered as he lowered the gun.

Ivy glanced at him before giving me her full attention once she was satisfied. "There's an attack coming. I don't know when, and I don't know how, but I've heard him talk about it for weeks. And it won't just be on your club, it'll be on your families, too. He wants them all dead." She stopped to take a breath. "He wants to wipe everyone and everything you care about off the face of the earth. And I believe he could do it."

He?

My jaw clenched. "Who?" I demanded. "Who the fuck are you talking about? And why?"

Her hard eyes refused to let me look away. "My husband. You took what was his, so now he wants to take what is yours."

Understanding smashed into me. But this puzzle was still a long fucking way off being solved.

"Fuck! Tony is the one behind all this?"

Hyde moved closer to Ivy, anger clouding his face. "What the fuck did King take?"

She looked at Hyde. "He took me."

I drew a long breath and then slowly released it. "How the fuck did I take you?"

I hadn't had any contact with Ivy since the day she walked out of our house. This bullshit her husband was carrying on about enraged me. Fuck, he'd killed a woman and her unborn child today because of it.

Ivy's eyes came to mine again. "You didn't, but he thinks you did. He thinks I'm leaving him because I never stopped loving you."

My chest tightened as my mind went into overdrive in an attempt to keep up with my rapidly-firing thoughts. I might have bro-

ken Ivy when I told her to go, but living without *her* had completely annihilated me.

I met Ivy when I was eleven.

I promised her forever when I was twenty.

I fucked it all up when I was twenty-four.

"Is that true?" I demanded.

I didn't want to know, but fuck, I *needed* to know.

She stared at me.

Didn't answer my question.

And then she blinked. "No."

Her lie blazed between us.

It was in her blink.

Ivy always blinked when she lied.

Fuck.

We could never repeat our history.

Never.

It would fucking kill us both.

"Round everyone up, Hyde. We're heading back to the clubhouse." I reached for Ivy as I issued the order. To her I said, "You're coming with us."

She attempted to shrug out of my hold. "No, I'm not."

I gripped her arm hard. "This isn't the fucking time to argue, Ivy."

Her eyes turned from cold to angry, and her body tensed. "I didn't come here for you to stop my progress with leaving Tony. I'm flying out of the country today, so take your damn hands off me and let me go."

I shook my head. "Change your plans. This isn't up for negotiation."

"I see you're the same old King you always were," she spat. "Always completely focused on what *you* want. God forbid what anyone else wants."

My fingers dug harder into her skin as I lowered my face to hers. "I'm not going to say this again, so listen up close. You came to me with information I need to check out. While I do that, you'll stay with my boys. And you'll do this willingly, Ivy, or else you and I are going to have a big fucking problem, and you won't like the outcome."

Her eyes widened a fraction. She seemed surprised. “You need to check what out? You don’t believe what I told you?”

A headache clamped down over my skull. Too much shit had happened today, and I had a lot more to deal with now that I’d had this conversation with her. Ivy and I had history—a fuckload of it—but that didn’t mean I would simply take her word for this. I may have loved her once, but I’d learnt a long fucking time ago not to let love get in the way. These days I ran on distrust and gut instinct. “Did you ever know me to be a man who didn’t check shit out? Not even you could make me roll the fuck over and blindly believe something.” I yanked her arm. “Now move!” I barked as the pain in my head intensified.

“God, you’re a bastard!” At least she’d stopped resisting me and had taken a few steps towards the attic ladder.

“You already knew that. Were you expecting something different?” I wasn’t the man she’d known. Not anymore. And if she thought I was a bastard back then, she had a lot to learn about who I was now.

She chose not to answer that. Instead, she gave me one last filthy glare before following Hyde down the ladder. When I reached them a few moments later, he had her by the arm.

His eyes met mine. “You want me to take Ivy back to the clubhouse?”

My natural instinct was to keep her as close to me as possible, but I fought that. I needed to be smarter here. I knew if she stayed with me, it would likely fuck with my thinking. “Yeah, brother. I’ll meet you there. And can you send Nitro over to Nik’s to bring her back to the clubhouse?”

He nodded and headed outside. Ivy didn’t put up another fight. And she didn’t look back at me. She simply allowed Hyde to direct her movements.

Everyone had cleared the house, leaving me alone, which was a good thing. I fucking needed the space.

I sucked in a long breath and exhaled it harshly. Fucking Tony Romano. I’d never suspected he was behind all the shit going on. I’d heard the stories about his and Ivy’s marriage. That they were a volatile couple. It hadn’t surprised me, though. Not with the history she and I shared. But what she’d told us seemed extreme. Fuck, Tony

ran an empire; he didn't have time to be fucking around on a revenge mission.

Pulling out my phone, I dialled my sister Skylar. It went to voicemail. *Fuck*. She had a habit of missing my calls. Or fucking ignoring them.

I dialled her again, my chest tightening with the need for her to answer.

Voicemail again.

I stabbed at the phone to try her again.

She finally answered. "Jesus, King, I'm in the middle of studying for an exam here."

I ignored her attitude. "And I'm in the middle of trying to save your fucking life, Skye. Pack your shit up. I'll be there in about fifteen minutes to pick you up and take you to the clubhouse."

"Ah, that would be a no. I have too much studying to do."

I massaged my temple where my headache kicked at my head. "This isn't up for negotiation. Take your books with you."

"Why?"

Skylar's twenty-four years were her downfall. She was too young and too sheltered to understand the darker parts of life. That was entirely my fault because I'd raised her that way. I'd fight every fucking minute of every fucking day to keep her sheltered, but the sooner she grew up and realised I knew best, the easier my life would be.

"Because I said the fuck so," I barked, unable to keep my frustration in any longer. "Be ready when I get there."

Without waiting for her reply, I ended the call and dialled my other sister, Annika.

She picked up straight away. "Hey."

"Nik, I need you to pack up the kids and wait for Nitro to swing by your place. Some shit is going down with the club, and I want you all safe with me at the clubhouse tonight."

Silence for a beat. And then—"Is this you being overprotective or is it for real?"

"Fuck, between you and Skye...," I muttered. "I'm being deadly serious. Nitro is on his way. Be ready for him. I'll see you at the clubhouse."

Again, I hung up before she could attempt to argue with me. Today wasn't the fucking day.

Images of Jen crumpling to the ground after that motherfucker put a bullet in her flooded my mind. Her eyes would haunt me forever.

The way they came to mine in disbelief.

The way they screamed her horror.

The way they condemned me for her child's death.

This really *wasn't* the day for anyone to fight me on any-fucking-thing.

This was the day for me to stand the fuck up and take control of this fucking city.

Jen was right in her condemnation. I may not have put that bullet in her child, but I may as well have. No fucking way would I allow that shit to happen again.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

King

“Uncle Zac!”

Annika’s daughter, Rebecca, threw herself at me after coming screaming down the hallway of the clubhouse to the office where I was going over shit with Hyde. Her little arms circled my legs as she hugged me, her blonde curls bouncing all over the place.

I scooped her up, and she wrapped her arms tightly around my neck while nuzzling her face in there too. For a tiny six-year-old, she was strong. “You been a good girl?”

She lifted her head and met my gaze, nodding with wild energy. “Yes!” Her eyes widened with expectation. “Do I get a treat?”

I narrowed my eyes at her, making her work for it. “You think you really deserve one? How good exactly have you been?”

Tiny fingers dug into my neck while she wriggled in my arms. When she answered my question, she did it with her signature style of enthusiasm. If I had to describe my niece in one word, it would be spirited. A huge contrast to her brother, Keith, who was mellow and a little shy.

“I’ve been the best. Ask Mummy! I even put all the books you bought me away in the bookcase this morning!”

“Mmm... was that before or after Mummy asked you to?”

Devil's voice sounded from behind Annika. "King, hate to butt in, but Bronze just arrived."

My eyes cut to his, and I nodded. "One minute." Giving my attention back to Rebecca, I raised my brows signalling I was waiting for her answer.

Her little lips pressed together in the way they did when she had to tell me something she didn't want to. She then nestled her head against my neck again while admitting softly, "After."

Tipping her face up to mine, I said, "You promise to do it before from now on?"

Her curls bobbed as she nodded. "Yes."

I bent to deposit her on the floor. "I've got a new book for you, but if I hear you're not sticking to our agreement, I'll take it back."

The excitement in her eyes couldn't be mistaken. I fucking loved her love for books.

Annika placed her hand on her daughter's head while giving me her eyes. "Thank you."

"Where's Keith?" Even though he was eight, two years older than his sister, he didn't have her confidence when it came to being around people, so he usually shadowed his mother.

"He's coming in with Nitro. I guess they got talking about bikes." She sighed. "You know what he's like. He's got that love of bikes you always had." He did. And I knew it concerned her, but I ignored that. Keeping a man from his bike was like taking his fucking air from him. I encouraged Keith's interest in bikes whenever I could.

"I've gotta deal with some stuff. I'll come find you once I'm done. Skye's studying in my room if you wanna hang out with her." My sisters knew their way around the clubhouse, but Annika preferred the quiet, so I figured she'd choose my room over the bar.

"How bad is this, King?"

I'd been a member of Storm for seventeen years, and we'd been through some shit with the club in that time. I kept my family close, so we always stuck together in these times. While Skye grumbled her way through them, Annika just dealt. Always practical in her life, she understood the need to get on with shit and do whatever it took to survive. But that didn't make it easier for her. I knew that while her strength ran deep, the effort to achieve it was great.

"Bad. Skye will fill you in." I didn't want to discuss this in front of Rebecca.

She nodded her understanding and guided her daughter away from me. I watched them for a few moments. I didn't care what the fuck it took, I'd make sure they stayed safe. I always had, and I wasn't fucking stopping now.

"King!"

I turned to find Bronze watching me, a wild expression on his face. Jerking my head towards the office, I barked out, "Nitro, my office!" He was somewhere in the club; someone would pass that on. Hyde, Devil, and Kick were already there, waiting to get shit started.

A few minutes later, door closed, I faced the five of them. The air in the room swirled thick with expectation. We all wanted the same thing. Even Bronze. He might have been a cop, but he knew what had to be done. He and I had been through a lot together in the seven years since I'd recruited him, and the one thing I knew for sure about him was that he had zero tolerance for family members becoming casualties of war. I knew without even having to ask him that he'd stand by me and avenge the deaths of Jen and her child. It's what I'd done for him all those years ago, and while Bronze wrestled with his conscience over many things, his loyalty for that act was guaranteed.

I looked at him. "Where are the feds?" They'd pulled eyes off us yesterday, so they'd missed the events of today. That caused me to question the shit that had gone down. I didn't fucking trust anything at the moment.

"The team has been moved for now. Looks like you've managed to lose your tail for a while." At my questioning look, he added, "Trust it, King. I did some digging. It's straight up."

I decided to run with it just being a coincidence. Turning my attention to Hyde, I asked the question I'd been putting off since I arrived back at the clubhouse, "Where's Ivy? And has she said anything else?"

My body remained on high alert since the moment I'd laid eyes on her in that attic. Every muscle tense, I warred with myself over her. Fifteen years apart and yet I still felt that pull to her. I wasn't sure, though, what it meant. I hoped it only lingered because of our family history. I did not need to fuck myself over by wanting something that had no place in my life.

"I've got her with Winter. Told him not to let her out of his sight. And no, she didn't utter another word to me."

I nodded. Winter was a good choice. Glancing at Kick, I asked, "You took care of Jen?"

Another fucking question I didn't want to ask. I'd left him to take care of her body when we headed out to meet with Ivy.

"Yeah, brother. What's the plan there?"

I knew what he was asking. *Where are we going to bury her?*

I scrubbed my face, feeling every fucking one of my thirty-nine years, and then some. It was unbelievable to me—and not fucking much was anymore—that out of the two women I'd ever loved, one of them was now dead because of the other one.

"Jen's got no one in her life. You find somewhere for her and let me know. I'll be there." I was all she'd had in the end. She might have driven me fucking crazy, but she didn't fucking deserve this shit.

Discussing this wound me tighter than I already was. The headache pounding against my skull felt like it could explode the fuck out of my head, and the muscles across my shoulders bunched to the point of pain. In an effort to get shit moving so we could stop fucking talking, I barked, "I want all family members moved to safety. When this shit goes down, I don't want any of them around. Nitro, you and Devil take care of that while Hyde and I work out a plan to get to Tony." *And while Kick finds a place to bury Jen.*

Fucking hell.

"And Marx?" Nitro asked. "What do you want done with him?"

Marx was of no use to us anymore. "Stay with him tonight and then get rid of him tomorrow."

Nitro nodded his understanding. "Will do."

After everyone filed out, leaving Hyde and me alone, I said, "Choose three men and send them to Melbourne. Get eyes on Tony. I want to know if Ivy's telling the truth."

He watched me with the same level of fierce intensity that churned deep inside my gut. He'd stood by me years ago and watched as I lost my shit after Ivy left, so he had to understand what it meant for me to even question Ivy's honesty in this. "And if she is?"

My hands clenched by my side. "Then we end this once and for all. I don't give a fuck how it affects ties we have to anyone else. We'll send the fucking word out—Storm doesn't tread carefully any-

more. They wanna take us on? They'll pay the fucking price regardless of whose ass they're kissing."

Hyde's nostrils flared and he exhaled sharply. "Agreed."

It wouldn't have mattered if he hadn't, but it made shit easier that he did agree. "I'm gonna check in with Skye and Nik."

He hesitated for a beat before asking, "You gonna call Axe? Zane?"

"Yeah."

I would be calling in every fucking favour ever owed to me. And I'd drag every chapter of Storm into this war with us if I had to.

But first, my family needed me, and they were always my top priority. We hadn't lived through the shit we had for nothing. Our bonds had been forged in hell, and they were strong. Unbreakable. We may not have been blood, but I gave no shits about blood. The only thing I cared about was that they'd always taken my back. For that, I'd give them my life if I had to.

I left Hyde and headed to my room. Mine was the one at the far end of the hallway. While the clubhouse was large, not every member had a room. I'd had mine for eight years, and my sisters weren't strangers to it. I hated that they were dragged into my shit. Especially after everything we'd all been through as kids. And I really didn't fucking want that for Keith and Rebecca.

"So how long this time?" Skylar demanded the minute I stepped foot in the room. She sat in the middle of the bed with her books spread out around her, pen tapping impatiently on one of the books. Annika sat in the armchair in the corner of the room with Rebecca sprawled across her while Keith hunched over a colouring book on the floor, completely engrossed in what he was doing.

"Skye," Annika said in a low warning tone. Always the peace-keeper, she often tried to intervene in whatever Skylar and I had going on. It was pointless, though. Skye and I were both stubborn and usually refused to back down.

Skylar scowled. "No, Nik, I'm over this. It feels like it's just one thing after another with Storm at the moment. When is this madness going to end? I just want to be able to live my life without having to worry about all this shit."

"It'll be over soon," I started, but my phone rang, cutting me off.

"Oh, that'll be Axe probably," Skylar said, waving at my phone as I yanked it out of my back pocket. "I already called him and told

him you'd kidnapped us."

"Jesus," Annika muttered, glaring at Skylar. "Why do you always do this?"

Skylar returned her glare. "Do what?"

Annika sighed, and I sensed her exhaustion. I wasn't sure if it was over the argument or life in general. She'd been through a lot lately—stuff I wouldn't blame her for being worn down over. "Bait him. It's like you want him to lose his shit at you."

Fuck. These two were in a mood with each other. Not unusual, but I wanted as little to do with it as possible.

I stabbed at my phone to answer it as I said to the girls, "I'll be back. Don't kill each other while I'm gone." And then to Axe, I said, "Skye filled you in?" I exited the room as my sisters went head-to-head.

My brother's deep voice rumbled through the phone. "She told me you had them holed up at the clubhouse, but she didn't tell me why. You need me, brother?"

"Yeah, I need you. And I need Zane, too." I caught him up with everything that had happened.

"Fuck, man, I've been waiting for Ivy to come back. Didn't figure it would take her this long. You think she's spinning shit? We both know how unstable she can be."

I raked my fingers through my hair. "I need to have a conversation with her about it."

"But you don't want to get that close to her, do you?"

Axe knew me better than most and having grown up with Ivy and me, he knew her well, too. He knew how dysfunctional our relationship had been, so he understood my need to distance myself. "At this point, it doesn't matter what I want. I have to do this for the club."

He was silent for a beat before saying, "I'll get there as soon as I can. Just dealing with a situation here, but I should be done with that by tomorrow, the next day at the latest."

After he promised to catch Zane up with everything, we ended the call. I exhaled sharply as I contemplated what I had to do next.

Ivy.

I had to have that conversation with her.

Alone.

Fuck.

Too much could go wrong in this scenario, but I knew there was no way she'd tell me anything if we weren't alone.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

King

Winter had Ivy in the room we kept free for members of other chapters who dropped in. When I entered the room, I found her sitting in the middle of the bed glaring at him. She diverted her attention to me as I moved closer to her. Cold eyes met mine, and her lips flattened. “Finally,” she muttered.

Anger rolled off her, but it didn’t diminish her beauty. Fuck, if anything, Ivy had grown more beautiful in the fifteen years since I’d seen her. The long dark hair, olive skin, curves, and ass I’d always been attracted to were all still there, but age had enhanced everything. It added to her appeal. A bad fucking thing for me when I was determined not to fall again.

I jerked my chin at Winter, indicating he should leave. When I had Ivy to myself, I dragged a chair next to the bed and sat. “Why now?” I demanded, keeping my eyes fixed firmly on her face so I could assess the truth of everything she said. Not even her body would distract me from this task.

Her gaze roamed over me as she sat in silence, not answering my question. She liked what she saw; that was clear in the heat flaring in her eyes. I allowed her silence, and when she met my eyes again, I lifted my brows questioningly.

"You've aged well," she said. "Is there a woman looking after that body of yours?"

"Ivy, I didn't come here for a catch-up. I want to know what the fuck's going on with your marriage, and why after fifteen years you're suddenly dragging me into it?"

Her nostrils flared. "Oh, so we can discuss *my* personal stuff but not yours. Have I got that right?"

I leant forward. I didn't want to, but the pull was too great. "The only personal shit I'm interested in is whether your husband is out for my blood. And I want more details on this attack you say is coming."

Before I realised what she was doing, she scooted to the edge of the bed. Our bodies were only inches apart. Reaching out, she ran a finger down the scar on my face. "I'll never forget the day I first saw this scar," she murmured. "We were just kids then."

I quickly moved my hand to pull hers from my face, but her reflexes were faster, and she grabbed hold of my hand and held it to my scar. Her touch blazed against my skin. It was too fucking much. "Ivy," I warned in a low dark tone. "Don't do this."

She brought her face closer to mine. Not close enough that our lips touched, but close enough to fuck with my head further. "You're so hard now, King. You always were, but not so much with me. I guess fucking around on me and kicking me out really did change things between us. But I'll never forget you as that eleven-year-old who shared his ice cream with me after I ate all mine and wanted more. That was the King I loved."

I ripped my hand away and stood as I shoved my chair back. My eyes bored into hers as I barked, "Tell me about your husband!"

Adrenaline pumped furiously through my veins while I fought to remain in control of this situation. Even after all this time apart, she still knew how to push my buttons. I didn't fucking need her bringing up our past. The best way to deal with it was to ignore it because she'd pounce the minute she saw a reaction to anything she said or did. God fucking help me, though, I was struggling to ignore her.

Her lips pursed together as she stared at me with eyes full of hatred. I couldn't be sure, but I thought I saw hurt flash through them first. "Tony hates you. He feels like he's competed with you for twelve years, and he's had enough, especially now I'm leaving him."

It was time to really push her. The sooner we got this over with, the better. "That's bullshit, Ivy. I don't fucking buy it."

She didn't flinch or react in any way. She simply said, "That's your choice, King, but I'm not lying to you. I hate to think what will happen to your club, though, if you choose not to believe me."

Interesting.

She didn't blink.

But still, I needed to push a little more to be sure. "Tell me, why would you come here and warn me when you hate me so much?"

Again, no reaction. "You might be a cheating asshole who can't keep his promises, but I'm loyal to a fault. Regardless of how *you* treated me back then, Nik and Skylar don't deserve whatever Tony has planned. I'll always look out for those girls. They were family to me."

Every instinct I had told me to walk the fuck out of the room and come back later when I had my shit under control. At this point, I was warring with my belief of every word she uttered, and my gut instinct to never believe anyone until I verified facts myself.

In the end, my gut instinct won out. "Where's Tony now?"

"He's either at work or at home tonight, but don't go looking for him yet, King. You need to spend time making sure everyone here is safe. And you should take as many men with you when you go. He's got security everywhere." She wrapped her arms around her body, a look of concern on her face.

I stepped closer to where she sat on the bed and lifted her chin up to bring her eyes to mine. "You're worried about me now?" Things weren't adding up. One minute she was angry and seemed like she wanted to inflict hurt, the next, she was trying to keep me safe.

She pushed my hand away and stood. "I'm worried for the people who have put their trust in you. They're the ones I want to keep safe. God knows I understand the devastation that trusting you completely can end in."



"You believe her?" Hyde asked later that night.

I threw some whisky down my throat as I scanned the clubhouse bar where we sat. It was quiet; most of the members were getting their families to safety. "I don't fucking know, brother. The Ivy I used to know wouldn't fuck with me, but I don't know her anymore."

"Why would she make that shit up?"

That was the question I'd been rolling around in my head for hours. "Revenge. But fuck, fifteen years is a long time to wait for that, so it seems unlikely. If I believe that, though, I have to believe she's telling the truth."

"But your gut is telling you something else?"

I drank the rest of my whisky. "Yeah." I hated to admit that, because I wanted nothing more than to finally have an answer to who was screwing with my club. I also wanted to believe that Ivy wouldn't lie to me, but mistrust filled me.

"So we'll keep her here until we know more, then?"

I stood to leave. "Yeah."

Until then, I'd stay the fuck away from her. If I had any hope of getting my club through this alive, I needed to keep Ivy out of my sight.



Kree opened her front door when I knocked on it late that night, and shook her head at me. "King, it's nearly eleven thirty, which is when most normal people are either in bed or about to be. I know you like to drop in unannounced, but your visits are getting later and later."

I'd been keeping an eye on Kree since she'd come to work for the club as a bartender. Her cousin Zane who I'd known for over fourteen years, had asked me to watch over her while he dealt with her abusive ex in Brisbane. After the night I stopped by last Christmas to give her some cash when I knew she was struggling, I'd come by regularly. It was a fucking mystery to me why, but being around her calmed me. And I'd needed some fucking calming over the last few months.

Ignoring her speech, I entered her home. "You should know by now I'm not like normal people."

She closed the door and muttered, "Yeah, but I'm still holding out hope for a change."

I made my way to her kitchen and the cupboard that housed my bottle of rum. She never argued with me when I left it here. Kree seemed to know what to bother arguing over and what battles to avoid. Smart woman.

I met her gaze and held up the bottle. "You want one?"

Sighing, she nodded. "Yeah, I could do with one tonight."

I didn't like the sound of that. "What's going on?" I glanced around the kitchen and added, "Why aren't your candles lit?" Usually she had a fuckload of them blazing in all rooms. It concerned the hell out of me that she'd burn her house down one day, but it concerned me more that she'd deviated from doing something she always did.

"It's nothing for you to worry about. And"—she shrugged—"I just didn't feel like burning them tonight."

She may have been smart, which I liked, but she was also fucking stubborn and proud. This wasn't the time for that. "Spit it out, Kree, and don't leave anything out."

Irritation flared in her eyes. Taking the drink I offered her, she downed almost half of it before saying, "I like you, King, but man, you are difficult. Sometimes a woman just wants to handle her own shit."

I took a long swig of rum. If her argumentative side was coming out to play tonight, I was going to need it more than I already did. "And sometimes a woman needs to know when to let a man handle it."

Silence filled the room while we watched and waited for the other to make the next move.

Finally, she reached into one of the kitchen drawers and pulled out a folder filled with paperwork. Dumping it on the counter, she opened it and passed me the top document. "My husband is being an asshole. That's what's wrong."

After I read the letter from her husband's lawyer, I growled, "Your husband is being more than a fucking asshole, Kree. Why the fuck hasn't Zane dealt with him yet?"

Her husband, Don, was using the law to draw her out of hiding by applying for a parenting order. There was no way Kree would agree to this, which meant she'd have to fight him. As far as I was concerned, Zane simply needed to put a fucking bullet in his head. That would solve her problem once and for all. We'd discussed this

once, and he'd told me he did things differently to me. I'd let it go at the time, but if he couldn't fix this for her, I would.

"Zane sent me that letter because Don's lawyers sent it to him, not knowing where I am. He told me not to worry and that he's dealing with it. But that doesn't make this any easier. I know Don, and he has ways of finding people." Her voice cracked as she spoke, alerting me to how worried she was. This was unlike Kree who was usually strong and calm.

I placed the letter back in the folder and shoved the folder in the drawer. "I'm moving you and the kids to the clubhouse."

Her eyes widened. "What? No. The kids don't need any further disruptions to their routines, King. They've finally started making some friends in the street. I don't want to take them away from that. Not again."

"It's either that or you guys stay here and wait for Don to find you. And besides, we've got club shit going on that also means you need to be moved. I'm not taking any chances, Kree."

"So this is one of those situations that I need to let a man handle?"

I scrubbed my face. "Fuck, don't fucking argue with me. Not tonight."

Something I said or the tone I used caused her to soften. "When?"

I finished my drink. "Now. Pack a bag."

The softness I'd manage to stir in her disappeared, replaced with a scowl. "You test me, King, that's for bloody sure."

With that, she left me alone while she packed and woke the kids. Fifteen minutes later, we were on our way to the clubhouse, Kree sitting next to me with her arms crossed, signalling her annoyance, and the kids sleepily whining in the back. I paid no attention to any of it. Keeping people alive consumed my focus, and I would do whatever that took. Whoever was fucking with my club would never have the chance to hurt someone close to me again. I'd make fucking sure of that.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

King

Ivy turning back up in my life was fucking with my head. Fifteen years without her by my side, yet it felt like only yesterday I sat back with a whore's mouth wrapped around my dick while killing the love Ivy had for me. But the love *I* had for her had never died, and that was proving to be a mindfuck I didn't have the time for. Not when I had club business to take care of.

Splashing water over my face in the clubhouse kitchen, I attempted to shake off the exhaustion that came from no sleep and trying like fuck to put regrets from years ago out of my head. They swam there, circling like hungry sharks desperate to feed on me, determined to dominate my attention.

Regret would choke the breath from me if I gave it space in my life, so I made a point not to. I didn't dwell on shit, and I sure as hell didn't spend time thinking about the bad decisions I'd made. But as much as I'd tried over the years, the regrets I carried over Ivy refused to ease up. I'd made promises to her and then I'd poured gasoline over them and lit the match myself.

The mindfuck of it all was that as much as I regretted how it went down, I still believed it was for the best. I was certain that if we'd continued on the path we were on, we would have destroyed

each other. Our love may have been pure, but it was as fucked up and dysfunctional as it came.

I scrubbed a hand over my face and took a good look in the mirror. Thirty-nine years of hard living had etched itself into my skin, as had the exhaustion that staked its territory in my life. I was fucking tired of the battles I was fighting. That Storm was fighting. Shit had to get better soon; otherwise, what the hell was the point of it all?

Movement to my right caught my eye, and I turned to find Skylar entering the kitchen.

"You look like shit," she said, her voice groggy from what I guessed to be too little sleep. Moving to the fridge, she grabbed out the milk before reaching for a mug and the coffee. "You want a coffee?"

I rested against the counter. "You gonna slip some poison in it?" She'd spent last night pissed at me, so I found it surprising we were even having this conversation. Skylar could hold a grudge for longer than anyone else I knew.

Her eyes met mine. "Now why didn't I think of that?"

"Because deep down in that cranky soul of yours you do actually love me."

"Mmm, let's not get too crazy here, big brother. Love is a strong word."

I crossed my arms and narrowed my eyes at her. "Okay, what are you fishing for this morning?"

"What? I can't offer to make my brother a coffee without having a reason?"

"You refused to even look at me last night you were that pissed off. And now you're coming to me with a sense of fucking humour and an offer for coffee first thing in the morning before you've even fully woken up. I'm not buying it, Skye. What's going on? What do you want?"

Her shoulders sagged a little. "Fine," she muttered. "It's not so much what I want, but what I need. I've got a tutorial on today that I really have to attend, and I'm figuring you're going to try to block me from going."

Fuck.

I scrubbed my face. "I don't want you leaving the clubhouse. Can you get the notes from someone?"

She shook her head. "No, this isn't about the notes. It's about being involved in the discussion that'll be going on today. I really need to be a part of it." She hit me with the look that told me to expect a guilt trip to fall from her mouth next. "Besides, you're paying for this course so I'd expect you to want me to be there for something this important. I mean, I know you don't want me to fail."

Jesus, she knew how to push my buttons. She always had. "I'll find someone to take you." At the smile that snaked across her face, I added, "Two things, though. One, if I'm going to put you at risk like this, I hope like hell your grades are good at the end of the semester or we'll be having words. And two, this coffee you're about to make me better be the best fucking coffee you've ever made me." It was going to be a long fucking day while I worried about her safety.

Her smile morphed into a grin that screamed triumph. "Two things, King. One, when have you ever known me to make a shit cup of coffee? And two, my grades will make you fucking weep they are that good."

Without waiting for my response, she turned away to make coffee. I watched her in silence, remembering the day she'd agreed to go to university. She'd fought me on it for a long time, but I'd refused to back down. Skylar was smart, and I wanted her to have the best life she could, so it was a no-brainer for me that I pushed her to study. The day that Silver Hell cunt beat her up, I stepped in and forced her to get her shit together. Between partying almost every night and drinking far too fucking much, she was slowly pissing her life away. The beating seemed to knock some sense into her, and it had made my fucking year when she'd finally said yes to uni.

Annika wandered through the kitchen doorway, tiredness etched into her face, a yawn escaping her mouth. She rubbed her eyes and mumbled, "I need some of that coffee, Skye."

"Mummy!"

Rebecca screamed into the room so fast she ran smack into a cupboard before bursting into tears. I pulled her into my arms before her mother could and held her tightly while she buried her head into my neck, crying. Smoothing her hair, I attempted to distract her. "Did you read any of that book I gave you?"

Annika's eyes met mine and she mouthed, "Thanks," as she waited for Skylar to make her coffee.

Rebecca sobbed for another minute before lifting her head and slowly nodding. "I read some with Mummy last night."

"Is it a good book?"

She kept nodding. "Yes." Her face crumpled and more tears streamed down her face. "My arm really hurts, Uncle Zac. I think I broke it." Her body shuddered, indicating a flare in her anxiety. Rebecca was an anxious kid at the best of times, but in moments of stress, her levels could rise fast.

I held her to me and exited the room that had grown noisy. Carrying her to my office, I closed the door behind us to create some quiet. Sitting, I rested her on my lap and met her gaze while taking hold of her arm. "It takes a lot to break a bone. I doubt yours is, but I'll give it a good look, okay?"

She didn't seem convinced, but she agreed with a quick nod. Her bottom lip quivered, though, so I quickly inspected her arm. The sooner I could confirm there wasn't a break, the sooner I could get to work on calming her down.

Meeting her gaze again, I said, "Good news, it's not broken."

She wiggled in my lap, the look on her face telling me she remained unconvinced. "But it feels like it."

I nodded. "I know it does, and I know you're scared, but have I ever let you down?"

Exhaling a shaky breath, she shook her head. "No."

I gently rubbed my hand up and down her forearm. "Do you know what will make it feel better?"

Hope flickered in her eyes. She'd stopped crying, but I knew the tears weren't far away if her fear took over again. "What?"

In one swift movement, I stood, scooping her into my hold as I did. Heading back towards the kitchen, I said, "My chocolate milk."

The hope in her eyes turned to excitement, and I knew that promise had done the trick. She scrunched a handful of my shirt in her little hand and said, "With extra chocolate like you did last time?"

I met her smile with one of my own and nodded. "Yeah, with extra chocolate. But this is between us, okay?" I never kept anything from Annika, but I liked Rebecca to think I did because it drew her closer to me, and that was a place I always wanted her to be. Close as fuck so I could always keep her safe.

Her smile grew and she nodded enthusiastically while leaning in close and whispering, "I won't tell anyone. I promise."

I cleared everyone from the kitchen and made her a hot chocolate with extra white choc chips melted into it and plenty of chocolate powder sprinkled on top, all served in her favourite Winnie the Pooh mug I kept here for her. We sat together at the table while she drank it, and I ignored the text that sounded from my phone so I could give her my full attention.

Glancing towards where the sound came from, she asked, "Are you going to check your message?"

I shook my head. "No, I'm busy."

Her forehead wrinkled as she frowned. "No you're not. You're not doing anything."

I leaned toward her. "I'm spending time with you, which means I'm very busy."

"But the message might be important."

I shifted the lock of hair that had fallen across her face and hooked it behind her ear. "There isn't any message to check that could be more important than hanging out with you. When we're done here, I'll check it, but until then, I don't want you to worry about that message again. You got it?"

Nodding, she blasted me with a smile. "Got it!"

"Good. Now, I want you to tell me all about the trampolining party you guys went to the other day."

"I already told you about it, silly!"

"I know, but I wanna hear all about it again."

She looked at me like I was the silliest person on the planet before sighing. "Okayyy, but you're probably gonna get bored."

I settled back in my seat and crossed my arms. "Never." I jerked my chin at her. "Now start talking, little miss."

She giggled. I didn't call her that very often, but I knew she liked it when I did, so I reserved it for when I was working hard to take her mind off something. It did the trick this morning. Ten minutes later, we were laughing over the funny stuff that happened to her at the party, her sore arm and anxiety completely forgotten.

This was the shit I lived for and was the reason why I'd bury Tony Romano for even thinking about fucking with my family and my club.



I leant back in my chair and rubbed my temples. A headache pounded against my skull, interfering with my ability to think. The painkillers I'd taken after finishing my conversation with Rebecca had started to kick in, but still, the headache lived and breathed pain that I didn't fucking need. Looking up at Hyde, I asked, "Where are we at with Tony?"

"Our guys are in Melbourne but are yet to get eyes on him. His men are busy, but he's nowhere to be seen."

"I'll talk to Ivy again. See if she'll share more information."

Hyde pressed his lips together, concern clear in his eyes. "You want me to do that? Might be safer."

I grunted. "For me or for Ivy?"

"Yeah, not fucking sure at this point."

I contemplated it but decided we had more of a shot at Ivy talking to me than anyone else. "I'll do it. You keep on top of our guys in Melbourne and let me know if they find him. And call Scott Cole. Tell him to get his men ready. I have a feeling we're gonna need them on this."

He nodded. "Will do."

Turning my attention to Devil, I said, "I need you with Skylar today. She's got a uni class on that she can't miss, so I need you to make sure she's safe there."

"I'm on it," he agreed.

I rubbed my temples some more. "And don't fucking let her talk you into anything other than that, Devil. My sister has a knack for asking for the fucking moon and getting it."

His lips twitched. "You forget I've played a round of that with Skylar, King. She's not getting anything out of me today."

"Good." I pushed my chair back and stood. "Fucking hell, is the fucking air conditioning working?" I felt like I was burning from the inside out.

Nitro frowned. "You okay, brother?"

"Yeah, just fucking hot. Get someone to look at the air con," I barked, irritated as fuck. Between the heat and my headache, I could hardly keep a straight fucking thought.

"King, it's not fucking hot today. It's raining and cold. You sure you're not running a fever?" Devil said.

I scowled at him. "I'm fine." Turning to Nitro, I said, "You good to deal with Marx this morning?"

He nodded. "Yeah. I'll leave in about twenty to take care of that."

"You want someone with you?"

"No, I've got it covered."

"Good." I didn't want to pull anyone off what they were already doing.

Hyde opened the office door. "Text me if you need me."

The three of them left me alone with my headache and my thoughts. If I knew anything, it was that my headache was going to get worse before it got better. This fucked-up situation we were in pretty much guaranteed that.



"She's not eating much," Winter advised me an hour and a half later when I met him outside the room we had Ivy in. I intended to keep her there until I'd dealt with her husband.

"Keep an eye on that and let me know if she still refuses food later."

I entered the room to find her sitting on the bed staring out the window. Her back was to me, but it seemed she could still sense my presence as easily as she could fifteen years ago.

"What do you want now, King?" The flat tone of her voice didn't surprise me. Ivy hated being confined in small spaces. It stemmed from the horrific childhood she had when her biological parents sold her for weekends at a time to men who locked her up and abused her.

"Why aren't you eating?"

She remained silent and still for a few moments, simply staring out the window. Then she turned slowly and found my gaze. "Why do you care?"

"Just answer the question."

Her eyes narrowed at me. "No."

"No?"

She stood and came to me, stopping a couple of feet away. "I'm not answering your question until you answer mine. Why do you care whether I eat or not?"

I scrubbed my face. "Fuck, Ivy, you're still as fucking argumentative as you were years ago."

"And you're still an asshole."

"I never tried to change. Now tell me why you aren't eating. Are you just trying to be a pain in my ass or are you not feeling well?"

"Did you ever consider that maybe I'm just not hungry? That you kidnapping and locking me up has killed my appetite."

This fucking conversation was the last thing I had patience for. I decided to cut to the chase. "Where's Tony?"

My question caught her off guard, and she frowned. "What do you mean?"

I exhaled harshly. "I mean, where the fuck is he? He's not anywhere he should be."

Still frowning, she said, "As far as I know, he should be either at home or at work."

She appeared to be telling the truth, but my gut twisted with doubt over her honesty again. If she were anyone else, I'd push her a lot fucking harder.

I warred with myself over which path to take to get the information I needed. In the end, I went with my gut.

Gripping her neck, I walked her to the wall and held her against it, ignoring the shock in her eyes. "It's been a long time for us, Ivy, since we've spent any time together, and I can't fucking tell anymore if you're being honest with me or if you're lying through your teeth." I gripped her harder. "What I can't figure out is *why* you'd lie to me." Pressing myself against her, I continued to squeeze her neck and bent my mouth to her ear. "Are you lying to me?"

Her fingers clawed at my hand, trying to pull it from her neck. Her breaths weren't restricted, but my grip was painful enough to get her full attention and understanding that I wasn't fucking around here. When I eased the pressure a fraction, she coughed and croaked out, "I'm not fucking lying to you! Let me go!"

I kept hold of her but eased the pressure a little more so she could speak without coughing. "Not until I know for sure what the fuck is going on."

Her eyes burned with hate as she spat, "You wanna know what the fuck is going on here, King?"

"What?"

"Your fucked-up kink is what's going on. Are you trying to get off while interrogating me?" When I didn't respond straight away, she kept pushing. *Taunting*. "You're just like your daddy. Tell me,

King, have you succumbed fully yet? Have you turned into the kind of man your daddy would have been proud of?"

I clenched my jaw as her questions infected the air around us. What Ivy didn't know was that since her, I'd embraced both the darkness his genes had given me, and my kink. I never took it to the extremes my father had, but I was brutal when it came to sex. Women knew what to expect—I never hid my desires—and if they didn't want the shit I wanted, I never went back for more.

I'd accepted my needs a long fucking time ago, and chose to own my depravity rather than fight it. This was a button she could no longer push.

With one last squeeze of her neck, I let her go. "That's not gonna work today, Ivy. I'm not the man you once knew. Not anymore."

She either didn't know anything further about Tony's whereabouts or she wasn't going to share it with me. There was no point continuing down this path. I'd find another way to get this information.

As I walked towards the door, she called out, "So that's it, King? You come charging in here demanding answers and assaulting me, and then you just leave without another word? Without getting what you want?"

I glanced back at her. She appeared agitated that I was walking away. It reminded me of how shit used to go down between us. Me trying like fuck to avoid a fight, her throwing shit in my face, drawing the fight out of me. And here we were, still doing that same fucking dance.

Stalking back to her, I grabbed her throat again, pissed off at the attitude blazing from her. She might not have been able to provoke me before, but she sure as fuck had now. Playing her games wasn't something I ever enjoyed doing. "Let's get one thing straight—I ask the questions, you provide the answers. End of fucking story. And when I'm done with your husband, you'll go back to your life and I'll go back to mine." I shoved my face closer to hers. "*End of fucking story.*"

The only fucking way to get through this was to throw that wall up between us that should never have been pulled down in the first place.

I exited the room and didn't stop moving until I'd left the building. Wild energy engulfed me. Energy I didn't know what the fuck

to do with. My chest felt like it would explode and my fists craved violence. The fucking worst of it was that I couldn't figure out my thoughts. They ran through my head so damn fast I could hardly latch onto them, and when I did, they conflicted with each other. This situation was stirring up a lot of shit from the past—shit I'd buried so fucking deep that I never wanted to confront again.

Fuck.

My phone rang, dragging me from my hell.

Devil's name flashed across the screen. I swiped to answer it and barked, "Yeah?"

I listened to what he had to say as parts of my body I didn't even fucking know existed knotted into balls of tension. When he finished, I roared, "Motherfucker! I'll be there soon."

"What's wrong?" Annika asked, joining me outside.

I shoved my phone in my pocket and tried like fuck to contain my anger. It was a pointless fucking exercise, though, because nothing right now would do that. "Devil and Skylar have been in a crash. Some asshole rammed his car into them. Devil's okay, but Skylar's not."

Her eyes widened with worry. "Oh God, what, King? How bad is she?"

"Devil's not sure, but she's conscious and still being a smartass, so my guess is it's not life-threatening. But she's in a lot of pain and Devil is pretty sure she's got broken bones." I raked my fingers through my hair as I forced some of the breath I'd been holding out. "I'm heading to the hospital now. Do me a favour and stay here. I don't need anyone else to be worrying about today, okay?"

She nodded. "Let me know how she is as soon as you know."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

King

"Jesus fucking Christ, Devil!" I roared as I took in Skylar's injuries. I'd arrived at the hospital ten minutes ago and had almost lost my fucking mind in the time it took me to get from the front door to where Skylar was in the emergency room. My heart pumped furiously as anger surged through my veins. Tony Romano would fucking pay for this.

"King! It wasn't his fault." Skylar tried to move, but her injuries caused her grief, and all she managed to do was scrunch her face in pain.

I moved closer to the bed, which only brought her wounds into sharper focus, causing another wave of fury to fill me. Swelling and bruises covered her face, neck, and arms, but it was what I couldn't see that worried me the most.

Meeting Devil's gaze, I demanded, "What have the doctors said? How bad is this?"

Regret blazed from his eyes. "Fuck, man, I'm fucking sorry this happened."

Every muscle in my body tensed with the anger I couldn't control. "I didn't ask for a fucking apology, Devil. I asked what the doctors have said." I wanted to fucking punch him. Rationally, I knew it wasn't his fault, but he was all I had to direct my emotions at. Hell, I

wanted to do more than punch him; I wanted to rip his fucking head from his body and beat the living shit out of him. But I didn't. I held my shit together and waited. For what, I wasn't sure. All I knew was that I would tear the world apart in order to inflict hurt on those who did this to her.

Skylar didn't give Devil a chance to reply. She fixed a filthy glare on me and said, "I'm right here, and I'm capable of answering your questions. They think my hip is fractured. They're going to do an X-ray to confirm and then I may need surgery. Other than that, they've given me some good drugs, and I'm fine."

I ran my eyes over the black and blue marks on her skin. "You're not fucking fine, Skye. You look like you've been through ten rounds with Rocky." I had to give it to her, though—my sister was a fighter.

"Don't exaggerate this, King. I mean, aren't you the one who taught me to suck shit up and not be a pussy?"

Ignoring her, I concentrated my attention on Devil. "What the hell happened?"

I took in Devil's only injury—a gash on his forehead—as he shoved his fingers through his hair and blew out a long breath. "I took the backstreets like we planned, but I don't know, somehow they followed us. We were on Cyprus heading to Main Street when they rammed us."

"You recognise them or the van?"

"I've never seen the van before, and the windows were dark, so I couldn't see who it was. And they took off fast afterwards."

"Fucking hell," I muttered. "As if we don't have enough shit to deal with."

"You want me to get a start on trying to figure out who the hell was responsible for this?"

"Make some calls and get it in motion, but I don't want you leaving this hospital. I want your eyes on Skylar at all times." When his phone rang, I jerked my chin at the door. "Go take that. I'm staying for a bit."

After he'd left us, Skylar said, "Don't blame him, King," before bursting into tears.

I didn't need any more reasons to hate the people who did this to her, but I sure as fuck had another one now. My sister didn't cry easily, so I knew by her tears just how shaken she was. And that concerned me because it meant Skylar's anxiety could flare over this.

Touching her arm gently, I said, "I don't."

She glanced down at my hand on her and then looked back up at me, nodding. Her face crumpled as she tried to stop crying.

My skin felt like it could rip apart at any moment. There were too many fucking emotions thrashing around inside me. Emotions that I didn't know what the fuck to do with. Add to that the fact I wanted to pull Skylar into my arms to console her but I couldn't because fuck knew where she was hurt, and it was all fast becoming too much to deal with.

I removed my hand from her arm and clenched my fists by my side while I attempted to get my breathing and my thoughts under control. Easier said than done. I'd never been good at getting myself under control. With each passing second, I felt it slip further away.

Skylar's eyes widened in understanding. She'd seen me here before. "King, don't.... Everything's gonna be fine. Just calm down, okay?"

I sucked in a deep breath before forcing it back out.

Everything was *not* going to be okay.

Not until I found these people and put them ten fucking feet under.

Skylar reached for my hand and squeezed it. "King, sit down and talk to me. Please."

It was the way she half whispered her request that did it. She'd never coped well when I lost control of myself. After I'd ended things with Ivy years ago, I'd raised her by myself for three years before Jen came into the picture. I'd had to get my shit together fast in those three years while Skylar and I figured out how to live together. One of the most important things I'd learnt was that she needed me in as calm a state as I could get myself. She was one of the only people who could bring me round fast when my rage threatened to take over.

I did as she requested and pulled up a chair. The emotions threatening to cage me in faded to the point where I could breathe again. They didn't completely disappear, though, and that was a good thing. I needed that shit to keep me focused on my goal.

Before we could say anything further, a nurse came in and told Skylar they were about to take her for an X-ray. After the nurse left, Skylar watched me for a few moments, seemingly assessing my state of mind. Finally, she said, "Devil told me Ivy's back."

I knew what she was asking without her having to say the words.

I nodded. "Yeah." I may have known she was looking for a reassurance that everything was okay, but I didn't have it to give her, so I said nothing else.

"Why?" Her question came out harshly. Skylar didn't know why Ivy and I had broken up, so she'd always held a grudge against her, even though I'd told her not to. Turned out my sister's loyalty ran as deep as mine, even if I did manage to piss her off every chance I got.

"Skye," I said, my tone holding a warning. "Don't go there."

"Why not? That bitch fucked you up years ago, and I don't want her coming back to stick the knife in any further. Why are you even letting her stay at the clubhouse? You should have told her to go back to where she came from."

I exhaled a long breath and dropped my head into my hands so I could massage my temples that were slowly being massacred by a headache. Meeting her gaze again, I said, "She didn't fuck me up. I fucked her up. And I've been telling you that for years, so just drop it."

The wild, angry energy we shared took hold of her and she sat up, the anger grooved into her face. The swift movement delivered pain to her body, though, and she winced slightly before lashing out. "I get it—you're a bastard. But, King, anyone who gets involved with you knows that. They know what they're getting themselves into, and Ivy knew for a long time who you were. Stop blaming yourself for that breakup. And for the love of God, walk away from her now. Don't go back down that path. I'm going to be really fucking pissed at you if you do."

I leant forward, closer to her. "I'm not going back, Skye. Stop worrying about me and concentrate on yourself."

"Just let someone worry about you for once, okay?"

Her question gave me a moment of pause. It wasn't often she expressed herself this way towards me. Usually, we spent most of our time arguing. Her question cut through the tension between us, and I smiled. "You wanna worry about me, Skye?"

She rolled her eyes and lay back down. "Don't be an ass. You might annoy the hell out of me most of the time, but that doesn't mean I don't love you. I always worry about you. You give a girl a lot of fucking reasons to do that, so maybe just this once you could stop with the dumb behaviour and give me some peace and quiet."

I leant back in the chair and crossed my arms. "I'll make a deal with you. I won't pursue Ivy if you stop giving me hell about wanting you at the clubhouse."

She groaned. "Worst deal, but I'll take it."

"Thank fuck," I muttered.

My phone rang, interrupting us, just as Devil stepped back in the room. It was Hyde. "Any news?" I asked, phone to my ear, eyes on Devil. I nodded at him, indicating I was over my shit and that we were good. He returned my nod and sat down.

"One of Romano's guys just turned up," Hyde said. "Says he's got information to share with us."

I sat up straight. "I'll head back now. Stick him in a room and wait for me."

"Will do."

We ended the call, and I stood to leave, motioning to Devil to join me outside Skylar's cubicle. After I'd filled him in on the new developments, I made my way outside to my bike. I was fucking wired to have this chat with Romano's guy. I didn't trust it, though. For all I knew, he'd been sent by Ivy's husband to screw with us some more. If that was the case, I'd find a way to use him. By the time I was through with him, he'd fucking agree to do anything I asked.



Hyde watched me walk the length of the clubhouse hallway to the office. He looked as worn out as I felt. This shit was taking its toll on all of us. Over a year of fighting off enemies would do that to anyone.

When I reached him, he said, "I've put him in a room with Kick."

"Good."

"Let's see if I can rattle him."

Hyde nodded again. "Also, Axe just arrived."

"Good. Get him in that room with me. Between the two of us, we'll break this motherfucker if there's any breaking to be done."

Kick's eyes met mine when I entered the room where he waited with the guy. He then turned to Tony's man who sat across from him and said, "You ever met King? If there's anything you want to

change about your story, I'd do it now before he gets started on you."

The guy looked between us. The minute his gaze landed on me, he pushed his chair back hastily and stood, moving backwards fast until he hit the wall. Hands raised, he yelled, "Dude, I'm telling the truth!"

I stalked to him, not slowing to give him time to think about strategy or any of that shit. My body language screamed out my mood for anyone to read clearly. If it didn't convince him I wasn't fucking around, my next move would.

"You sure about that, asshole?" I asked, pointing my gun at him.

He nodded frantically, gulping for air as he tried to reassure me. "Yes!"

I aimed my gun at his leg and fired. "I don't fucking believe you!" As the guy screamed his denials while staring with disbelief at his bleeding leg, I barked, "Shut the *fuck* up and start telling me the truth!"

I yanked him back to the chair and shoved him down in it at the same time my brother joined us.

"I see you started without me," Axe said, deathly calm and steady as fuck. Axe could have been in the middle of a fucking ambush and he'd still be as calm as this. That's what years in the military did to a man.

I, on the other hand, was feeling as far from calm and steady as could be. Every fibre of my being blazed with the need for retribution and blood. For all I fucking cared, the guy sitting in this chair would pay for the sins of Ivy's husband unless he gave me something. I didn't give a fuck whose blood I got on my hands so long as at the end of all this, I had Tony Romano's.

Axe and I ignored the shit spewing out of the guy's mouth while he protested his innocence and bitched about the fact I shot him. We circled him, and as Axe slowly rolled up the sleeves of his white button-down shirt, I said, "You got all fancy for me, Axe. But white? For this?"

He kept his eyes trained on the guy while he answered me. "Had a work thing I had to take care of before coming here. Required something a little better than what I would have preferred to wear for this. Although, you didn't tell me we'd be doing *this* today. I may have chosen black if I'd known."

I jerked my chin at the guy in the chair, who divided his attention between Axe and me, his eyes and body language growing increasingly fearful. *Exactly how they should be.* "He just turned up here an hour ago, brother. Says he no longer works for Romano and that he has information he wants to give us." I stopped circling him and slammed my hands down on the table, staring the guy dead in the eyes. "But I'm not fucking buying it. And that's what you and I are gonna figure out now. Whether the shit coming out of his mouth is worth another bullet or not."

The guy yelled at me, "I'm not screwing with you, man!"

Axe looked at him. "What's your name?"

"Brant." He swung his head around to face Axe. "You've gotta believe me. What do you need from me to know I'm not fucking with you? I'll tell you anything you want!"

Axe considered that for a moment. It was part of his interrogation tactic. Where I went in like a bull-at-a-gate, he never lost control of a situation. It was fucking killing me not to slam this guy back up against the wall and shoot his other fucking leg, but I knew that between us, Axe and I would get the result we needed. I just had to let Axe do his thing and wait my turn, because eventually, it would come. Axe had to get the guy there first, though.

"How long have you worked for Romano, Brant?" Axe asked, moving behind him.

"Seven years."

"And now you're turning on him? Seven years is a long stretch of loyalty for you to throw out the window."

Brant's face twisted into a scowl. "If you worked for Tony Romano, you'd understand."

"Ah, but I don't, so enlighten me. Tell me why you're betraying him now." Axe settled his ass on the edge of the table and crossed his arms like he was readying himself to listen to a long story.

"When you first go to work for Tony, he makes you feel like you're part of his family. He invites you to his home for parties, he gives you expensive gifts, he treats your family like his and looks out for them. It lowers your fucking defences until the day he has you right where he wants you, fully at his mercy. After that, he forces you to do things you wouldn't wish upon your worst enemy, and he threatens your family if you don't do these things."

Axe stared at Brant like he was bored. "So?"

"So? I'm showing you why anyone would want out of the Romano empire."

Axe leaned his face close to Brant's. "No, what you're describing to me is what other men would consider a picnic in the fucking park, Brant. You're not showing me anything I don't already know about working for men like Romano. What I *don't* need from you is a fucking sob story about why you want out." His voice grew deeper, darker. "Tell me why you'd come here and chance King riddling your body with bullets after he gets the rest of his anger out in other ways. Because I'm telling you that if you don't, you're going to wish you'd stayed at that fucking picnic you had going with Romano."

My breathing slowed as I waited to hear Brant's next words. I focused every sense on deciphering his body language, tone, and what he said in my effort to figure out the truth of him. And all the while, my finger stayed glued to the trigger of my gun because if I decided I didn't like what he had to say, that gun would be in his face before he could draw another breath.

Brant looked up at Axe and swallowed hard. He took his time forming his words before finally saying, "For Ivy."

My mind exploded with questions, and I was unable to hold myself back any longer. Throwing our usual plan of attack out the window, I pressed my gun to Brant's temple. "Keep fucking talking, motherfucker, and don't hold any-fucking-thing back. The minute you say something I know to be incorrect, you'll have a bullet in your skull."

His shoulders bunched more than they already had, and his hands balled. *Good*. He tripped over his words trying to get them out. "Ivy has always been good to me. Always. And he never appreciated her. I've lost count of the number of times I've turned up to their house and found her beaten up. I tried to convince her to leave, but every time she tried, he found her, dragging her home kicking and screaming."

When he stopped talking, Axe said, "Go on. I feel like you're just getting to the good bit."

Brant glanced up at me. "When she told me your history and that she'd heard what Tony had planned for you, I encouraged her to bring that information to you, hoping you'd take her in and keep her safe from him. She wasn't sure you would, not after the way things ended between the two of you. I figured you would, though, because

of the way she said you'd always looked out for her, right from when you were kids. I've been waiting to hear from her, but I never did. And then Tony was raided by the cops and went into hiding and I—"

"When was this?" I barked. *And why the fuck didn't Bronze know?*

"Two days ago." His shoulders sagged a little. "Fuck, tell me you have Ivy. That's all I care about, that she's safe. I'd never forgive myself if Tony had another chance to hurt her for something I encouraged her to do."

Brant knew my history with Ivy, which led me to believe him. Ivy had never been the kind of person to share personal shit with people, so for her to open up to him meant she trusted him.

I was the worst kind of asshole. I'd let all the bullshit I carried with me after decades of dealing with the scum of this world affect the way I treated one of the only women I'd ever loved. Ivy had come to me in good faith, and I'd taken that faith and shit all over it. Worse, I'd been a bastard and locked her up.

Fuck.

I was halfway out the door when I looked at Kick. "Find out everything he knows and bring it to me. And don't let him out of your sight. We'll keep him here until I'm sure we don't need him anymore."

Pulling out my phone, I hit Bronze's number, and when he answered a moment later, I said, "One of Tony's men turned up at the clubhouse today. Says Tony was raided two days ago. Why the fuck don't I know about this?"

"Fuck," he muttered. "Give me half an hour."

"I don't have half a fucking hour, Bronze. Get it for me now!"

Hyde exited the office and came my way, fury etched into his face, as Bronze said, "Half an hour, King, and you'll say yes because there's something else you need to deal with right now that I'm just about to fucking tell you."

I had the distinct feeling that whatever Bronze was about to tell me, Hyde was, too. "What?" I demanded.

"Nitro and Marx have been arrested."



Looking around the room at church five hours later, I noted the grim expressions on everyone's face. *Fuck*. Shit was going south at a great rate of fucking knots, and I was experiencing something I never had—concern that the situation was spiralling into a clusterfuck I couldn't manage. There were too many fucking balls in the air, and I only had two fucking hands.

I directed my attention to Kick. "Before we get into this, have you found somewhere for Jen?"

He leant forward to rest his elbows on the table and nodded. "Yeah. Just waiting on your word for when it happens."

"Tomorrow afternoon." Ignoring the churn in my gut—the fucking guilt over Jen that never left—I turned to Hyde. "Tatum's coming in soon. You and I are going to nail her down with a plan of attack. And then we're gonna figure out how to deal with Marx."

He nodded. "Also, Ghost made contact with me. He wants to see you."

"I don't have time. You go. Take Kick with you." Ghost was one of the last fucking people I wanted to deal with.

"No, he said he's got something to share and that he'll only share it with you."

I rubbed the back of my neck and stretched it as another headache clamped down over my skull. "Jesus fucking Christ, does it never end with that motherfucker?" I exhaled hard. "Okay, you and I will take care of that tomorrow." I'd have to move shit around to make it happen, but the sooner I sorted him out, the better.

Looking around the room at everyone again, I said, "Tony Romano has disappeared. The latest info I have is that the cops raided his warehouse two days ago, but Tony was already gone. Bronze is digging up more info on that, but this is all we know for now. We need to find him fast, so keep your ear to the ground and report any little thing back to me that you hear, even if you think it means nothing. Keep your families safe until we've dealt with him, and don't trust anyone outside of the club. It seems Tony still has men doing his dirty work while he's laying low, and I don't want a repeat of what happened this morning with Devil. As far as what's happening with Nitro, Tatum is working to get him out, but Marx has talked. If you have anyone on the inside who we can use, come to me with it. We're working all angles, and I'll consider anything. And when I say

anything, I fucking mean *anything*. I don't give a fuck who it affects. I want Marx dealt with so he never becomes a problem again."

After the meeting ended, I headed towards the front of the clubhouse, looking for Tatum. Unfortunately, I didn't find her. Instead, I found Detective fucking Ryland.

"We need to take a walk," he said, a smug look on his face and swagger to match.

Hitting him with a filthy scowl, I said, "I can assure you, Ryland, you're the last person I need to take a walk with."

His eyebrow arched. "You want your men to hear what I have to say to you?"

Could the motherfucker be any more of a prick? "I don't keep fucking secrets from my club. Spit out whatever the fuck you came here for and then leave."

"Righto then. As you're aware, I'm talking with Marx about the activities of your club. On top of that, I have other sources I've been having conversations with, and I'm piecing together the crimes you and your club have committed over the last decade and a half."

The headache that hit during church intensified, and the violent impulses I constantly battled consumed me. It took every ounce of restraint not to flatten him. Pulling out a smoke, I lit it and inhaled deeply while counting to ten. When I knew I'd pulled myself together enough not to tell him to go fuck himself, I said, "You're telling me this because?"

That smug look returned to his face, pissing me the fuck off. "Because I want you to know it's only a matter of time before I have everything I need to lock you up for the rest of your life. And after I do that, I'm taking your club down with you. Be ready."

With that, he left through the front door of the clubhouse while I watched him go, mentally filing through every option I had to sort him out.

As he exited, Tatum entered, shooting him a look that expressed her hatred of him. She and I had come a long way since the day I'd told Nitro to deal with her. His hesitation in doing what I'd asked had coloured my view of her, as had her tendency to express her thoughts of me, but I'd slowly come around to appreciating what she offered the club.

"What did he want?" she demanded. *Good*. She'd need that fight to help us get Nitro out.

"To tell me he's gunning for me and the club."

Her lips flattened. "Like you didn't already know that."

"Yes." As much as he angered me, though, his actions today provided me with information that would help us figure out how best to work against him. "It seems he's a little too invested in this, which will work well for us."

She nodded slowly, a thoughtful expression crossing her face. "True. At some point he'll cross a line."

I smiled for the first time today. "And you and I will be ready for him when he does that."

"You and I?"

"I want you to liaise with Bronze and keep on top of everything we know about Ryland. Do some digging yourself. Find out his weaknesses, his strengths, all about his family, everything you can. Figure out a way we can use the law against him, especially when he crosses that line."

"I'm surprised, King. I assumed you'd just remove him from the equation."

"I plan to. But not before I figure out what he knows, who told him, and who else knows. I'll need an in for all that, and he's going to provide it himself. Your brain is going to work out the how. But first, I take it you're up to speed on Nitro and Marx?"

"Yeah, and I've got some recommendations for you as to who to hire now that this has escalated. We need to get them in to see Nitro as soon as possible." The expression on her face turned more determined than I'd ever seen it as she added, "And I hope you've got some ideas as to how to stop Marx from talking again, because this is some shit you guys are in. I'll be fucked if my man is going down, so if you don't have a plan, I'm calling Billy in to help me with it."

Nitro had done well with her. She had exactly the right amount of grit needed to survive club life. Jerking my chin towards my office, I said, "Join me and Hyde. We're going over all this now." Involving an old lady in club business wasn't something I'd ever done, but this situation wasn't like any we'd ever been in, so I was running on my gut and right now it was telling me to use Tatum for all she was fucking worth.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Lily

"I'm just saying that maybe you want to consider a one-night stand or something. You're not getting any younger, and at the rate you're going, I'm concerned your vagina will forget what to do when you finally decide to let a man in again."

I ignored my mother while continuing to lay the dining table. Acknowledging her, and continuing the conversation, would only encourage her to give me more unwanted advice.

"Lily, did you hear what I said?"

Placing the last set of cutlery down on the table, I looked up at her. "Yes, I heard you, but my vagina has special memory powers so you can take it off your long list of things to worry about." Honestly, the list she had was longer than my list of shit I'd like to do to my ex-husband before he died. And that was saying something, because *that* list was long and I was adding to it daily.

She twirled out of the dining room into my kitchen, her long floral, boho skirt flaring. "Darling, I'm trying to be serious here. I've watched you navigate this single world for three years, which was fine because you were actually dating, but this celibate thing you're experimenting with is disconcerting."

My mother trying to have a serious conversation while twirling around the place was a daily occurrence in my life. I loved her dear-

ly, but man, she was hard work sometimes. A patchwork of mixed and often conflicting traits, thoughts, feelings, likes and dislikes, Hannah Bennett was anything but dull. She often said the same about me, though, so I took great comfort in the knowledge I was just as much hard work for her.

I followed her into my tiny kitchen so I could grab the eggs and bacon I'd cooked for breakfast. "I'm thinking of extending my celibacy just to annoy the fuck out of you."

Her lips flattened and she shook her head at me. "Six months is long enough." She gathered the juice and coffee pot and took them into the dining room while continuing on. "I could set that dating profile I made for you to public. Mmm, maybe I will. You'll have a list of suitors by the end of the day."

I joined her and placed the food on the table while hitting her with a stern expression. "Don't you dare. And who says suitors anymore?" *And whose mother even kept track of their daughter's sex life like this?*

A smile lit her face. My mother was a beautiful woman, but when she smiled, she glowed. And she looked all of forty-five rather than the fifty-five she was. "I could call them beaus if you'd prefer."

And she would, if only to exasperate me. She liked to use flowery language and big words and long freaking sentences because she knew it irritated me. I was all about getting to the point and getting there fast.

Turning to face the lounge room, I called out, "Kids! Breakfast is ready."

Mum's lips flattened again. "Really, Lily, must you always yell?"

It's going to be a long day.

It was only 7:00 a.m. and I'd already dealt with a clogged shower drain, a cat that had clawed her way through the screen on my back door, and the cranky old man who lived next door and who always wanted to talk to me about my children at six in the morning.

I took a deep breath before saying, "I like to use the beautiful voice you gave me."

She always liked it when I engaged in positive self-talk. I mean, it wasn't that I didn't believe it, but I wasn't convinced today was gonna be a day for extreme positivity. Some days you just had to get through. They couldn't all be days of profound thoughts and actions,

could they? Today was possibly gonna be a survive-rather-than-thrive kinda day.

The sounds of my children running through the house filled my ears. I counted to three in my head, knowing it would only take my mother that long to say what she always said.

"Children, the food isn't going anywhere. You don't need to run through the house."

Yep, without fail. She'd said it to my sister and me while we were growing up, too. You had to wonder if she ever got sick of saying it.

The whirlwind that was my children filled the dining room, and I watched as the three of them scrambled for their breakfast before they'd hardly taken a seat. Even Robbie, which was odd. He was my eight-year-old nerd who loved to read more than eat, but this morning he was all about the food, too.

I frowned at him. "Are you okay, baby?"

Zara stopped filling her plate for a moment and looked up at me. "He's on a mission to get back to his iPad."

I didn't have to ask him why. Robbie was currently obsessed with a YouTube science show, and they'd just released their latest episode.

Smiling, I said, "Ah, I get it."

Mum sat down and threw in her two cents. "Whatever is on that iPad can wait. We're enjoying our breakfast together this morning."

God.

Help.

Me.

She was in a mood for all her old-school ways this morning, and I was *far* from being in the kind of mood to just let her be. Usually I simply ignored her, but then again, she didn't usually start the day with a lecture on opening my vagina up for anyone who wanted in.

I sat next to my oldest daughter, Holly, who shot me a sympathetic look, and said, "Mum, we always have our breakfast together."

"Yes, but you always just let the kids leave the table whenever they want. I don't get to have breakfast with you very often, and for once, I'd just like everyone to take their time so we can catch up."

I tried not to laugh. And I also made a mental note to say no next time she asked if she could sleep over. I mean, my mother lived five freaking minutes away from us, yet she was acting like she lived in another state and hardly ever saw us.

"You know my thoughts on this. Please don't push me to defend them," I said. She and I often argued over the way I raised my kids. I didn't rule with an iron fist, and she would have preferred a little more of that style.

She finished filling her plate with food and stopped for a moment. "I'm not asking you to defend them. I'm simply asking for some time with my grandchildren. Is that too much to ask?"

If she was going to be so intent on being this dramatic, I was going to need a smoke.

Standing, I muttered, "I'll be back in a minute."

Holly glanced at me, stifling a laugh. When Mum started talking again, she quickly interjected, "Grandma, how did your date go the other night?"

Smart kid.

She knew the best way to divert the conversation when her grandmother was involved.

As I headed outside to the back patio, Mum called out after me, "I know you're going for a cigarette."

Seriously. Could. Throttle. Her.

I made another mental note: find her a man fast. She needed something to focus her attention on rather than my sister and me, and all the problems we apparently had.

After I took my first drag, I pulled my phone out of my pocket and texted my sister.

Me: Your mother is slowly killing me.

Brynn: Not my mother today. She's all yours. And BTW, I'm already dead. She killed me yesterday.

Me: How?

Brynn: She sent me a male prostitute.

I called her.

"What the fuck, Brynn? Are you kidding me? And why didn't you call me straight away?"

"Not a word of a lie, big sister. Be prepared. I'm pretty sure your turn is coming since you haven't had sex in six months. And I didn't

call you because I was dead, remember?" She sighed. "What planet do you think our mother is really from? What kind of mother sends her daughter a fucking prostitute?"

I took a long drag on my smoke. There wasn't enough nicotine in the world to get me through this morning. "I don't care if you're dead, you still need to warn me about these things." I frowned. "Wait, did you fuck him?"

She laughed. "I thought about it. Instead, I made him play scrabble with me. We took a selfie and I sent it to Mum. I'm surprised she didn't tell you."

I almost choked on my own laughter. "Maybe you and I are the weird ones, babe. I mean, who the hell turns down sex for scrabble?"

"Sex with a prostitute is not the kind of sex I want in my life, thank you very much. But, I do have to confess the dude was hot, and I mean, fucking hot. And on top of that, he's a pro at scrabble. I asked him for a rematch."

"Did he say yes?"

"Kind of."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I had to agree to do something with him first."

"Jesus, stop dragging this out. Just tell me already. What?"

"He wants me to go fishing with him on the weekend."

This story was getting weirder by the minute. "So let me get this straight—you just met him last night and now you're suddenly hanging out with each other? I honestly think I'm existing in some alternate universe today."

"No shit, Lil, we got on so well. Like, he's so easy going and funny. I wish the guys I dated were this easy to get on with."

"Is this fishing thing not a date?"

She was silent for a beat. "No. He told me he likes to do it with someone, but that none of his friends like it."

"Well, dude must be hot. You hate fishing. Make sure you ask him how he selected his profession. I've always wondered why someone would have sex for cash. I mean, it's hard enough to have good sex. I can't imagine having shitty sex more than once a day."

"That's because Linc didn't know what the hell he was doing and neither have any of the guys you've dated since him. Maybe Mum will hook you up, too, and maybe the guy'll know what he's doing."

I finished my smoke as I said, "If she sends a guy my way, I'll put him to good use in my kitchen while I go take a bath and a nap."

"Hey, before you go, how did you go with Zara and the boy problem?"

"Ugh, did you have to remind me about that?" My fourteen-year-old was giving me grey hairs long before any woman should have them. Her obsession with boys was out of control. "I told her the only way she'd have a night-time date with that boy was with me or her father in attendance."

"You know, just because you didn't have these issues with Holly doesn't mean you can bury your head in the sand over this. At some point, you're going to have to let her out on a date."

"I do. She can go out with him in the daytime, but no fucking way am I allowing her out at night with him." It was beyond me how I'd managed to raise such different girls. Holly was all about study rather than boys, while I was fairly sure Zara didn't even know what a textbook looked like.

"What's the difference?"

"There's a huge difference! Babies get made at night."

"Oh, God, please tell me you aren't that naïve. Babies can get made during the day, too."

"Brynn, I'm not that naïve, but I know from what Linc and I did when we were kids that there's more likelihood of sex at night. I do not want Zara having a baby at seventeen like I did."

"Jesus, Lil, it doesn't matter what you and Linc did. The fact is that if Zara wants to sleep with this boy, she won't care if the sun is shining or not."

I knew she was right. God did I know that. But for the life of me, I couldn't get my brain to think any differently than it did, and it was screaming at me not to let my daughter out at night with a boy. I was so fucking terrified of my girls making the same mistakes I had. I'd managed to get Holly to sixteen without a pregnancy so far, and I'd do whatever it took to get Zara there, too.

"I'm hanging up on you now. And let me tell you that when you have a daughter, I'll be the first one to say 'I told you so.' Girls plus boys plus no sun equals babies."

She laughed. "Fine, be stubborn. I promise I'll be the good aunt who is there to make sure your kid is okay when she refuses to talk to you because you've turned into your own mother."

"I am *not* turning into my mother." *Good fucking God, I better not be.*

"Lil," she said softly, "you are. But I still love you. Just don't start sending me male prostitutes. I'll have to reassess the relationship if you start doing that shit."

The door to the patio opened and my ex stuck his head out.

"Shit, Brynn, I've gotta go. Linc's just turned up." *And I'm going to fucking kill him.*

"I'll get on my knees and start sending prayers up for Linc's life."

I ended the call and took a step toward the man who consumed way too much of my time these days. "Did you have a brain fart, Linc? Because I could have sworn I asked you to stop showing up at breakfast time without warning."

His face pulled into the scowl I could trace with my eyes closed I'd known it for so long. "Why you gotta be such a smartass all the damn time, woman? And why can't a man show up at the house where his children live whenever he has something for them?"

Oh, he wanted to get into it, did he?

I moved closer to him, fixing a shitty look of my own on my face. "One, don't call me woman. I'm not your woman, and I haven't been your woman for a good three years. Two, it's a pity the father of my children only wants to show up to visit said children when it suits him. And three, my bank account seems to be minus a few numbers this week, so if you have something for the kids, you suck. They'd rather have their excursion fees paid and their swimming fees paid and their—"

He raised his hands in defence. "Okay, I get your point, Lily. You don't need to go on. The money should be going in your account today. And for the record, you never used to be this bitchy."

I lifted my brows. *Fuck him.* "And you used to handle your shit."

Shoving his fingers through his hair, he muttered, "Fuck. I've had a bad month. There's not much work coming in, okay?"

"Okay? Are you kidding me? I get that things are tight, but would it have killed you to warn me? Or to pick up the phone and let me know that the cash was going to be late? Because let me tell you, this mama already has enough shit to stress over. So don't come at me, all casual and 'I've got presents for the kids' when I'm over here spending my nights trying to figure out how to pay the damn

electricity bill because you didn't uphold your end of this parenting gig." *And not for the first time.*

He hit me with one final glare before turning to walk back inside, not another word on the matter.

I contemplated taking the day off and locking myself in my bedroom. If I didn't love my job so much I probably would have done that. Instead, I gave myself a talking to and went back inside. I had shit to get through today, and I refused to give Linc any power over my actions. I'd pep talk the fuck out of today if I had to.



"You good for tonight, hon? I mean, you look like you need some time with your girls, but if you wanna cancel so you can sleep, I'll understand."

I watched Adelaide, my bestie, shove her bag in her work locker and wondered just how bad I looked. It hadn't been the best morning so far, but I thought I at least looked okay. "If I look as bad as you're saying, I shudder to think how awful I'm gonna look by tonight."

She pulled her long red hair into a ponytail and shook her head. "Okay so you don't look that bad, but I know you well enough to read the signs that shit isn't right with you. Is Linc still being an ass?"

"Ugh. Ass doesn't cover it. I'm not sure why, after three years of doing his best to ignore me, he's suddenly always on my doorstep. He doesn't listen when I ask him to please give me some notice he's coming over, or even to ask if he can. And his child support payments have gone from bad to worse. I used to at least count on some money from him; these days I either get nothing or I get it late. That shit makes it hard for me to budget, you know?"

"Oh, honey, I know. You *know* I freaking know. Some days I want to scream at Jedd for what his bullshit support has done to my financial situation, but you know what? We're stronger because of these men, Lily. Because of them, we've had to figure out how to stand on our own and give our kids what they need. When it gets too hard, remember that and be proud of who you've become and what you can achieve on your own." She threw me a wink as she added, "And

just know that there are good men out there and that one of them's going to rock your damn world one day." The wink was because after two years of being single, Addy had started dating Mr Tall, Dark, and Handsome, and he was rocking her world in ways it had never been rocked.

"Just ignore me, babe. I'm having one of those weeks. I'll get my shit together again soon."

Usually I didn't allow anyone or any situation to interfere with my mojo. Usually, I'd get my meditation cushion out, light some candles and meditate my way through this kind of stuff. Or I'd burn some oils, fill my bath and chant my way through it. But Linc had been screwing with me for too many weeks now, and I was all out of sync with myself.

"What you need is a girls' night out. I'll organise one. And maybe we'll find you a guy to blow your mind for even just one night." She whipped out her phone and shot a quick message off before I could stop her. Looking back up at me, she hit me with the huge smile Adelaide Sutton was well known for. "Quinn and Georgia are in the loop. We'll finalise plans tonight. And Lily? I have the *exact* right dress for you for this!"

Before I could say anything or stop her, she was out the door, and I was alone thinking about the *exact right* dress she had for me. It would be slutty and most likely red. Addy had a thing for red dresses. I was all for colour, but I just knew this dress was going to scream "fuck me all night long in any way you want and I'll be sure to blow you real good" from a mile away. I closed my locker and headed out to start my shift, putting all thoughts of the red dress out of my mind after I decided I'd definitely wear it. God knew, this celibacy thing had to come to an end. I needed to get laid.

"Lily! Wait up," my boss called out, hurrying to catch up. Falling into line, he said, "Fuck, it's madness here today."

I eyed the exhaustion lining his face. "You need to take that holiday you've been talking about for six months, Jackson."

"Don't get me started on that," he muttered. "The higher-ups keep pushing our workload. At this rate, I'll be getting around Greece with a fucking cane."

Hospital life was never slow. The problem was, though, that these days it wasn't just hectic, it was unbearably so. Staffing and funding cuts were killing us, to the point where I'd even started con-

sidering leaving the hospital to work for a physiotherapist friend who had her own successful practice. She'd been after me to join her for over a year, but I loved working with Jackson and Adelaide so much that I hadn't entertained the idea.

He shoved a chart at me. "I need you to start with this woman today. Her brother is causing me no end of fucking grief, and while I'm loathe to give him what he wants, I just want him gone."

I frowned. "What's going on?" It was unlike Jackson to get this worked up over anything. His patience and calm way of getting through work were what made him so good at his job.

"She had hip surgery yesterday, and he's in everyone's face about her recovery. One of the nurses mentioned physical therapy was up next, so he's been harassing them to get us down there. Apparently, he wants to be there for our first session, but he's busy and doesn't have all day to wait around for us." Anger clouded his face. "Like we're not fucking busy ourselves." He exhaled loudly and muttered, "Fuck."

"I think maybe you need to take the day off. It's so unlike you to get worked up over an asshole like this and to cater to his demands."

"The nurses want him gone too. I haven't met him, but I've been told he's menacing."

I nodded. "Okay, well with the mood I'm in this morning, he can menace me all he likes. I've had just about enough of asshole men."

His face turned serious. "Be careful, Lily. These guys aren't worth messing with. I don't need another Mackie case on my hands."

The case he referred to had caused our team no end of headaches. The father of a young girl had assaulted one of our physiotherapists when he'd refused to cave to the guy's demands. His treatment plan didn't fit in with the father's work schedule, and while we'd tried to accommodate that, we didn't do enough as far as the father was concerned. They'd had a roaring argument that ended in the father punching our guy. Jackson had been the one who had to answer to bosses and deal with the fallout.

"I'll tread carefully, but I won't allow him to walk all over me."

He sighed. "God help me." Shaking his head, he added, "For once, I'd just like to be given a team member who doesn't ruffle feathers."

I grinned. He didn't mean that, but I knew both Adelaide and I created headaches for him. "You'd be lost without me." I took a step

away from him. "I'll do my best to keep the peace."

Ten minutes later, I entered the hospital room of Skylar King and came face-to-face with who I presumed was the guy Jackson had mentioned. And I could see why the nurses were keen for me to get him sorted and out of here.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

King

“Finally,” I muttered, watching the dark-haired woman who’d just entered Skylar’s room. If I ran my club the way this hospital ran, we’d never survive. They didn’t know shit about efficiency.

Her brows lifted. “I think you mean hello. Right?”

I wasn’t in the mood for snark. Not today. “I always say what I mean.”

“King,” Skylar said, “can you lay off her? She’s just doing her job and trying to help me.”

The woman looked at Skye and smiled. “Hi, Skylar. I’m Lily.” She glanced up at me. “And I’m just going to ignore your brother’s attitude. I deal with teens every day, so I’m a pro at that.”

I held her gaze, unable to let it go. She was throwing up a challenge, and fuck if it didn’t stir something deep in my gut. But right alongside that was irritation. I stepped closer to her. “I’m not someone to be ignored, Lily.”

“Oh God,” Skylar muttered, but I blocked her out, my entire attention on the physiotherapist. Not that I knew for sure that was who she was, but my patience levels were running low, so I hoped to fuck she was.

She stood taller, straightening her shoulders. “Well, like I always say to my kids, I won’t ignore you if you treat me with some respect.

But if you wanna hit me with bad manners and rudeness, you won't get much out of me."

I opened my mouth to give her my thoughts on that, but Skylar glared at me. She then turned to Lily and asked, "Are you my physio?"

Lily nodded. "Yes. I'm going to get you started on some rehab this morning and work with you until you go home."

"How long do you think I'll be in here?"

"Usually three to five days for this type of injury, but that depends on a lot of things."

"What kind of things?" I asked.

She looked at me again, her gaze a little less sharp. "Once Skylar is able to get out of bed unassisted, use the toilet, and shower herself, we can discharge her. She'll need someone to help her at home, though." Glancing at Skylar, she asked, "Do you have someone?"

"She'll stay with me," I said. "I'll take care of everything and make sure she has whatever she needs."

Lily's eyes cut to mine, flashing with something I couldn't quite read. Surprise perhaps? She watched me silently for a moment before nodding and saying to Skylar, "Okay, great. So the nurses have had you sitting in the chair. I want you to do as much of that as possible. It'll reduce the risk of bed sores and clots, and help you transition to standing. I'm going to visit you both morning and afternoon to get you up and about, but we're going to take it slow, okay? It's important not to do too much too soon."

Skylar nodded. "Got it. Slow and steady."

"Right, let's get you out of bed and into the chair. Then we're going to focus on you standing on your uninjured leg for today. The goal is to try to get you on both legs tomorrow."

My phone rang as Lily helped Skylar out of bed, and I left the room to take the call.

"Everything is set for us to visit Ghost this afternoon," Hyde said when I answered the phone.

"Good. Any news on Nitro this morning?"

"No. The lawyer Tatum recommended is seeing him in about an hour, so we'll know more then."

Nitro and Marx had been picked up when Nitro was on his way to get rid of the asshole. A fucking cracked taillight had done it. Marx had been unconscious in the back seat, causing the cops to

grow suspicious, and because of Nitro's club ties, they'd hauled both in for questioning. Fuck knew what Marx had told the cops.

"I'll be there in about an hour or so. Make sure Kick's around then. We need to discuss our plans to draw Romano out."

"Will do," he said, and we ended the call.

When I stepped back into Skylar's room, she was standing on one leg while Lily helped her. I slowed and ran my gaze over the woman who would be helping my sister's recovery. She had the kind of beauty I didn't see often, and while it had a lot to do with her looks, it had a fuck of a lot more to do with her energy. I'd take a beautiful face, long legs, and a tight ass any day, but it was the way she stood up for herself that got most of my attention. I didn't like a woman arguing with me, but I respected the fuck out of a woman who didn't let a man walk all over her. Sometimes those two preferences clashed, but in the end, respect always won the battle.

"I'm guessing that you're gonna load Skye up with a rehab programme to do at home when she leaves here, and I'm also guessing her recovery would be helped along by seeing a physio," I said to Lily. At her nod, I continued, "How often do you recommend for that?"

She answered me while keeping an eye on what Skylar was doing. "A few times a week if you can swing it. The more the better. I can give you some names of physios I recommend."

I nodded. "I'd appreciate that." Looking at Skylar, I said, "I'm gonna head out now. Devil's on his way up to stay with you today, and I'll be back tonight. Text me if you need anything."

"Can Nik come to visit? I could do with the company."

"No. Devil will keep you company."

"Ugh. You are such a pain. I like Devil and all, but I'm fairly sure he's bored out of his brain talking to me."

"Yeah well, he's all you've got. You'll be back at the clubhouse in a few days hopefully."

The last thing I heard as I exited the room was her mutter, "Men. Do the guys in your life give you this much hell, Lily? Tell me I'm not the only one who has to live with this kind of stuff."

I didn't catch Lily's reply. My mind was already on the next fire I had to put out. I didn't give a fuck if Skylar felt like I gave her hell. All I cared about was protecting her.



Lily

Do the guys in my life give me that much hell?

I laughed. "Where do I begin?" Honestly, I felt like maybe they didn't, because her brother seemed way over the top, but at the same time, I experienced as much frustration with Linc as she did with King.

I wonder what his first name is?

God, why was I even thinking about him? The man was rude and demanding, and I had no space in my head for people like him. But, good lord, he had something that sparked my interest. Tall and built with muscles for days, he'd commanded my attention as soon as I entered his space. His piercing eyes had hit me instantly. They looked like eyes that hid a thousand secrets. God, I'd even liked his dark hair that was a little longer and a little more unruly than I usually preferred. Not to mention his beard and tattoos. King looked to be everything in a man I'd never had but had always wanted to try. I'd found myself wanting to pull him into line for being so rude while also wanting to talk a whole lot more with him.

And that scar on his face.

I wanted to know who did that to him and why.

Skylar cut through my thoughts. "Are you married?"

I steadied her while she did the exercises I'd prescribed. She was fit, so I had high hopes for a speedy recovery. With any luck, she'd be out of here fast. "Not anymore. After twelve years of marriage, I discovered my husband was cheating on me. We're divorced now, but he still gives me headache after headache."

"Fucker. I'd cut his balls off. Like, literally. But then, I'm as crazy as my brother, so I'm not really a sane person when it comes to being crossed by people."

I liked her honesty and the easy way she allowed me to work with her. Some patients struggled with their rehab and fought it every step of the way. So far, Skylar had done everything I'd wanted

her to. And it had impressed me that her brother seemed invested in her recovery. Family support was a huge key to success in this journey.

"Trust me, I dreamt about doing that to Linc. I've got three kids, though, and parenting from prison didn't seem like a good option, so I let him keep the balls. But let me tell you, this week, I'm this close to slicing them off."

"That's gotta be the worst—still having to have him in your life after what he did to you."

"It's definitely hard. And bittersweet some days."

She frowned. "How so?"

"Linc and I were high school sweethearts. I'd always thought we'd be together forever. The fact I still like the guy underneath all the bullshit means it hurts to have him around, knowing everything we'll never have."

"Yeah, I can see that."

She was beginning to tire with the exercises, so I manoeuvred her to the chair. "I think we might be done for now. How are you feeling about everything?"

Taking a seat, she said, "I'm over it already, but I know I have to do the work, so I'm not complaining. Please just tell me if there's anything I can be doing to speed everything up."

I took a seat next to her and smiled. I really did love her desire to do what needed to be done. "Time is a big factor in all this, Skylar. As is you continuing to do the exercises I give you. Please don't put any pressure on that leg today. Wait until tomorrow and I'll assess it then. I think, though, that you'll be ready for it tomorrow."

Another man joined us, blasting me with the kind of smile any woman would love sent their way. "How's she going, Doc?"

I returned his smile. He must have been the man King referred to as Devil. Interesting names these men had. I'd never had anything to do with bikers, though, so I had no idea about how they chose them. The only thing I knew about bikers was what I read in the newspapers, and lately their club had been mentioned a lot. That was how I knew what the name on the back of their jackets meant. "I'm not the doctor, but she's going well." Standing, I said, "I'll be back later this afternoon, but remember what I said about no standing on that leg."

I ran into Jackson twenty minutes later as I did my rounds. "You took care of that guy?"

"Yeah, all sorted."

"Thanks, Lily. That's one problem I can take off my list of shit to worry about today."

Speaking of lists of shit, Linc had sent me a text telling me the child support money would still be a couple of days away. If only I could take him off my list as easily as I'd taken Skylar's brother off Jackson's list.

I decided to put him completely out of my mind and not think about him today. Maybe instead, I'd think about King and that scar of his.

I wonder how he did get that.

And I wonder what he's like in bed.

I bet he's rough and demanding and bossy.

Oh, God.

Yes.

Oh, fuck.

No.

No, no, no.

Worst idea I'd had in a long time.

It was then I realised I really *did* need to get laid, because I was clearly losing my mind if I was imagining what it would be like to have sex with a rude man like King.

I had enough troubles in my life.

I didn't need to add asshole to my list.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

King

There was no love lost between Ghost and me. Jethro had seen to that. He'd played us off from the very beginning, but by the time I'd figured that out, too much water was under the bridge for us to ever go back. Ghost had always eyed the Storm presidency, believing it should have been his. Jethro had other ideas. He marked the position as mine early on, and once Ghost worked that out, he'd gone out of his way to fuck with me. Ivy and Jen had been caught in the cross-fire, but again, I hadn't learnt of that until it was too late.

Ghost had targeted them because Jethro told him to. Jethro had told a few club members to harass both of my women, but the difference with Ghost was that he'd taken it all a step further and tried to force himself on them simply because of his grudge against me. I'd never forgive him for that.

Sitting across from him at the jail later that day, it took a lot of fucking control not to reach across the damn table and choke the life out of him. After my last visit, I'd intended never to return.

"Spit it out, Ghost. Why are we here?" I demanded. "Have the feds come back?"

He shook his head. "No, not the feds." He paused for a moment, almost as if he was still deciding whether to share his information

with us. Finally he said, "Tony Romano paid me a visit, and since all he spoke about was you, I figured you'd want to know."

"What the fuck?" Hyde muttered, leaning forward and resting his arms on the table.

I was as confused as Hyde. It made no sense. "What did he want?"

Ghost's smile was one of victory. He squared his shoulders. "I thought you might ask that, but if you think I'll just hand that kind of information over without getting something in return, you're mistaken."

Fucking Ghost. I'd known this was a fucking ambush when Hyde had said Ghost would only talk to me. "You wanna stay a member of Storm, you need to get that mouth moving, Ghost. That's the only fucking thing up for negotiation here."

Ghost's smile disappeared and hatred blared from his eyes. "At this fucking point, King, I couldn't give a fuck if you kick me out of the club. The only thing important to me is getting the fuck out of here. You make that happen and I'll give you whatever information you want."

"I've already got shit happening towards your release."

"And we both know you could be doing more. Stop dragging your feet and make this happen within the next couple of weeks."

He was right—I was dragging my feet. Helping Ghost get out of here was the last thing I wanted to do, but I'd given him my word, and I never went back on that. Not even when it was given to someone I despised.

"Done." I leant forward, my eyes boring into his. "Now start fucking talking and don't stop until you give me everything. I find out you skipped some shit, your release gets pushed back as far as I can make that happen."

Ghost's eyes flashed with the same hatred mine did. "And if you don't get shit done in a few weeks, I'll find a way to fuck you over."

Jesus, the motherfucker had a death wish. "Talk!" I barked, coasting close to my threshold of control.

His lips pulled up in a snarl, but he finally spilt what he knew. "Romano wants you dead, and he wants Storm wiped off the map. He has a wealth of knowledge about Storm's drug trade, who you buy weapons off, the shit Jethro was into.... Fuck, I don't know how the hell he knows this shit, but I'm telling you, if he went to the cops

with any of this, every member of the club would go to prison. He even knows about Moses."

"Jesus fucking Christ," Hyde said, echoing my own thoughts. *We have a rat in the club.* "What did he want with you?"

"He offered me half a mill to turn on the club. Wants me to go to the cops with what I know."

"You expect us to believe you'd turn down that kind of cash? To help me?" I said.

"Not to help *you*, King, but to help the club."

"Bullshit."

The hatred in his eyes flared again. "It's not bullshit. Fuck, think about it. Why would I call you here and tell you this shit if I was gonna take the cash? I'd just fucking take it, talk to the cops and never look back if that was my choice."

My mind worked as fast as it could to come up with scenarios of how this could all play out, but with all the shit in there, it was a battle I was losing. Ghost had a point, but I still had my doubts.

"If I choose to believe you and you fuck us over, there's no coming back from that, Ghost. Not for you and not for your sister."

"Look," he snapped, agitation getting the best of him, "I've always been loyal to the club and I don't intend to change that. Best I can figure, Romano is fucking insane. I've got enough insanity to deal with in you. I don't wanna get into bed with another crazy asshole."

"What else did he say?" I pushed. "Nothing you've told us helps us in any way. We already knew Romano was coming after the club."

He contemplated that for a moment. "Now who's speaking shit?"

"What else?" Hyde almost bellowed. By the looks of him, he was as close to losing his shit as I was.

Ghost scowled at him. "Ivy is the key to all of this. He's fucking obsessed with her. You get to her and you'll get to Romano."

"See now that's where your info is fucked up, Ghost. We have her and she's telling us jack," I said.

Ghost's eyes met mine again, a flicker of confusion in them now. "She's with you? And Tony hasn't turned up looking for her? I find that hard to believe."

"He's disappeared," Hyde said. "Dropped off the radar to avoid the cops who raided him two days ago."

"And Ivy has left Tony," I added.

Ghost's confusion grew, and he frowned. "I don't see any of that happening. Not from what Tony said the other day. For one, I got the impression he's in with the cops, and two, I don't think he'd ever allow Ivy to leave him. I'm telling you, he's consumed by her. If anyone could cause Tony Romano to fall, it'd be Ivy. She'd be enough for him to not go into hiding from the cops because all he'd be able to think about would be getting her back."

Fuck.

I glanced at Hyde. "What do you make of all this, brother?"

"We need to head back to the clubhouse and go over it all. Pull Devil and Kick in on it and get their take on it. Bronze too."

"You also need to work on my release," Ghost said.

I eyed him. "I have a job for you before that happens." I detailed the club's problem with Marx and told Ghost to find someone to fix that problem.

He nodded. "I may already have someone in mind."

I stood. "Good. Hyde'll be in touch. Until then, sit tight and call us if you come across anything else."

As we left the prison, Hyde looked at me with determination. "I'm going to talk to Ivy."

My reaction surprised me. He'd wanted to talk to her the other day, too, but I didn't want to inflict him on Ivy. It was a gut-deep response. Hyde interrogated people the same way he took to them with his fists—he was savage and ruthless in his quest to extract information. As much as my head screamed yes to this, every fibre of my being refused to agree.

"No."

"You sure about that, brother? She could be our best bet to find Romano."

"No."

"You're too close to this. I might get more from her."

Fuck. "No."

"King, think with your head and not your dick."

He was a stubborn fucking bastard. He wouldn't let this go. "I'm not thinking with my fucking dick, brother." Or was I? I scrubbed my hand over my face. Jesus fucking Christ. "Just don't fucking hurt her."

His stubborn side showed itself. "If she has info the club needs, I'll go down swinging to get it."

No fucking way would I allow him to harm her. "I want in that room."

"King," his voice hardened, "you're not setting foot in that room. I don't give a fuck if I have to knock you out, I'm questioning her, and I'll do whatever it takes to save our club."

Fuck.

Shit was spiralling.

And I couldn't fucking stop it.

I felt ripped apart by my allegiances. I'd loved Ivy for a long time. Could I allow her to become caught up in this? Would I allow Hyde to do whatever it took to get her to talk?

Had I fallen that far down the fucking black hole that I no longer cared what happened to her?

I exhaled a harsh breath and met Hyde's gaze. "Just get it done. I don't want to fucking know the details."

CHAPTER TWENTY

King

I met Jen three years after I pushed Ivy away. I hadn't been looking for a woman to share my bed with, but she'd forced her way into my life and then into my heart. We'd met at a party thrown by a club member. She was drunk and had tried to fuck me in the bathroom. I was a lot of things, but I wasn't a man who took advantage of drunk women. I'd said no and left, but not before I'd found someone to get her home so some other asshole couldn't force himself on her. A week later, she'd turned up at the clubhouse to thank me for it. She'd called me a gentleman, and I'd laughed for the first time in a long fucking time. That had been the start of our journey down a dark, fucked-up path of jealousy, raging arguments, destructive behaviour, and resentments we never found our way through.

Sex had been our glue; Jen liked it brutal, and she quickly worked out that it kept me coming back for more. She understood that after a long day taking care of club shit, all I'd wanted to come home to was a woman who'd let me lose myself in her so I could wipe the day from my mind. She'd saved the fights for the daytime and the sex for the nights. It worked until she figured out I'd never love her the way she wanted. I'd loved her, but I'd never hand every last piece of myself over to anyone again, and Jen wanted to collect those pieces like fucking trophies. In the end, she'd cheated on me,

and I'd walked away. The betrayal had stung because they always did, but I couldn't find it in me to hate her. I'd known the cheating was because I refused to give her everything I'd given Ivy. I could hardly fault her for my shortcomings.

I'd felt guilt more than anger.

I'd ruined another woman, another relationship.

Kick had found a place for her out by the creek she'd loved to visit. As I'd said goodbye, memories had rushed at me of the times I'd taken her there. Fuck, memories always carved jagged grooves deep in me. If I could have avoided it, I wouldn't have visited her grave. But I owed her that. I fucking owed her a lot more than that, but since I could never pay those debts, this was all I had to give.

I'd sat with her for an hour, and when I was done, I'd headed back to the clubhouse and spent the night obliterating every memory from my mind. Turned out Jen had been hell alive, and she was still hell for me dead. Kick dropped me at the hospital just after midnight. "No fucking way am I letting you on the road in this state," he'd said. What he didn't know was that there was no fucking way I'd ever allow myself on the roads in this state.

"King," Skylar mumbled early the next morning, prodding my arm. "When did you get here? And God, you smell like a brewery."

I was only half asleep in the chair by her bed. The night had been long and the ghosts had refused to leave me alone. I sat up and rested my elbows on my knees, stretching the kinks out of my neck. Sleeping in a hospital chair fucking blew. So did the headache pounding my skull. "We buried Jen yesterday afternoon." It didn't answer her question, but it told her everything she wanted to know.

Her face softened. "Oh."

I stood so I could also stretch my back. I felt like hell, but I was more interested in how Skylar was feeling. "How's the pain?"

"It's okay. The drugs are working." She paused for a moment before saying, "You know I wasn't a huge fan of Jen's, but I hate that she died like this. No one deserves that."

"Yeah," I agreed, but I didn't want to get into it. Didn't want to be having this conversation with anyone, because that meant I'd have to face the guilt again. "I'm going for a smoke. You want anything when I come back?"

The look she gave me told me she knew what I was doing. Skylar knew me better than anyone. It was one of the reasons we argued so

damn much. She liked to see how far she could push me. Always had. But today, she let that shit slide. Nodding, she said, "Yeah, a coffee. I can't do the stuff they serve here."

When I stepped outside five minutes later, I lit a smoke and stared up at the dark morning sky. The colour of the clouds matched my mood. And the rolling thunder added to the symphony playing in my head. A symphony of fucked-up thoughts that wouldn't leave me the fuck alone.

For one mad moment, I wondered whether my father's mind had been as chaotic as mine. Was this how he crossed the line into insanity? Did the thoughts become too much to deal with that his mind cracked into so many pieces that he could no longer figure out right from wrong?

Could I fucking figure out right from wrong anymore? I wasn't sure. Most days I didn't give a fuck, but every now and then, someone came along and tested that attitude. Ivy reappearing in my life was one big fucking test.

She and Jen had played on my mind all night, and my dreams had tortured me. It had been a long time since I'd had dreams like this. After I'd pushed Ivy away years ago, I'd spent a year dreaming of her, my father, my mother, and Margreet. The dreams had become nightmares I couldn't escape. I'd avoided sleep that year, and insomnia had plagued me ever since, but the dreams had disappeared.

Until last night.

Last night I dreamt of Margreet and the disappointment she felt over the choices I'd made in my life. Ivy and Jen had shown up in my dream, too, and told me I was going to hell after I was finished with this life.

Fuck.

I'd woken in a cold sweat, thoughts of hell still on my mind. I knew the only place I'd be going after this life was straight to hell. My father had made sure of that the first time he'd forced me to help him with his sick and perverted crimes. Usually it was my mother who helped him, but not that night. She'd been sick and unable to do what he wanted, so he'd dragged me out of bed and used me to lure the blonde teenager into his car. What girl wouldn't want to stop and help a nine-year-old who was alone on a street in the middle of the night? She'd never stood a chance between my sad eyes begging for help and my father's brute strength when he pulled her into the car.

He'd kept her locked up in our house for a week before he ended her suffering. I'd endured seven nights of her screams and his grunts. But that was only the beginning of it all.

I had the blood of five girls on my hands by the time I was ten. Three days before my tenth birthday, my father was arrested for assaulting a man at the pub he frequented. My early birthday present that year was my mother abandoning me at a hospital because she decided she couldn't raise me on her own. It was the best birthday present I ever received.

Jesus, would this shit ever go away? Would I ever stop thinking about my father? Would Margreet linger in my mind forever?

I took a long drag of my smoke, closing my eyes as it worked its way into my lungs. Why the fuck was I turning my actions over in my head? Questioning myself in ways I tried never to question myself. There was a lot of shit to deal with today. Thinking about this wasn't doing me any favours. All it did was fuck with my thinking. And that wasn't fucking useful. Not to me and not to my club.

I opened my eyes, took one last drag of my smoke before stubbing it out, and turned to go back inside. Another round of thunder cracked overhead, but I barely heard it. Thunder didn't come close to the noise of my mind.

"Good morning."

I'd been so lost in my thoughts I hadn't seen Skylar's physiotherapist standing in my path to the front door of the hospital. I'd almost run into her.

I nodded at the smoke between her lips. "If the way you're sucking that smoke back is any indication, your morning is as shit as mine."

"Yeah, that about sums it up. Kids."

My gaze dropped to her body. She wore the tightest fucking jeans I'd ever seen with a white T-shirt and black leather jacket. It seemed an odd outfit for a hospital employee to wear, but what the fuck did I know? Finding her eyes again, I asked, "How many you got?"

"Do you really care?"

She had me there. And yet, I was engaging in small talk, which I rarely bothered with, so there was some interest. "How many?"

A smile ghosted across her lips as she drew more smoke deep into her lungs. "I knew you weren't as big of an asshole as they told

me. I've got three. Two teens and an eight-year-old. It's mostly my fourteen-year-old daughter who keeps my nicotine addiction fed."

I narrowed my eyes, assessing her more closely. "You don't look old enough to have a fourteen-year-old."

Her smile grew larger. "Well, now I like you even more. I'm old enough to have a sixteen-year-old."

"Daughter?"

"Yeah."

"Fuck, I wish you well."

Her brows lifted. "You have daughters?"

"No, but I've got experience raising girls." I jerked my chin at her smoke. "That's not gonna be anywhere near strong enough soon."

"Trust me, I know." She glanced at her watch. "Shit, I've gotta go. My boss will kill me if I'm late today." She rummaged through her bag and pulled out a breath mint before smiling again and saying, "Your sister did really well yesterday. She should be standing on both legs by this afternoon."

"Good. I need her home with me as soon as possible."

She slowed and fixed her gaze on me. "I like your dedication to family. I mean, unless you're some creepy stalker brother who keeps his sister locked away, but out of all the vibes I'm getting about you, that isn't one of them."

We watched each other silently for a few moments as more thunder rumbled overhead. And then she was gone, and I was alone again with my thoughts. Fucking worst place to be.

I had another smoke before going back inside to check on Skylar. Today was going to be a long one. And with a bit of fucking luck, one that produced some results in our efforts to track Romano and our rat down. But to get that shit done, I first needed to make sure my family was okay.



Annika glanced up from the coffee she was making when I entered the clubhouse kitchen an hour later. "You look like hell."

"I fucking feel like it too." I jerked my chin at the kettle. "You got enough for another one?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I'll even take pity on you and make toast to go with it if you haven't had breakfast. You want vegemite?"

I lifted a brow. "What are you after, Nik?"

She pulled another mug from the cupboard. "Maybe I just think you need some TLC at the moment. I'm not the sister always wanting stuff, remember?"

She was right. Annika was the maternal type while Skylar was the complete opposite. Nik never asked me for much at all. I had to force my way into her life when I knew she needed me. Skye, on the other hand, was the sister who came looking for me when she wanted something. It had been the other way around before Margreet died. Her death altered our relationships, causing Annika to shut down on me, and Skylar to demand my attention constantly.

I moved closer to her and leant against the counter. "Vegemite sounds good." As she made coffee and toast, I asked, "Are you guys holding up okay here?"

She stopped what she was doing and gave me her full attention. "We're fine, King, but it's odd for you to even ask that. Usually you just want to tell us what to do, not ask us how we're doing. What's going on? And where's the brother I know and love?"

Scrubbing my face, I muttered, "I'm trying here."

She smiled. "We're good. The kids are running wild, but they get on well with Kree's kids, so at least there aren't any problems there."

Fuck, I hadn't made the time to speak with Zane about Kree's ex. He was due to arrive today, so I made a mental note to do that then.

I took the coffee she passed me. "I just came from the hospital. Skye's physio says she's doing well. She should be home in a few days."

Axe joined us, his gaze coming straight to me. "Zane's about five hours out. He's got all his gear with him."

Zane ran his own security firm, his team mostly all ex-commando, and had the best surveillance gear you could get your hands on.

I nodded just as my phone rang. *Bronze*.

"Bronze, you're not gonna hit me with bad news so early in the morning, are you?"

"Not bad so much as interesting. The info you have on Romano being raided by the cops is wrong. It didn't happen."

I gripped my phone harder. "He *wasn't* raided?"

"Correct. Whoever told you that is full of shit. He's not even on their radar at the moment. Well, not besides the usual level of interest they have in him that is."

None of this made sense. Why the hell had Brant fed us that bullshit? "Anything else?"

"Yeah," he said forcefully. "Why the fuck have you got the blonde grilling me on Ryland? I've got enough shit going on, King. I don't need her all over me too."

Tatum.

"I told her to investigate Ryland. He's too invested in this case, and at some point, he'll cross a line to get the result he wants. Tatum's gonna figure him out and she'll work with you on that."

"Fuck." He paused for a moment. "Fine, but just get her to back off a bit. She's a little too fucking enthusiastic."

"She's not gonna back off, Bronze. She'll do whatever it takes to get Nitro out and to get Ryland off our back. You'll just have to deal with her."

"Some days I regret agreeing to work with you," he muttered.

"Yeah well, we both know you'd make the same choice over if you had to." I eyed the toast Annika held out for me. "I've gotta go. Call me if you find anything else."

I ended the call and took the plate of toast off Annika, already going over in my mind what I'd just learnt. Axe's and Annika's conversation blurred into the background as I tried to figure out Brant's angle. He'd seemed attached to Ivy. More than fucking attached if I really thought about it.

I pulled out my phone again and called Hyde.

"I was in the middle of something," he grumbled, and I heard Monroe complaining too.

"Fuck, brother, you need to get Monroe out of town. I thought you'd moved her already."

"You ever tried to convince an argumentative woman to do something, King? I'm fucking working on it."

I could imagine the shit she'd given him. "Yeah, I can imagine."

"I was just about to get my dick sucked, so maybe you could move this along."

"Bronze has new information that contradicts what Brant told us. Romano wasn't raided by the cops. We need to talk to Brant again."

"Yeah. And I'll talk to Ivy again."

Hyde had interrogated her yesterday while I buried Jen. He'd let me know she hadn't come through with any further information, but I was yet to discuss it with him. I'd avoided it. Hadn't wanted to know how far he'd had to go with her.

"No, I'll have this chat with her." I'd allowed him one shot at her; I wouldn't give him another. Fuck knew I was wound tight because of it. *Because of my inability to wrap my mind around my feelings about Ivy showing back up in my life.* And that I just let Hyde at her like that? Fuck, that fucked my head up even more. Had I really become a man so hardened by the shit I'd lived through that I was willing to abandon someone I'd once loved?

"I figured you'd say that. I don't think she knows much more than what she's already given us. It makes sense, especially with what Ghost told you yesterday. I reckon Romano's fucking with us, brother."

"You think he sent Brant to feed us that bullshit?"

"Yeah. Brant played the Ivy card well, and I bet that was because Romano told him to. To get to you. Romano wanted to know if you had Ivy."

"I'll talk to Ivy. And for fuck's sake, lay the fucking law down with Monroe. I don't want her caught in this shit we've got going on."

Ending the call, I looked at Axe. "I've gotta take care of something, and after that, you and me are gonna talk to Brant again. And this time, we're not going easy on him."

He nodded. "Understood."

I left the kitchen and made my way to Ivy.

Winter sat outside her room, looking exhausted. He stood and met me. "She still isn't eating much, and I think she may be feeling sick."

I nodded. "Take a walk while I talk to her. You look like you could do with some sleep too, so I'll organise for one of the guys to give you a break today."

"Thanks, brother."

It had been two days since I'd seen Ivy, and Winter was right, she looked ill. She sat in the armchair in the corner of the room with her legs curled up under her and her head resting on the arm of the chair. Lifting her head, she said, "What now, King? Another fucking

interrogation? I'm surprised you didn't send one of your men to do it."

I dragged the other chair in the room to where she was and sat in front of her. Resting my elbows on my knees, I ran my eyes over her. Hyde hadn't touched her, thank fuck. The only marks on her face were the bags under her eyes. Those damn eyes, though, roared with mistrust and anger. They threw out an accusation I found hard to stomach. It turned out that no matter how hard I tried to bury my fucking soul, it was still there. My fucking heart may have been frozen for years, but those eyes of Ivy's caused it to thaw, and that made me feel even more out of control than I already did.

When cornered like this—when forced to confront myself in ways I didn't want to—I drew upon the only response I'd ever known. I fought back with anger. When Ivy threw her hurt at me like this, I always threw mine back. And so it seemed, we never changed.

"Yes, another fucking interrogation. But only because I'm trying to keep you safe. Do you even fucking understand that?"

She sat up straight in the chair, her body rigid. "All I understand is that I came to you with information that was good and you've done nothing but thrown it in my face since I got here. And then you didn't even have the decency to come in here yourself yesterday to ask me what you wanted to know. You sent one of your men to do it. I know there's nothing between us now, King, but I honestly thought there was more than that. I thought I deserved better than *that*."

Fuck.

She did deserve better than that.

I shoved my chair back and stood, pacing the room for a moment, trying desperately to get my thoughts in order, before coming back to her. I couldn't fucking figure out what I was thinking, what I was feeling. It was like my mind had been reprogrammed in the years after she left and now it was misfiring, unsure how to register everything being thrown at it. The only thing I truly knew was that we had to get through this and then go our separate ways again. I could not allow myself back into her life or her into mine. But fuck, getting us to that point felt like the hardest fucking thing I'd had to do in a long time.

The best way I knew to deal with shit like this was to avoid it. So I ignored what she said and focused on what I needed. "It turns out Brant's information was wrong."

She stared at me for a long few beats before blinking and muttering, "You're a fucking asshole. You can't even be bothered to discuss what I just said to you. I'm glad you cheated on me because I was better off without you in my life."

Her words sliced through me. Fuck knew how because I'd learnt a long time ago not to let people hurt me like that. But Ivy had always had a way of cutting deep.

"Tell me what you know about Brant," I demanded in a low dark voice. I needed to get this information from her and then get the hell out of this room.

She uncurled herself from the chair and stood. Coming close—too fucking close—she snarled, "I told Hyde everything I know. I don't know anything about Tony being raided, and I don't know why Brant would turn on him."

My breathing sped up as I fought all the emotions coursing through me. *Fought feeling them.* Needing to put space between us, I took a step back. "Tony wasn't raided. Brant lied about that. What I want to know is why."

The anger rolling off her burnt out a little, replaced by confusion. "I don't know why he'd do that. That makes no se—" She stopped talking abruptly, and I zeroed in on that.

"It makes no sense to you?"

By the way her mouth fell open and her eyes widened a fraction, Ivy appeared bewildered by what I'd just told her. And that confused *me*.

When she didn't respond, I pushed her. "What's going on, Ivy? Why doesn't this make any sense to you?"

She wrapped her arms around her body and looked at me with anger again. "Nothing makes sense! I don't understand what's going on. And I feel like I'm going to be sick, so can you please get me a bucket or something in case I vomit?"

Her face had turned white, and I recalled what Winter had told me earlier. Gripping hold of her arms, I directed her back to sit in the chair. "Wait there, I'll get you something."

She curled into a ball and closed her eyes as she rested her head on the arm of the chair again. As I exited the room, I heard her murmur, "Thank you." It surprised the hell out of me and caused my guilt to rear its head. Although the only emotion that seemed to come from her was anger, I knew that was how Ivy coped with life.

She'd used it when we were a couple, and it seemed she hadn't changed. But her "thank you" reminded me that at the core of that anger was a vulnerable woman. I needed to remember that and make allowances. The only way we'd survive this would be for one of us to back down, and I knew that had to be me. I wasn't sure I had it in me, but after everything I'd put Ivy through years ago, I had to fucking try.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

King

“You think you could manage not to shoot him today?” Axe asked as we prepared to question Brant again.

I eyed Brant who sat at the table in the middle of the room looking nervously between Axe and me. “What? You don’t like a little blood in your interrogation room?”

“I’ve told you everything. I’m not sure why we’re doing this again,” Brant said, fear clinging to every word that fell out of his mouth.

Axe moved behind Brant and bent so he could talk into his ear. “That’s your first lie for the day, Brant. Don’t let there be another or else King’s gun will be the least of your worries.”

Brant’s eyes widened and he swallowed hard, but he took Axe’s advice and didn’t utter another word.

I took the seat opposite him. “You lied to us the other day, too. Your boss wasn’t raided by the cops.”

“No, he was. I know he was.”

Interesting—he didn’t frown or give off any body language that he was confused by what I said. I glanced up at Axe who remained behind Brant and jerked my chin to indicate the show was his for now. Axe knew how to hurt people without killing them. I struggled with that, so this part of the interrogation was his.

Axe wrapped an arm around Brant's neck and squeezed hard. When Brant panicked and attempted to pull out of my brother's grip, Axe said, "Easy there. You keep thrashing about like you are and you'll likely end up choked to death."

Brant's face reddened as he tried to suck in some breaths. He stopped fighting Axe and nodded his agreement.

"Good," Axe said. "Now, I'm going to ask you some questions, and you're going to give me straight answers. If you don't, this is going to get a whole lot uglier for you. Got it?"

Brant forced air out of his nostrils and nodded. He looked like he was about to shit his pants, and I had to wonder why Romano had used him for this dirty work. If he'd sent Brant to us, I suspected he'd chosen the wrong man, because Axe was about to break him and then, if needed, I'd finish the job off.

Keeping his arm firmly around Brant's neck, Axe continued, "We know for a fact that Romano wasn't raided by the cops. Why did you lie to us?"

Brant shook his head, and Axe eased his grip just enough for the asshole to splutter out his words. "I didn't lie! That's what Tony told me! I swear—"

Axe clenched his jaw as he squeezed Brant's neck again. "Bullshit." When Brant shook his head again and tried to claw Axe's arm from his throat, Axe tightened his hold even more and yanked him up out of the seat. Dragging him back towards the wall behind them, he growled, "Shit's about to get real messy for you, Brant. Start fucking telling the truth."

By the time Axe slammed him against the wall, Brant was fighting for breath. When Axe let him go, he raised his hands in a defensive manner and pleaded, "Stop! Ask me anything else. I'll tell you whatever you want."

Axe threw out his first question without hesitation. "Did Romano send you here to give us false information?"

"No."

Axe slapped him. "I'll ask that again. Did Romano send you here?"

Brant held his face where Axe had hit it. "No, he didn't. I came by—"

Axe slapped him again. Harder. "Why did you come here then?" His questions were rapid fire, giving Brant little time to think in

between.

"Because I wanted to check on Ivy. You've gotta believe—"

Again, Axe slapped him. "I don't fucking believe you, Brant. Give me something I can buy into."

Brant's words came out fast, like he was tripping over them to get them out. "I was worried for her safety. I knew Tony would be going crazy looking for her, so I wanted to check that she was with you or that she was safe somewhere else. After Tony went into hiding—"

Axe gripped Brant's shirt with both hands and pulled him forward before slamming him back against the wall. Moving fast, he punched him hard in the gut and demanded, "Who told you Tony went into hiding?"

Brant doubled over, holding his stomach and trying to draw breath. "Fuck, man—"

Jesus, it was taking every ounce of my self-control to hold myself back. I wanted to get in there and punch every last breath out of the motherfucker so that he'd just fucking give us what we wanted. Instead, I paced back and forth, giving my brother the space to drag the information from him.

But, fuck.

Axe didn't allow Brant the opportunity to complain. He punched him again and roared, "Who the fuck told you Tony had been raided by the cops?"

Brant stumbled, almost falling to the ground. Doubled over, he yelled, "Tony did!"

Axe took hold of Brant's chin and lifted his face. A moment later, his fist connected with the asshole's cheek, knocking him to the ground. As Brant lay in agony, Axe crouched beside him. "Start from the beginning and tell us everything. I wanna know why you care so fucking much about Ivy's whereabouts, and how you came to have that conversation with Romano about being raided."

Brant stared at Axe with hatred while catching his breath.

Axe watched him in silence, waiting.

My brother's patience fucking amazed me. It always had. Even when we were kids, he'd had this level of calm that I envied. I'd never had patience for much. My father had seen to that. He'd wired my brain to respond with anger and swift retribution whenever I felt fucked over.

Finally, Brant started talking. "Like I told you the other day, Ivy has been kind to me, so I care about her. I don't want Tony to be able to hurt her ever again, so I've been helping her get ready for this attempt to leave. Tony called me the day she left, asking me to check on some stuff at work, and in that conversation, he told me he was laying low for a while because the cops had raided him. I swear to fucking God, that's the truth."

Axe remained silent for another few moments before saying, "You're in love with Ivy, aren't you?"

Brant's eyes darted between Axe and me. He seemed desperate not to have this conversation, but he nodded slowly. "Yes."

"And she loves you?" Axe asked.

"No, I don't think so." Brant stumbled over his words and glanced at the wall as he answered that question.

I stopped pacing and narrowed my eyes on him. Watching. Waiting for the truth.

"You're lying, Brant," Axe said. "You do think she loves you."

Brant stared at the wall, silent. When he answered Axe's question, he fixed his gaze on me. "I want her to love me, but she loves you."

Fuck.

Axe stood and turned to me. Jerking his chin at the door, he said, "We need a minute." When we were out of the room, he said, "He's not lying."

"I agree."

"My bet is Tony knows about this thing between him and Ivy. Probably figures that Brant knows where she is, and possibly thinks that if he believes Romano's in hiding, it's the perfect opportunity to go to Ivy. I'd say Romano has eyes on him and this clubhouse, and is waiting for him to leave here."

"So we put him back out there and wait for Romano to come to him."

Axe nodded. "Yeah, but we wait for Zane to arrive and get him to bug Brant's phone and put a tracker in it. You get Brant to call Romano so we can track him too."

"And I'll get him to mention our rat to Romano so he knows that I fucking know. And whichever club member suddenly disappears is our guy." I glanced down at my ringing phone. Holding it up, I said, "Can you finish with him while I take this?"

He agreed, and I answered the call. "Tatum. Any news?"

"Nothing. He's still on remand, and I'm still waiting to hear from you as to whether you've found a way to deal with Marx."

She was pissed off, and I wasn't a fan of her throwing that shit at me. "Because you're Nitro's old lady and because you're helping me with this, I'll let that shit slide this time, Tatum. But you come at me with that kind of attitude again and we won't remain friends very long."

"King, I don't give a fuck if we're friends or not. The only thing I care about right now is that Nitro gets out. You take care of that or I will."

"I'm in the middle of taking care of it for fuck's sake." Why the hell had I involved her in this? I wouldn't make that mistake again.

"Good. Let me know when it's done."

She ended the call, leaving me staring at my phone wondering how the fuck an old lady had managed to get under my skin like she had. I was annoyed as fuck at her, but I had to admit she had my respect for taking Nitro's back like she had.

Hyde came my way, a look of determination in his eyes. "Just heard from Ghost. He thinks he has a guy who can take care of Marx for us. Said he'll confirm ASAP. And Winter said to tell you that Ivy's not feeling any better."

"Call the doctor. Get him to give her the once over." I shoved my phone in my pocket. "Brant confirmed the truth in her story. I'm just about to see her again and let her know she doesn't have to stay in that room anymore."

"You think it's wise to let her go? With what's going on?"

I shook my head. "No, I'm not letting her out of here, but she's not a fucking prisoner."

"I'll let the boys know that's she's not to get past the front gate. And I'll get onto the doc now."

Five minutes later, I entered Ivy's room again. She lay on the bed, back to the door, and didn't acknowledge my presence. I walked around to the side she faced and found her staring at the wall. Sitting on the bed, I expelled a long-held breath and rested my elbows on my knees.

Neither of us spoke.

Not for a good five minutes.

There was so much to say, and yet, I couldn't find the words to express any of it. And she didn't appear interested in talking either.

Finally, I said, "I fucked up."

She didn't respond immediately, and when she did, bitterness filled the air. "Yeah. You did. And not just this time. But I'm not interested in an apology." A caustic laugh fell from her lips. "Not that you ever apologise. God forbid King should ever think anyone's worthy of a sorry."

I clenched my jaw, resisting the urge to reply to her sour words. "You can leave this room, but I won't allow you back out on the streets yet. Not until Romano is dealt with and I know you'll be safe."

Sitting up, she threw out, "You won't *allow* it? Why do you think you have any say in my life anymore, King?"

I'd avoided meeting her eyes, but I turned and looked at her now. "I mightn't have any say in your life, but this isn't up for argument, Ivy. You will not be leaving this building. Understood?"

Her lips flattened as she stared at me with loathing. She didn't answer my question, though. Just stared at me.

I jerked up off the bed and paced in front of it, attempting to sort through the shit I wanted to say. "Fuck, why can't you see what I'm trying to do? That this is in your best interest?" That she couldn't, or wouldn't, bewildered me.

She shot off the bed, coming to me with fire in her eyes. They burned with it. Getting in my face, she yelled, "Why can't *you* see that you don't always know what's in other people's best interests? You haven't changed, King! Always laying down the law as you see it, not once stopping to consider that I might have a different vision for my life." She slapped her palms on my chest and added, "Fuck you!"

My veins filled with fury, and I gripped her wrists. "You don't know me as well as you think you do," I thundered. "Not if you think I don't stop and consider every-fucking-thing about those I care for."

Her brows lifted. "Oh, so cheating on me was your way of considering everything, then? You're full of bullshit."

She tried to wiggle out of my grip, but I squeezed her wrists harder and pulled her to me. Our bodies, this close, was dangerous. The desire I'd always felt for her sparked to life, circling us, threaten-

ing to pull me under. Because that's where I'd end up if I let it take over.

The weight of my past actions sat heavy on my shoulders. I'd carried it with me for too long, some days almost suffocating under the pressure. Knowing I'd fucked her up had fucked *me* up. I'd decided long ago to carry it and never tell her the truth. It was better she continued believing I was an asshole. Better she kept me from her life.

But her outburst, and the way she kept looking at me with so much hatred, tripped me up. I wasn't sure I could stand that hatred for much longer. Not when Ivy was the person I'd loved the longest in my life.

I latched onto my own anger over this situation and used it to fuel my reaction. Glaring at her, I said, "I didn't come here to get into it with you. That shit is in the past, so let's move the fuck on and deal with important shit."

Her eyes widened, and from the way her face morphed from angry to hurt back to angry, I knew we wouldn't be moving the fuck on. Wild energy engulfed her, and she engaged in a full-out battle to disentangle herself from me. Shoving her hands against my chest and fighting me, she shouted, "That shit *is* important to me, you fucking asshole! That you would say that and think that, just shows me what a bastard you really are. Did you even really love me? Because I don't think you did! I think I was just another pussy to you. Someone who warmed your bed and fucked you whenever you wanted."

Her words tore me apart.

They ripped shreds of my soul from me. The soul I'd refused to acknowledge since I'd pushed her out of my life. But Ivy saying this shit to me? That caused my soul to rear its head and force its way back into view.

Fuck.

Motherfucking *fuck*.

I lost my calm.

I lost my fucking mind and allowed words out that should never have seen the light of day.

Letting her go, I roared, "I didn't fucking cheat on you! I did that for your protection, too. Don't you fucking get it, Ivy? I do everything for your fucking protection." My voice darkened as hurt consumed me. "And never fucking say that I didn't love you. I loved

you more than any-fucking-one. You were never just someone to come home to and fuck. Hell, if that was the case, I would have left you when you kicked me out of your bed for months." I moved closer to her again, ignoring the emotions blazing from her. Ignoring everything but my own needs now. I fucking needed to get this shit out there. "Anything you wanted, I would have given to you. Anything you needed, I found a way to get. And when I realised the last fucking thing you needed was *me*, I took matters into my own hands. I never once cheated on you. Not until that night, and even then it wasn't real. I set it up to make you leave. To keep you safe from me. So don't throw accusations at me that are as far from the fucking truth as you can get."

She stared at me with shock and disbelief. Her chest pumped furiously while she tried to steady her breaths. "You lied to me?"

One simple question with only one truthful answer.

But that answer had so many layers to it.

Where did you start when years of love and hate and hurt all piled on top of each other? How did relationships ever survive that? I had no fucking clue because I'd never managed to keep a relationship from crumbling under all those layers.

I didn't want to answer Ivy's question. Not without being able to give her the full picture. But what was the point? We were done a long time ago. There was no going back, ever. So I simply nodded. "Yeah, I lied to you."

Her silence hit me more than if she'd yelled and screamed at me. It always had. I didn't know what to do with silence. Didn't know how to engage with it. I did best with anger and violence. Come at me with either of those, and I'd find a way through it. But silence caused me to stumble and falter because it hurt like a motherfucker. My father had taught me that.

When she sat on the bed and turned away from me, her own hurt so deafening it blocked out everything else, I was done. I'd already said too much and didn't want to continue falling down the fucking abyss of our past. Exhaling hard, I said forcefully, "Don't try to leave the clubhouse, because you won't like the response."

With that, I stalked out of her room and outside to my bike. I needed to get out of here for a while. Fuck knew I had to put some distance between Ivy and me. And I wouldn't be hurrying back to her any-fucking-time soon.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Lily

I stared down at my phone, hoping I'd imagined the text flashing on my screen.

I blinked, trying to get the words to disappear.

Surely it wasn't real.

He wouldn't.

Fuck, he probably would.

My ex was that dumb, he would.

I blinked again, squeezing my eyes tightly, praying for the text to be gone when I opened my eyes.

Shit, it was still there.

"Motherfucker," I cursed.

I shot off a text to my sister in response to hers.

Me: I'm going to fucking kill him.

Brynn: Ooh, let me do it first.

Me: Do not let Zara out of your sight. She is NOT going on that date tonight.

Brynn: Hurry home, sis. She's already applying her makeup.

I called her. "I swear, I'm going to wrap my hands around his throat and squeeze every last fucking breath from him. And then I'm going to get a knife and stab him so many times that when they sentence me for my crime, they'll give me the death penalty even though they don't give that to anyone anymore. I'm going to make him fucking hurt for this shit. This is the last time Linc screws with me!"

I was on my way to see Skylar King, but realised I needed a moment, *or fifty*, to calm down before I saw her, so I spun around to head outside for a smoke first. I stopped abruptly when I came face-to-face with Skylar's brother.

King.

He watched me with an intensity that flustered me.

"Shit, Brynn, I've gotta go," I rambled into my phone, not giving her a chance to respond to what I'd already said. "I'll be home as fast as I can this afternoon. And thanks for the heads up." Ending the call, I shoved my phone into my pocket and took a step backwards, away from King. "Hi," I said, completely muddled by both the news Brynn had given me and the fact King was right there. I mean, he was so damn close and staring at me so intently that my thoughts had become a jumbled mess.

"Remind me never to piss you off," he said, that voice of his a deep rumble that did things to me. Things I wasn't used to from the men I spoke to. Goodness, he was dangerously sexy this close.

"Huh?" I had no idea what he meant. Especially not when all I could focus on was the way he watched me.

"The threat of strangulation and a stabbing frenzy."

"Oh, that. Right."

His lips twitched slightly, like he was amused by me. "Someone close?"

I let go of the breath I held. Thinking about Linc was enough to ease my nerves around King, because the anger he induced cleared my head of the disorientation King caused. "My ex is being an asshole." I remembered what King had said about having experience raising girls. "Tell me, would you allow your fourteen-year-old daughter out on a date at night?"

"Only if I had eyes on her at all times."

I frowned. "You'd stake out her date?"

He nodded. "Yeah. I know the shit that runs through a fourteen-year-old boy's mind."

"Oh, God." I yanked my phone back out and hit Linc's number. Looking up at King, who continued to watch me with that damn intensity I wish he'd let go of, I said, "One sec, I have to rip my ex a new one."

Amusement flickered in his eyes and across his lips again.

When the call went to message bank, I let loose on Linc. "You better get your ass over to my place quick fucking smart, Linc, and tell your daughter that you made a mistake by saying yes to her date tonight. If you don't fix this, I swear to God, you will regret it. I will find all the ways under the sun to make you regret it."

I stabbed at the phone when I was done and looked at King and demanded, "What?" when I saw the way his eyebrows had arched. "You think I'm a bitch to my ex? He deserved that, for so much more than just this! I'm sick and tired of putting up with his crap." My heart raced with anger and frustration. Why did I ever take this journey with Linc? He'd given me nothing but heartache and grief for years now, and I wasn't sure how much more I could handle.

King shook his head. "No, I'm just thinking 'good fucking luck' to your ex."

"Yeah, he's going to need it," I muttered before blowing out another long breath and changing the subject. "Are you heading up to see your sister?"

"Yeah. How's she doing today?"

"Good this morning. She managed to put weight on both legs, which I'm really happy with. I'm just going for a smoke before I do this afternoon's session with her. I'll see you there if you're still around. I have a list of physios for you to check out, too."

He nodded and continued on. I watched him walk away, wondering again about that scar on his face. Heck, there were a lot of things I wondered about that man. Things I'd never find the answers to. Things I would probably rather not know. And yet, I'd found my thoughts drifting to him since we met.

That's because you're the good girl who always falls for the bad boy.

It's time you got your shit together and found yourself a nice stable man.

Ugh.

I sounded like my mother.

Brynn was right.

I *was* turning into her.



"So you think she may be able to leave here in a couple of days?" King asked as I finished up Skylar's session.

I smiled at Skylar who settled herself on the chair next to the bed. She'd worked hard today, and I was more than happy with her progress. "Yes." I passed him my list of recommended physiotherapists. "Here's that list I promised."

"Appreciate it," he said, taking the list and perusing it. "There are only a few names on here."

"Yes." When he glanced back up at me, questioningly, I added, "I'm fussy with my recommendations. I would never give you the name of someone if I wouldn't personally use them."

"Good to know." He folded the piece of paper and pushed it into the pocket of his jeans. Then to his sister, he said, "I'll get the guys to set up a room for you with everything you want, so text me a list today." He glanced back at me. "Is there anything you recommend I get to make shit easier for her?"

Yesterday, I'd thought King a rude man. Maybe he was, but I couldn't help softening my opinion of him as I took in how much he cared for his sister. I'd worked with a lot of families in my role at the hospital, and sadly, I wasn't surprised anymore when it was clear some of them treated caring for an injured family member as the biggest burden they'd ever endured. That kind of scenario happened all too often. King was different. He cared deeply and by the looks of it, would do whatever it took to help Skylar recover.

I listed a few things I thought would help and had just finished when his phone rang. He checked the caller ID and said, "I've gotta take this," before stepping out of the room.

"Thank you for all your help," Skylar said, distracting me from watching King go. It was hard to draw my gaze from him though. When jeans hugged a man's ass the way King's did, it was almost impossible.

When I finally turned to Skylar, she watched me like she was entertained by me. Ignoring that, I said, "Absolutely."

Smiling, she shook her head. "I can never work out why women are so freaking attracted to my brother."

"It's his ass," I said, deadpan. "Because it sure isn't his friendly vibes or anything like that."

Her smile morphed into a laugh. "Honestly, I've watched women throw themselves at him, even when he turns asshole on them."

I shrugged. "What can I say? We women are screwed up when it comes to men. I've always liked the bad boys, but almost everything about your brother tells me he's more than just a bad boy. I'd take that ass, though."

She continued to laugh. "I like you, Lily. You just say it like it is."

I gathered my stuff to leave. I still had two more patients to see before I could go home and lay down the law to my daughter. "Between an ex I wanna strangle, three kids who cause me heart palpitations most days, and a mother who tests my patience with her crazy-ass way of living, I don't have the time in my life or the energy to say it like it isn't." I paused for a beat before smiling at her and adding, "I'll be back tomorrow morning. Do those exercises I gave you, okay?"

She nodded. "I wouldn't dream of not doing them. My physio is bossy and will give me hell if I don't."

"Yes she is, and yes she will," I agreed before exiting her room.

I'd almost made it to the lift at the end of the corridor when King came towards me, a look of deep concentration on his face. I had no idea what was going on his life, but from what I'd observed of him so far, it felt like he was dealing with something big.

His eyes met mine as we moved closer, and I did my best to ignore the way his attention stirred butterflies in my stomach. I'd never met a man like King before. He exuded power without even trying. It surprised me that I found this a turn on, because I'd never been about a man taking charge of me. But a girl had no freaking say over what got her excited, as much as she tried. And God knew, I'd tried.

"Thanks for all your work with Skylar."

The butterflies in my stomach flapped their wings all over the place as his voice vibrated across my skin.

I decided then and there that dangerous wasn't a strong enough word to describe King. If a man could elicit this kind of response simply from uttering a few words, I didn't want to imagine how I would react to anything more. It was a good thing his sister would be going home in a couple of days.

I smiled. "Just doing my job."

"Something tells me that you doing your job means a lot more than what it would mean for most people."

My breathing slowed.

Not many patients or their family members acknowledged the efforts I went to. Most just thanked me and moved on to the next phase of their recovery.

"Thank you. That means a lot."

His gaze swept down my body briefly before coming back to meet mine, and oh good freaking Lord did that cause a riot in my belly.

Dangerous? Freaking hazardous, more like it.

"I'll go through this list of physios this afternoon and will be back in touch if I need you."

With that, he left me to go back into his sister's room, leaving me staring after him wondering what he meant by getting back in touch if he needed me. His statement bamboozled me, but then again, maybe it was just his ass that did that.

"Shit," I muttered to myself. I had better things to do than stand here lusting after a man who probably went through more women in a month than I went through men in a decade.



I'm going to get through this weekend.

I'm going to survive my kids.

I'm not going to kill my mother.

I slid down the bath and submerged my entire body as I chanted positive affirmations that not even I believed.

I quite possibly might kill Linc.

That one rang true.

I'd had to drag him over this afternoon after I got home from work to retract his approval for Zara to go on a date tonight. He hadn't wanted to, because he hated not being the fun parent, but I'd threatened to report him for late child support payments if he didn't. Heaven knew why I hadn't already. When we'd divorced, I promised myself I'd do everything to keep his relationship with the kids close, and for some fucked-up reason that I couldn't let go of, I

thought that not reporting him would help with that. He always came through with the money in the end, so while it could be stressful, it always worked out. If that changed, I'd definitely reconsider my stance.

I came up for air as a knock sounded on my bathroom door, followed by my sister's voice. "Lil, can I come in?"

"Yeah, but only if you have wine for me."

The door opened, and she held up a bottle of wine. "I have supplies."

"Thank God, because it might be the only thing that will stop me from committing a crime tonight."

She grinned as she sat on the edge of the bath and passed me the glass of wine she'd already poured. "I'm not sure if Holly has ever ushered me inside the house faster than she just did. Tell me everything." Brynn'd had to rush off to a massage appointment when I'd arrived home, so she'd missed out on all the drama with Zara and Linc.

I gulped some wine down and squeezed my eyes closed for a moment before taking another gulp. Opening my eyes, I took a deep breath and said, "Zara hates me, and I doubt she'll speak to me for a good month. Maybe a year. Mum stuck her nose in and told Linc off. They had a huge fight, which then led to me having a huge fight with Mum. She left in a huff, at which point I told Linc he'd pretty much reached my limit, and that if he didn't get his shit together and back me on parenting decisions rather than going against me in order to gain the kids' approval, then he and I were done." I took another deep breath and downed the rest of the wine in my glass.

Brynn refilled my glass. "What do you mean by you guys being done? As far as I'm aware, you're already done. Are you planning murder? Or is it code for something else?"

"Murder is definitely on my list of options, but I'd need to watch a heap more crime shows first to figure out how to get away with it, and honestly, when does a girl have time for that?"

Her eyes sparkled with amusement. "So, what then?"

I sighed and drank some more wine. "You know, I could really do with a smoke right about now, but I made a decision at lunch to give them up."

Brynn cocked her head to the side. "Lil, stop avoiding my question."

I stared at her, not wanting to admit the truth of the matter because I knew it could lead to an “I told you so” moment, and I really, *really* hated those moments. “Okay, fine, you were right—I need to stop letting him get away with so much.”

“Which means?”

“Jesus, Brynn, why do you have to push me on this? I know what I have to do, and I’m gonna do it.”

“I push you because your heart is too kind and I know you too well. You’re angry with Linc today, but what happens when that anger subsides? Will you still be so ready to let go of your tendency to go easy on him? I just want what’s best for you, and I don’t think the way you two have been co-existing for the past three years is the best for you anymore.”

“I agree.” I took a sip of wine. “And that’s why I told him we’re doing things differently from now on. He’s going to have the kids every second weekend, he’s not going to drop by unannounced, he’s going to pay child support on time, and he’s going to take the kids every alternating Wednesday night. And on those Wednesday nights, he’s going to help the kids with their assignments rather than just doing fun stuff with them.”

Brynn’s eyes widened. “You guys worked all this out this afternoon?”

I nodded. “Yes, and I’m serious about making it happen. I can’t go on in this super-stressed state anymore.”

“Good,” she said, standing.

“Where are you going?”

She jerked her head towards the door. “I’m going to check in on Zara. When Holly called, she said Zara was asking for me. I just needed to make sure you were okay first.”

I frowned. “Holly called you to come over?”

“Yeah, she said shit had gone down and she figured you’d need me. You raised some good kids, babe.”

“If only they all still loved me like that.”

“They do. Zara will come around.”

As she exited the bathroom, I called out, “Wait! Is tomorrow your fishing date with the prostitute?”

She looked back at me. “Yes, but can we not refer to it as a date? It’s just fishing.”

“We both know it’s not fishing.”

"We do not."

"We do. And by the way, what's his name?"

She poked her tongue at me. "I'm not telling you." She closed the door and left me alone.

"I'm going to find out!" I called after her, laughing as I thought about my sister ending up on a fishing date with a prostitute our mother ordered for her. It was the kind of story that people just wouldn't believe. And it was the exact kind of story that helped me through my days. Thank God for having Brynn as my sister. The hilarious shit she got up to always made me laugh and eased my stress a little.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

King

"Don't let him out of your sight," I said to Devil over the phone early the next morning. I'd pulled him off watching Skylar so he could track Brant.

"Has he made contact with Romano yet?"

Devil and Kick were tailing Brant who we'd let leave the clubhouse fifteen minutes earlier. Zane had bugged Brant's phone so we could keep track of him and also listen to his calls.

"No."

Hyde entered the surveillance room Zane had set up and eyed me. "Ghost just made contact again. The guy he thought we could use to deal with Marx has been moved, so he's not an option anymore. Ghost is working his contacts to find someone else."

"Fuck," I muttered. "Go through everyone we know again and see if we can do this without Ghost. We need this dealt with as soon as fucking possible."

Hyde nodded and left as Axe met my gaze. "Do you know what Marx has given the feds yet?"

"Not yet. Bronze is working on that, but they've locked the case down tight apparently, so he hasn't been able to access the info."

"I've got a guy who might be able to help. I'll mention it to him."

Zane cut into the conversation. "Here he goes."

The room turned silent while the three of us listened to Brant's call with Romano.

"Where have you been?" It was Romano.

"I'm in Sydney. I've been looking for Ivy for you."

Silence followed for a moment. *"Did you find her?"*

"No, but I found out something that might interest you."

"Keep talking."

"I visited the Storm clubhouse, thinking Ivy might have gone to King. She hasn't, but they're knocking themselves out looking for whoever's been fucking with them. I heard one of the guys mention something about a rat in the club."

I'd threatened his life if he didn't come through for us with this, and it seemed he'd taken me seriously.

"And what the fuck makes you think I'd have any interest in that?"

"I figure if the guy's working with you, feeding you information, you might wanna look out for him. Warn him or something."

Romano laughed, his contempt bleeding through the phone. *"They're looking in the wrong place."* He paused before saying, *"Get your ass back to Melbourne. I've got shit for you to do."*

Zane glanced at me as the call ended. "Romano's playing with him. He's gotta know where Brant's been."

I nodded. "Agreed. And now we wait for him to come for Brant."

"That comment about you looking in the wrong place, though," Axe said, "That didn't sound like a play."

"Yeah," I said, "I'll get Hyde to extend the search." I met Zane's gaze again. "You need to deal with Don." *Kree's husband.*

His movements slowed, and he gave me his full attention. "I am."

"No, you're fucking about trying not to step on fucking toes, Zane. That's not dealing with anything. Don needs to be removed from Kree's life for good."

"I don't *remove* people like you do, King, and you know that. I've got a plan in place that should neutralise the threat to Kree."

"Should?"

His jaw clenched. "It will fix the problem."

"When? Because if this fucking problem isn't fixed in the next couple of days, I'll take care of it."

"Fuck." He rubbed the back of his neck as he swore. "Give me a week. If it's not done then, it's all yours."

I contemplated that. Kree and the kids were safe here, and I had enough other shit to take care of so this was probably the best option. Against my better judgement, though, I nodded in agreement. "A week. Make sure it's done."

Winter stuck his head in the room as Zane went back to what he was doing. Eyeing me, he said, "We need to get onto the doctor again. Ivy's getting worse."

Fuck.

After the argument I'd had with her yesterday, seeing her was the last thing I wanted to be doing.

"How?" I asked. "And has the doc given you any idea when he can make it?"

"She hasn't left her room since you said she could. I've been checking on her, and there's blood on her sheets. When I asked her about it, she refused to discuss it. Doc said he'd come by this afternoon. He was swamped yesterday. But I don't think we can wait that long."

"How much blood, Winter?" For all I fucking knew, it could be something as simple as a nosebleed.

"The amount of blood I'd be worried about if she were my sister."

"Jesus. Okay, I'll deal with this."

I made my way to the room we'd allocated Ivy and entered it without knocking. Concern sparked through me when I found her hunched over on the side of the bed.

"Do you need a doctor?"

She took her time looking up at me. When her gaze met mine, she nodded. Standing, she came my way, clutching her stomach.

"Yes, I think so."

Pulling out my phone, I hit the number for our club doctor. "What's wrong?" I asked her, putting the phone to my ear.

Her mouth opened, but all that came out was a scream of pain as she doubled over. It was then, as her hands grabbed hold of my shirt, that I saw the pool of blood on the bed sheet.

Winter had been right to be worried.

It looked like Ivy had lost half her fucking blood.



"A miscarriage?" I stared at the doctor, hating every word coming out of his mouth. "So you can't save the baby?"

He sighed as he pulled the gloves off his hands and threw them in the bin. "There is no baby to save, King. She'd already lost it. Two weeks ago. But it was an incomplete miscarriage. That's why she's still experiencing cramping and bleeding. She needs to go to the hospital for a D&C."

I glanced beyond him at Ivy sitting in the bed staring at the wall in front of her.

Fuck.

My fucking chest hurt just looking at her.

Ivy had wanted three kids. It had been all she'd talked about at one stage while we were together. She'd picked out three girl names and three boy names to cover all bases. When I'd asked her why the fuck she wanted to bring children into this fucked-up world, she'd smiled at me and said we would do it right. That she and I would be the best type of parents. The complete opposite of our parents.

I nodded at the doctor. "I'll take her now."

Moving past him, I went to her. "I need to get you to the hospital."

She ignored me for a few moments before finally turning to look up at me. "He never wanted children. Not like you did."

I clenched my fists by my side. There was something in her tone, something that made me ask, "Why did you miscarry?"

A sob escaped her lips, and her hand flew to her mouth as tears slid down her cheeks. When she answered me, the words choked out of her. "He beat me until I passed out. When I woke up, I was bleeding."

It took everything in me not to roar with anger. Not to drive my fists into the wall. Instead, I scooped her into my arms and made a promise I intended to keep. "He will pay for this, Ivy. If it's the last fucking thing I ever do. He will fucking pay."

Her eyes found mine and held them as she slid her arms around my neck. I struggled for breath while she did that. It was all too fucking much.

Her pain.

Her body in my arms.

Her fingers on my skin.

And when she whispered, “Thank you,” through her sobs, and nuzzled her face into my neck, I knew I’d do anything to put an end to her husband’s life. I’d fucking bleed if I had to.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

King

“You look like shit.”

I looked up from the drink I was staring at to find Kree watching me with a look of concern. She’d broken the silence I’d managed to find in the clubhouse bar. “It’s 2:00 a.m., Kree. Why are you up?”

She slid onto the stool next to me and reached for my glass of whisky. After she took a long gulp, she said, “I can’t sleep here. I need my candles and crystals around me. I’m agitated without them.”

I moved around to the other side of the bar as I said, “I’ll send the boys out to get your shit tomorrow. You need your sleep.” Grabbing a glass, I poured another whisky and placed it in front of her. “Drink that.”

Her lips curled into a smile. “You don’t like sharing your drink, King?”

I ignored that and moved back around the bar to my stool. I wasn’t in the mood for fucking small talk.

We sat in silence for a good few minutes before she broke it again. “You wanna talk about it?”

I eyed her. “I thought you didn’t wanna know the shit in my head.”

"I don't, but you've got a lot of stuff going on, and I figure you need to get that shit out. And I also figure you're not the kind of man to talk about any of it." She took a sip of her drink. "I'm not saying I want specifics, but you *need* to talk about it. You might just blow the place up if you don't."

I watched her for another moment before nodding. She made a good fucking point. Since I'd learnt of Ivy's miscarriage yesterday, my mind felt like it had fractured. I'd moved through the motions of getting her looked after and then bringing her back here, but after that, I hadn't been able to bring myself to see her. I'd spent the rest of yesterday and all of today out looking for Romano. The motherfucker still managed to elude us. Not even Brant had drawn him out. Nothing was fucking going in our favour, and fuck knew I needed to get some of that shit out of my head.

I emptied my glass and poured another one before turning to face her again. "I've fucked a lot of things up in my life, Kree." I paused and exhaled a long breath. "I don't wanna fuck this up, but shit's heading south every hour." I stopped talking and knocked back some whisky. I was wrong—I didn't need to get into this shit with her. I didn't need to get into it with anyone. I just fucking needed to stay focused on my goal and get it done. Talking about it didn't help anyone.

"We've all fucked stuff up in our life. You shouldn't be so hard on yourself."

The longstanding tension in my shoulders made itself known. I'd lived with it for so long I hardly felt it anymore, but every now and then the pressure became all I could feel.

I dropped my head for a moment and then glanced sideways at her. "You ever fucked anyone over? You know what guilt feels like? And I mean the kind that twists your gut so fucking much that some days you can't fucking breathe."

"I don't know that kind of guilt, but I'll tell you something—if you're the kind of man who can admit his mistakes, you're the kind of man who can be forgiven."

"I'm not looking for forgiveness."

"Well, maybe you should be."

"Why?"

"If you don't, this kind of stuff will eat you up and kill you." She leaned closer. "And when I say you should look for forgiveness, I

mostly mean from yourself. You need to show yourself the kind of love others would show you if you asked for it."

"Fuck, Kree," I muttered, taking a swig of my drink. "I'm not asking for love or fucking forgiveness. I own my shit. I did it, and I'll fucking live with it."

"Yeah well, you're *not* living with it, King, if you're sitting here in a bar asking me about guilt at 2:00 a.m. So have a think about *that*, okay?"

I was fucking done with this conversation. Moving off my stool, I said, "Let Kick know what shit you want from your house tomorrow. He'll get it."

She called after me as I left, "Think about it. I'm not always right, but I'm right about this."

She wasn't right, not if she thought I needed forgiveness. Men like me didn't deserve that.

I made my way to the kitchen but got distracted by the door to Ivy's room. The light coming from under the door shed a tiny sliver of light into the dark hallway, catching my attention.

Against my better judgement, I closed the distance to her room and entered it.

She was lying on the bed, staring up at the ceiling, but turned her head to look at me. No smile, but the hard edge to her seemed to have disappeared. Now, she just looked broken.

My chest squeezed.

Fuck.

I sat on the bed and held her gaze. After a few moments, I asked, "How are you feeling?"

"Tired mostly."

"Do you need anything?" Winter had been keeping an eye on her and had told me she still wasn't eating much.

"No."

The lifeless tone to her voice worried me. Ivy used to shut down on me when something devastated her, and this was the tone I knew well from those times. It was the sign she was tapping out, and I'd be fucked if I'd allow that.

My jaw clenched as I thought about all the shit her husband had put her through. "How many times did he do this to you?"

Her eyes closed and she rolled to her side and curled into a ball.

"Ivy," I demanded, my voice harsher than I meant, "tell me. How many times?"

She shook her head. "Don't, King. I don't want to talk about it."

"What? Three times? Four? Five?" My voice grew louder as my desperation to have this conversation intensified. I needed to fucking know. "How many fucking times?"

Her eyes snapped open and wild, angry energy blazed from her. "Why? There's nothing you can do about it now, so there's no fucking point going over it!"

"There *is* a fucking point because I'm going to make him pay. Tell me."

She stared at me for a long beat, and I wondered if I was going to have to drag this information from her, but finally she said, "I've had six miscarriages. Four were because of him."

I shot up off the bed and paced the tiny room. "Fucking hell! I will fucking wrap my hands around his throat and take his last fucking breath."

Ivy sat up on the bed, resting against the wall. Her exhaustion clothed her, and I fucking hated him for that too. "Just let it go, King. I'm not going back to him. He can't hurt me anymore."

I stopped pacing and directed my gaze back at her. "You've got that fucking right—you're never going back to him. And I won't fucking rest until I make sure he can never touch you again."

A long sigh fell from her lips. "Can you please pass my painkillers and the glass of water that are on the table?"

I did as she asked and then sat on the bed again, watching her closely for a sign—*any sign*—that she was going to be okay. When she looked at me after taking her drugs and said, "Remember the miscarriage I had when we were together?" I knew that was my sign. Somehow, we'd moved past the standoff we were at.

I nodded. "Yes." *I'll never fucking forget it.*

Ivy had fallen pregnant a couple of months after the night I'd almost forced myself on her. It had been a rare night where we'd connected again and the sex had been good, like old times, rather than rushed and just a release for each of us. I'd held hope the pregnancy would bring us back together, but six weeks later, that hope had been killed and she'd pulled away from me again. It had been one of our darkest moments together.

A tear slid down her cheek. "I was a bitch to you after that."

She had been, but so much other shit had already gone on between us, that by then, we were both at fault. "It's in the past, Ivy. We both did some fucked-up shit."

More tears fell and she wiped them away. "Yeah, but I shouldn't have pushed you away and treated you so badly. I'm sorry for that."

Regret sat heavy in my chest as I thought about that time in our lives. There'd been so much confusion and so many misunderstandings, and if I could take that shit back, I would. But I wouldn't change the fact we weren't in each other's lives anymore, because that was the only thing that actually made sense. We would have destroyed each other if we hadn't made that break.

I stood as I said, "Get some sleep."

Leaving the room, I didn't look back.

Never fucking look back was how I lived life, and now was not the time to change it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

King

"You're going to be fine," Lily said, trying to assure Skylar, who looked anything but convinced she was going to be fine.

I was taking her home today, and she'd just spent the last fucking ten minutes freaking out about how she was gonna cope without the support she'd had while in hospital. Lily had to be one of the most patient women I'd ever come across. The way she remained calm with my sister impressed the fuck out of me.

Panic crossed Skylar's face. "I might not be! King still hasn't been able to find a physio off your list who can fit me in. What am I gonna do without you, Lily?"

"Jesus," I muttered, losing *my* patience, but Lily's eyes cut to mine and she hit me with a look that told me to rein it in.

"I'm going to give you my phone number, okay?" Lily said to Skylar as she sat next to her on the bed and held out her hand for Skylar's phone. "And if you need to chat or need me to talk you through anything at all, you call me."

Skylar passed over her phone and fuck if Lily's offer didn't calm her down a little.

Lily keyed her number in, handed the phone back, stood and then said with a level of bossiness that Skylar responded to, "Right, up you get. I've got another patient I have to see, and your brother

looks like he's about to lose his shit if you guys don't get moving soon."

My brows arched as I met Lily's gaze. Her serious expression disappeared and a ghost of a smile flickered across her face. It didn't last long, and as soon as she turned back to Skylar, it was gone, but it sparked a smile of my own.

I watched as she helped Skylar up, all the while talking positive shit to her. It reminded me of how Margreet used to encourage us as kids and how she always had the ability to stay focused and calm, even when we gave her hell. Lily's words blurred into the background as my gaze drifted down her body. Fuck, she owned some serious curves and a tight ass. The kind that usually gave me a hard-on. If I wasn't knee-fucking-deep in club shit at the moment, I'd have paid more attention to those curves by now.

"King!" Skylar's voice sliced through my thoughts, drawing my focus back to the situation at hand. "I'm ready to go."

I nodded as I continued eyeing Lily. When I made it back up her body and found her watching me, she blinked and immediately dropped her gaze before turning to Skylar and mumbling a good-bye. A moment later, she exited the room, confusing the hell out of me as to what the fuck just happened.

"King, can you take this?" Skylar asked, passing me her iPad.

I packed it into her bag and gathered her shit while she sat in the wheelchair the wardie had waiting to take her downstairs. We were on our way to the elevator when Hyde called.

"I've got some good news finally," he said. "Ghost has someone organised to take care of Marx."

"When?"

"Tonight."

"Let Tatum know. The less she feels the need to ring me, the better."

"Will do."

"Any news on Romano?"

"Nothing yet. I do have news on Ivy, though."

I followed the wardie and Skylar to the lift. "What?"

"She's looking for you."

"And?"

"She's harassing the fuck out of Winter about seeing you."

"Tell her I'm busy, Hyde." Seeing Ivy was the last thing on my agenda for today.

"You ever tried to tell Ivy something she doesn't wanna hear? She's fucking stubborn."

"Yeah. I know." *Did I fucking know.* "She can wait."

"Fuck," he muttered.

"You get Monroe out of town?"

"She left this morning. I hope to fucking hell we get this shit sorted soon because she's headed down to Melbourne to see Charlie who's staying with Tenille. Those women could kill each other if left together for long enough."

I gripped my phone harder. "We need to make a new plan to get to Romano. I'm on my way back there now. Get Axe and Zane in on this too."

As I ended the call, I eyed Lily ahead. "I'll meet you downstairs, Skye," I said, leaving her with the wardie while I cut a path to where Lily stood going over her files.

"King," she said, glancing up from her work. Her eyes held uncertainty, wariness maybe, but they also held the kind of warmth I didn't often come across in my world. And again, it reminded me of Margreet.

"Will you work with Skylar on her rehab?"

She shook her head. "No, I don't do private physio work. Have you got many left to call from that list I gave you?"

"I've called them all. None have any spare appointments."

She frowned. "Oh. I thought Skylar said you still had some left to try."

"You saw how anxious she is about this shit. I haven't told her they're all busy. I was hoping you might be able to squeeze her in."

"No, sorry, like I said, I don't do any work outside of the hospital." She shifted her weight onto one leg, drawing my attention down those legs again. Fuck, I really needed to get laid. I needed to drive some of this fucking tension out of my body.

Forcing my gaze back up to her face, I said, "I'll pay you whatever you want."

She opened her mouth to respond, but quickly shut it again. Then she said, "I honestly don't have time between my kids and work. Sorry. There are plenty of good physios out there. You'll find someone."

With that, she gave me one last smile and walked away, leaving me staring after her wondering why the fuck I was annoyed she'd said no. There had to be hundreds of physiotherapists in Sydney.

"Fuck," I muttered to myself, stalking towards the lifts. I'd find someone else. Skylar didn't need Lily.



"I've spent days looking into Ryland and can't find any dirt on him," Tatum said an hour later when she found me in the clubhouse bar. I hadn't been in the clubhouse for longer than twenty minutes, and hadn't had a moment of peace in that time.

"Keep digging. Everyone has dirt."

"I'm telling you, King, he doesn't."

"Fuck, Tatum, he will. Just keep fucking looking." It had just gone midday and the bullshit I'd already dealt with today left me little patience for any more. From issues with cleaning jobs we had going on, to a drug shipment being delayed, to club members growing restless with the Romano situation not being handled yet, to Tatum being on my ass about this, I was ready to call it a fucking day and go in search of pussy to dull the roar in my head.

She hit me with the cool gaze she often reserved for me. "I should have known you'd fob me off. You've been doing it for days." She turned to leave, throwing back, "I'll get Billy to help me on this."

I reached for her, wrapping my hand around her wrist and pulling her back to me. Every ounce of frustration and anger I felt over this fucking situation and her attitude spilled out as I growled, "You do that, and you won't like my response. This shit stays club business. The minute you make it something other than that is the minute you're out in the fucking cold." My eyes bored into hers. "Understood?"

Her cool gaze quickly turned stormy. Yanking her arm from my grip, she continued to drive my blood pressure up, hostile as fucking ever. "No, not understood. You can take your threats and shove them up your ass, King. I'm not scared of you."

"I'm not trying to scare you, Tatum. I'm just letting you know how shit will go down if you choose a path that's not in the club's interest."

She glared at me for a moment longer before stalking out of the office.

Fucking hell. The last thing we needed was Billy getting involved in this. I had to keep this contained in order to keep the club safe. There was far too much shit buried that needed to be kept that way, and the more people involved, the more likely some of it wouldn't stay buried.

I dialled the lawyer we'd hired to get Nitro out.

"King. What's up?" I appreciated that he always got straight down to business.

"I need to see Nitro."

"I can get you in tomorrow morning."

"Book it."

"Will do. I'll send you the details."

Hyde entered the office as I ended the call, his body as tense as I felt. "Ryland's back."

I blew out a harsh breath. A fucking frustrated-as-fuck breath. "Jesus fucking Christ."

Hyde nodded. "Yeah. You want me to tell him you're not here?"

"No, I need to know what the fuck he's here about today. Has Tatum left?"

He nodded again. "What happened there?"

"She's ready to get Billy involved. I've organised a visit with Nitro tomorrow. He needs to keep her on a fucking leash."

"Might be easier said than done with her. And Nitro's not gonna be happy if we threaten her in any way or do something to keep her quiet."

"I've already threatened her. If Nitro keeps her quiet, I won't need to go through with it." Without waiting for his input on that, I asked, "Any luck on the rat yet?" He and Zane hadn't turned up any good leads yet.

"Still nothing, but I've got some of the guys out knocking down doors to find this motherfucker. It won't be long now. Also, nothing new on Brant either. He might be back in Melbourne, but Romano hasn't made contact with him."

"He will. Keep Devil and Kick on Brant for when that happens," I said as I exited the office. "And organise Church for tomorrow morning. I want to see where everyone's at."

I made my way outside to where Ryland was waiting for me. He watched me come towards him with the same satisfied expression he'd worn the other day. The one I would wipe from his face when I was finally done with him calling the shots.

"King, are you having trouble sleeping? You look tired."

Maybe I'll just fucking deal with him now and be done with it.

"What the fuck do you want now, Ryland? I'm busy and don't have time for all your visits. Either charge me with something or get the fuck off this property."

He smirked. "I see my presence agitates you, which is completely warranted with the shit I'm digging up on you. I just dropped by today to let you know the investigation is progressing well."

I clenched my jaw as the overwhelming desire to smash my fists into his face consumed me. The whole fucking scenario of how I'd remove him from this earth played out in my head in a rush of seconds, but I managed to control my thirst for his blood. "And now you've told me that, you can back the fuck up and leave."

"Nitro sends his regards. Mind you, he doesn't talk much, that one. No worries, though, Marx does enough talking for the both of them."

I took a step closer to him at the same time Hyde joined us, warning, "King. Not a good idea, brother."

He was wrong. It was the best fucking idea I'd had in a long time.

Fuck.

I stepped back. "If that's all, Ryland, I've got shit to do."

He hit me with another satisfied grin. "I bet you do. I wouldn't bother trying to cover up all your skeletons though, King. It's too late for that."

As we watched him leave, Hyde said, "He's fucking with us, brother."

My head throbbed with the beginning of a headache. "Yeah, but I'm not convinced he doesn't have some shit. We need to call Cole in on this now. We need all the fucking help we can get."

He nodded. "I agree."

"You organise that while I check in with Axe to see if he's been able to find out what Marx has given the feds."

I found Axe a few minutes later, chatting with Skylar in my room that we'd set up for her. They were laughing over something, and it

caused me to slow down for a moment. Axe hadn't been around much over the last few years while he'd been dealing with some personal shit, and I knew Skylar missed him. He'd always had a calming effect on her. Hell, Axe had a way of quieting any fucked-up situation. He also had his own way of fucking shit up if it was called for, but right now, I knew his presence soothed her fears,

"Did you find me a physio?" she asked when she realised I stood watching them.

"Still working on it."

"Oh God, there's not going to be anyone available on such short notice. I just know it." Her voice wavered with anxiety, something she'd struggled with since Margreet's death.

"Hey," Axe said, in the deep lulling rumble of his that usually worked on her, "it's all going to work out okay, Skye. There are plenty of physios around."

The anxiety I'd heard in her voice flashed in her eyes as she glanced between Axe and me. "Can you please go and take care of it now, King?" She paused for a moment before adding with an almost begging emphasis, "*Please?*"

I jerked my chin at Axe. "I need a moment with Axe first and then I'll get on it."

Skylar reached for Axe as he stood. "Don't be long. And can you bring me some of that chocolate when you come back?"

He nodded with a smile before meeting me outside. Closing the door of her room, he asked, "What's up?"

"Did you get hold of the guy who might know something about what Marx has told the feds?"

"Yeah. Just waiting for him to get back to me. He said to give him a couple of days, so I'm expecting to hear something soon."

"Let me know as soon as you do."

"Will do." He pulled a pack of gum from his pocket and shoved some in his mouth. "What's the go with the physio? Surely it's not that hard to book one?"

"Fuck," I muttered. "None of the ones the hospital physio recommended are available. I haven't told Skylar that so don't mention it to her. We'll have to take our chances on an unknown and hope like fuck they're good."

"What about the hospital chick? Skylar hasn't stopped talking about her. She'd help ease Skylar's anxiety."

"She said no."

"And since when do you ever take a no? Just make it happen." He nodded at the door to Skylar's room. "I better grab this chocolate she's after and get back in to her before she loses her shit. This whole situation is fucking with her head."

He left me alone with my thoughts, which was a dangerous place to be. This situation was fucking with all of our heads.

I entered Skylar's room again and found her sitting on the bed crying. She glanced up at me and wiped her tears away. My fucking heart squeezed at the difficulty she was experiencing with everything going on. I had to fix this.

Holding out my hand, I said, "Skye give me your phone."

Her brows pulled together. "Why?"

I motioned with my fingers for her to just do as I'd asked. "I want Lily's number."

The way her shoulders relaxed told me I had to do everything I could to get Lily to say yes. Axe was right that she would help Skylar's anxiety.

She passed her phone as she swiped more tears from her face. "Thank you," she said softly. "I know I'm a pain in your ass and that I don't make any sense with all my worry, but I'm really grateful for everything you're doing."

"Fuck, if it wasn't for the shit I've got going on, you wouldn't have been in that accident, Skye. This is all my fault."

She sighed and rested her head against the wall. "I don't blame you, King. And you've really gotta stop taking the blame for every bad thing that happens in our lives."

Before I could respond, Annika joined us. "How's the patient?" She smiled at Skylar. "The kids are dying to get in here, but I told them you need some time to settle in first. I'll do my best to keep them away for as long as I can, but I can't promise anything. They're going a little stir-crazy being cooped up here."

A smile tugged at Skylar's lips. "Oh God, please let them come in. We can go stir-crazy together. And besides, I need some little slaves to do stuff for me."

Annika laughed. "Perfect. It'll get them out of my hair. I might even get a nap in this afternoon." She glanced at me. "What are you taking the blame for now? I heard you guys talking when I came in, but I didn't hear what it was about."

"Nothing," I muttered, not wanting to get into that conversation again.

"It wasn't nothing," Skylar said. "I was telling King he needs to stop taking the blame for the bad stuff that happens to us."

"Oh," Annika said, nodding. "She's right. I mean, you might be the almighty King, but you're not responsible for everything."

I ignored them and held up the phone. "I'm going to call Lily."

As I stepped out of the room, Skylar called out, "We're going to finish this conversation one day."

It wasn't a productive conversation, so I had no desire to finish it, let alone engage in it. Instead, I dialled Lily and waited for her to answer. She didn't pick up, though. It went to message bank, which I didn't bother with. I dialled again. Same thing happened. On the third try, she finally answered.

"Shit, sorry, Skye, I was in the middle of dealing with a teenage girl who thinks it'd be a good idea to follow in her mother's footsteps and give up her virginity at an age where she doesn't fully comprehend that babies can come from sex. And an asshole ex who still doesn't understand that he wouldn't get as much hell from me if he just held up his end of this parenting gig. I'm going to need copious amounts of wine tonight to get through this day. Why do men make our lives so hard some days? I know that if he backed me up on this with her, she'd be more inclined to listen to what I'm saying."

Her outburst cut through the shit in my head in a way not much did. I didn't know what the fuck it was, but she somehow managed to jolt me from my thoughts, easing some of the tension in my body as she did so. It was a welcome fucking distraction. One I didn't have time for, but one I would indulge just to have a few minutes of peace from my thoughts.

"Take something from him that he values. He'll do whatever the fuck you want after that."

Silence. And then—"King? God, I thought it was Skylar calling. Just ignore everything I said. I'm rambling. Shit. Wait. What do you mean by take something from him?"

"What does your ex get from you that he values?"

A few moments passed in silence where I figured she was thinking about my question. "He likes to come over to my place a freaking lot, but there's no way I can take that from him. I've tried telling him to stop, but he just keeps coming whenever he wants. Besides

that, I don't know..." Her voice drifted off before suddenly she said, "Oh, I know! He still has access to the couple's gym membership my sister got for me years ago. I'll take his name off it."

I frowned. "You let your ex use a gym membership you pay for?"

"I don't pay for the membership. It's her bestie's gym, so they give it to me for free. Linc is vain as fuck, so it'd kill him if I stopped letting him use it."

I had zero clue what would possess a woman to let her ex use her like that, but in my experience, people did shit for the strangest fucking reasons, so I wasn't touching that. "Cut him off. He'll come crawling back to you begging for it back and willing to do whatever that takes."

She turned silent again before saying, "You're a smart man. Thank you."

I'd been called a lot of things in my life, but smart wasn't one of them. The compliment felt odd, but fuck, it put a smile on my fucking face. "I've dealt with enough assholes to know how to use them to get what I want."

"Take the compliment, King. Now, what can I do for you? I'm presuming you called for a reason."

I was unsure how her ex managed to coerce her into shit; she seemed switched on to me. But then I knew better than anyone how love led you down paths you never intended to take. "I need you to take on Skylar's rehab."

"I'm sorry, but I really can't fit her in. My kids are a handful at the moment and work is kicking my butt."

"There has to be something I can offer you to make you say yes. Name it."

"You just don't back down, do you?"

"No. Not when I want something this much. I'm not sure how close you and Skylar got, although with the way you answered my call, I'm guessing you guys got friendly, but she suffers from anxiety. It's flaring pretty badly due to the accident and what she has to do now. Just the mention of your name eases that anxiety a little."

She exhaled. "I really wish I could say yes, and I want to, but as much as I try to figure it out in my head, I just don't see how I can work her into my schedule."

The headache Ryland caused pounded harder against my skull. "You're busting my fucking balls here, Lily. Have a think about it. I'll

get back to you soon.”

Without waiting for her reply, I ended the call. I’d give her the rest of the day, and then I’d strongly encourage her to come around to my way of thinking. There was no way she wasn’t taking on this job.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Lily

I closed my eyes, sunk further into the warm bath and took a deep breath before clearing my mind of all thoughts.

I exhaled.

Inhaled.

Exhaled.

Fuck, who was I kidding? Meditation wasn't going to work tonight. Not after the day I'd had. But the bath *was* helping, which was a relief. It was only Monday, and I already wanted this week over with. Zara still refused to talk to me and had defied me last night by slipping out of her bedroom window to spend time with her boyfriend. I'd realised she was missing when I'd gone to say goodnight at nine o'clock. Linc had been less than helpful, refusing to end the date he was on to come and help me find her. In the end, it had been my mother who had saved the day. She'd called Zara and talked her into coming home. She'd actually surprised the heck out of me with the patience she exhibited. That patience hadn't been there when I was a teen. I liked this older version of her, even if she drove me crazy trying to fix what she perceived as my problems.

I checked the time on my phone. Just after ten. Time for bed. The kids were finally all asleep. I'd checked Zara's room at least five times to make sure she was there. She wasn't freaking escaping me

again. I'd never been the kind of parent who tracked their kids' phone, but I was seriously considering getting one of those spy apps for her phone.

Ugh, I was turning into someone I didn't recognise. Suspicious and helicopter-y. But as much as I tried to fight these tendencies, I failed. Zara was my baby, and I had to protect her.

I hopped out of the bath and dried myself off as I got lost in parenting thoughts again. *Story of my life*. I'd just figured out how to help Holly with one of her problems when a sound outside jolted me to full alert. It sounded like someone knocking on my front door, which made no sense due to the time of night.

God, I hoped it wasn't an intruder. Although with the mood I was in, I wouldn't hesitate to take them on.

I debated my options of getting dressed versus wrapping the towel around me before I went to investigate. I figured I'd rather not approach an intruder wearing only a towel that barely covered my ass, and had decided to throw some clothes on instead when the noise sounded again.

Jesus, they were going to wake the kids. I did not need to be dealing with tired, cranky kids if they were woken. I quickly secured the towel around me, doing my best to cover my butt, grabbed my phone, and yanked the bathroom door open. I'd taken two steps when my phone vibrated with a text.

Unknown number: Lily, let me in. We need to talk.

Me: Who the hell is this? And do you realise it's after ten?

Unknown number: King.

What the what?

Me: Goodness, stop freaking knocking. You'll wake my kids up. IT'S LATE.

King: I'll stop knocking when you let me in.

Men!

I marched out to the front door and checked to confirm it was him. I mean, I knew it would be, but checking was a habit.

It was most definitely him standing out there dressed in the jeans and leather that made me weak at the knees.

Shit.

Opening the door, I stepped outside, pushing past him so I could close the door, and then grabbed his arm and pulled him with me to take our conversation away from the house. I then turned to him and, eyes wide, whisper-yelled, "How did you get my address? And why do you feel it necessary to drop by unannounced so damn late? I thought you were an intruder!"

My heart hammered with bewilderment.

King was here.

It was late.

I was wearing a towel.

What the freaking heck did he want?

And oh God, why did he have to affect me so much?

Focus, Lily.

This is not the moment to lose your shit.

The street lamp threw just enough light over us for me to see his eyes skim over my body before meeting mine again. "I have a guy who's skilled at finding people. Let's just leave it at that."

My eyes bulged some more. "Umm, no, King, let's *not* just leave it at that. That's too casual for me. And I feel a little violated, to be honest. What else is your guy skilled at? Should I be expecting—"

Before I knew what was happening, he slid his arm around my waist, lifted me and walked me back to my door and inside my house. Once we were in, he let me go and quietly shut the door behind him. It happened within seconds, completely throwing me off-kilter. Looking down at me with those intense eyes of his, he rumbled, "I needed to know where you lived and he could help me with that. That's all. Now, do you wanna put some clothes on for this conversation?"

Holding my towel in place, I stared at him, almost at a loss for words. If I'd felt bewildered before, I wasn't sure what to label how I felt now. Being manhandled by King had shaken all my thoughts and emotions into disarray.

I need a smoke.

*Shit, I gave them up.
You can start not smoking again tomorrow.
But clothes first.
Grab the smoke on the way.
Shit.*

Pointing at him, I said, "Stay here. I'm going to get dressed. And for the love of God, if you wake my kids, I *will* hurt you."

I waited for his response, but he gave none. Well, none that was clear. He simply continued watching me in silence, waiting. It threw me further off balance. I liked it when people didn't beat around the bush, but this was a whole new level of not wasting breath on words that had no importance. And with King, I would have preferred a little more insight into what he was thinking.

Leaving him, I hurried to my kitchen in search of my handbag that held the pack of smokes I hadn't dumped yet. My hands shook a little as I lit it, but I ignored that and took a long drag. I hated that it was exactly what I needed. What I *really* needed was to find a way of dealing with stress that didn't involve cigarettes, but that was a job for tomorrow. Tonight, I had only one thing I needed to do, and that was to get through this conversation with King without agreeing to his demands.

His request to help Skylar had been rattling around my brain all day. It had taken willpower to say no to him in the first place because I could do with the cash he offered. I mean, who turned someone down when they told you to name your price. I *had* turned him down, though, because I didn't want to get any closer to King than I already was. Not only did the man intrigue me, I was more attracted to him than I wanted to admit. And with what I had going on in my life, I didn't need to get distracted by a man.

After I changed into my jeans and a T-shirt, I went back to him, ignoring the way his gaze travelled my body again. I liked his eyes on me, but I certainly wasn't encouraging it. "If you came here to ask me again to work with Skylar, you should just leave now. I won't be forced into doing this."

"You don't strike me as the kind of woman who can be forced into doing anything."

Frowning, I asked, "So you're not here for that?"

"I am, but I wouldn't use the word force. I don't make it a habit of forcing women into shit, Lily."

I lifted my brows. "So what word would you use, because it feels like you're trying to push me into this. Especially since you came here tonight rather than calling me in the morning to discuss it."

"We weren't getting anywhere over the phone, and this couldn't wait until tomorrow. I've spent the last hour trying to calm Skylar's anxiety over the fact she won't have someone coming to see her tomorrow. I'm here now to fucking beg you to work with her." His eyes flashed with determination as he added, "And I'm not the kind of man to beg for anything. But she wants you, and I'll do whatever it takes to make that happen."

My fierce resolve not to cave to his demands crumbled at the sight of him standing in front of me begging for my help. There was no doubt in my mind as to his sincerity. I didn't know this man, but from everything I'd seen of him at the hospital, I knew he cared for his sister. And if there was one thing in this world I respected more than anything, it was someone who would do whatever it took to provide and care for their loved ones.

"Shit," I muttered. "Shit, shit, shit."

The tension he carried in his shoulders appeared to loosen as he lifted his brows and said, "So that's a yes?"

Against my better judgement, I nodded. "It's a yes. I'll start tomorrow after work." I couldn't believe the words falling out of my mouth, but I also couldn't stop them. It was like he'd cast a spell over me.

"Thank you," he said, the hard, determined tone vanishing from his voice. I didn't know him enough to be sure, but his words seemed to be laced with relief and gratitude. He definitely didn't appear as strained as he'd been at the beginning of the conversation.

"Right, so now this is sorted, can I please go to bed? I've had a long day and need some sleep."

He nodded. "I'll text you the address."

As he turned to leave, I said, "And King?" He glanced back at me. "Don't make it a habit of calling on me late at night. I'm not a fan."

His lips twitched with a smile that didn't quite form. "I have no fucking idea how your ex gets away with the shit he pulls on you."

With that, he was gone, the rumble of his bike signalling his departure a couple of minutes later. I was left staring after him, hoping that working with Skylar didn't also mean seeing a lot of him. King

had a way of contradicting himself that revealed more about him each time we talked. With each new layer I discovered, I couldn't help liking him more. And that could prove bad for me, because while being attracted to him was one thing, liking him more than I already did would be a whole other situation to deal with.



I hardly slept that night. I couldn't get King out of my mind. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw his eyes, his lips, his scar and those muscles of his. And I heard the growl of his voice, because even when King talked to you in an everyday conversation, his voice held a trace of the growl I suspected lived deep in him. The growl that would be kryptonite to a woman.

By the time I finished work the next day and drove to his clubhouse, exhaustion had claimed me. Thank goodness Brynn had an early day on Tuesdays—she'd offered to cook dinner for us all at my place tonight so that when I got home, I could put my feet up and relax. I'd be having an early one tonight, and if King stopped by late again, I'd freaking tell him where to go.

His men let me through the gate, and I continued along the driveway to find the parking space near the front door that they'd kept free for me. I passed a line of about ten parked bikes before I arrived at my destination. A few bikers eyed me as I passed them. None smiled. I didn't expect them to, but I also didn't expect them to look so serious. I should have anticipated that, though, because King was the most intense man I'd ever met, so it made sense his men would be the same.

The Storm MC clubhouse was huge. Black paint covered the entire building, with not a window in sight. My gaze was drawn to the Storm MC sign painted on the building high above the front door. I found it all to be a little intimidating—entering the world of bikers who I knew nothing of except for what I'd read in the papers. But King had won me over with the way he cared for Skylar, so I trusted him enough to do this.

"Lily," a voice I knew called out as I exited my car.

Turning, I found Devil standing at the front door. I'd spoken to him a few times at the hospital and quite liked him. Where King

seemed fierce, Devil seemed a little lighter. He definitely smiled more.

Locking my car, I headed his way. "I found the place, but I've gotta tell you, you guys are kinda hidden in here. I like the forest you built around your clubhouse." I'd almost driven straight past the property due to the trees hiding it from the street.

He grinned. "It keeps the assholes out." He jerked his chin towards the front door. "Skylar's been hanging out for you all day."

I knew this to be true. She'd texted me five times throughout the day with different questions about her recovery. King hadn't been exaggerating when he'd said she was anxious.

Devil led me inside, down a maze of hallways to Skylar's room. It surprised me how quiet the clubhouse was. I'd kind of expected with the size of it, that there'd be a lot of bikers inside, but I saw only four men along the way. They were all as subdued as the men I'd passed outside. I wondered if they ever smiled and had fun.

Skylar's eyes lit up the minute I stepped into her room. "Thank God you're here."

As I moved further into the room, I wondered what it was usually used for. Completely masculine with photos of bikes on the walls, men's clothing hanging in the open wardrobe, and filled with dark wood and leather, I guessed it to be one of the bikers' rooms. *Do they live here?* That seemed a strange idea to me. Did their families live here? I couldn't imagine wanting to live here if I were married to one of the men.

"Do you need me to get anything for you?" Devil asked, cutting into my thoughts.

I smiled at him and shook my head. "No, I'm good."

"Just yell out if you need me," he said. "I'll be down the hall in the bar."

"You guys have a bar here?"

He grinned. "Yeah. Stop by on your way out and have a drink with us."

"God, if only I could. I've got three kids waiting for me at home, of which one is a fourteen-year-old who's trying to kill me with her boy-crazy ways. I've gotta be at full capacity to deal with that, so alcohol is reserved for later in the night after I've survived her."

He frowned. "Surely you're not old enough to have a fourteen-year-old."

"Trust me, I feel sixty some days."

Winking, he said, "Well, sixty looks good on you."

I turned to Skylar after he left. "He seems like he'd be a lot of fun."

She shifted in her chair. "Yeah, I really like Devil. He's not as serious or bossy as the other guys."

I eyed the chair she sat in. "We need to get you a different chair and a stool."

"Why?"

"That one is too low. And a stool will help with swelling." I dumped my bag on the bed and dragged the spare chair in the room close to her. Sitting, I said, "Now, talk to me. Tell me what's concerning you, and we'll talk through it all so you know why stuff is happening and how you can move forward without so much worry."

Her face crumpled and tears streamed down her cheeks. "I feel so stupid to worry about all this, but I'm stuck here while King won't let me go home and I'm in pain and I don't want to do anything to hurt my hip and I hate asking people for help and..." She shuddered as a loud sob escaped. "I just feel out of control with everything going on and I'm worried I'll never get back to how I was before."

My heart ached for her. I saw this kind of stress in many patients, especially those like Skylar who weren't prepared for an operation and the recovery they'd have to go through. I reached for her hand and squeezed it. "Let's take all that one at a time. I'm going to get you through this, Skylar, and you *are* going to make a full recovery. However, you're going to have to make me a promise."

She blinked through her tears. "What?"

"I need you to promise me that you'll trust me completely and believe that I know my shit. If I tell you to do something, you'll do it. You can ask me all the questions under the sun, but at the end of the day, you will do what I say, because you know that I know my shit. Okay?"

A small smile peeked out from under her tears. "God, you're going to fit in around here."

"Yeah? Why?"

"Because you're just as bossy as my brother."

"Well, let's not go that far. I can be bossy, but I'm pretty sure I've got nothing on King." I stood. "Now, repeat after me—you know

your shit, Lily’.”

Her small smile morphed into a larger one. “You know your shit, Lily.”

I nodded. “Right, let’s go over what I want you to do each day, and then I’m gonna get you up and take you for a walk.”

We went over the list of activities I wanted her to do, and then I took her for a short walk around the clubhouse. She seemed scared of walking, so I focused on getting her more comfortable with her crutches. By the end of our session, her anxiety levels had dropped and she appeared more confident in her ability to get through her recovery.

“Thank you so much for saying yes to this,” she said as I picked up my bag to leave. “I know King was probably really pushy about it, and I’m sorry about that, but I’m so glad to have you helping me.”

“Yeah, he was pushy, but that’s what brothers are for, right?”

“True, but I do know how he can be, so sorry.”

“All good.” I headed for the door, glancing back at her before I exited. “You good for tonight?”

The smile that spread across her face was what I was looking for. “Yes.”

“Good. I’ll stop by after work again tomorrow.”

I headed down the hallway to leave, but I managed to take a wrong turn at some point and ended up in an area of the clubhouse I hadn’t seen yet. As soon as I realised I’d gone in the wrong direction, I turned to go back. And ran smack bang into a hard back as a voice boomed, “Mace, where the fuck are those headache pills?”

King.

He’d stepped out into the hallway at the same time I’d turned around, and I’d run into the back of him. In an effort to steady myself, I reached out and gripped his arms.

“Goodness, someone has their cranky pants on,” I muttered, letting him go as I found my balance again.

Turning, he stared down at me, his cranky mood clear in his eyes. “Are you finished with Skylar?” His question came out as a bark, matching his mood.

Jesus, I didn’t have the energy to deal with his bad temper. “Yes. I’m just leaving now, but I got lost in your hallways.”

He took that in before turning away from me, and barking out again, “Mace! Get your ass here. I need those pills and I have a job

for you.”

“Do you speak to everyone that way? ‘Cause I gotta tell you, I wouldn’t get my ass here if you yelled at me like that.”

His head whipped back around to face me as he demanded, “What did you just say?”

I didn’t miss the way he winced, as if he were in pain. “I said that I wouldn’t get my ass here—”

Irritation flashed in his eyes. “I know what you said,” he snapped, rubbing his temple.

“Oh for God’s sake,” I muttered, rummaging in my bag for the peppermint oil I always carried. “You are freaking moody today. Come here.”

A guy joined us, looking anything but confident. Shoving a box of Advil at King, he said, “Sorry, King, I couldn—”

King cut him off with a snarl. “I don’t want your fucking excuses, Mace.”

Good Lord, I didn’t like this side of King.

Mace glanced between King and me. “What job do you want me to do?”

“Lily needs help finding her way outside.”

I shook my head. “Not yet.” I held up the bottle of peppermint oil. “First, I’m going to fix that headache of yours.”

King looked at me like I’d lost my mind. “I have pills for that. Mace’ll get you to your car.”

“Those pills will do jack for you, King. Get your ass into a chair and let me work my magic.” Mace’s eyes widened, and King looked like he was about to blow a gasket. Before he could argue with me, I added, “You have nothing to lose by letting me do this, and I can guarantee you’ll be thanking me later.”

Mace backed away slowly. “I’ll come back when you guys have finished.”

King’s eyes never left me as he said, “Don’t go too far. This won’t take long.”

Mace nodded and took off. I didn’t blame him. King did not appear to be impressed with anything at the moment, especially not with me. I should have just left his cranky ass to rely on Advil, but I knew that wouldn’t work as well as what I could do for him, so I persevered and kept reminding myself that I too could be a moody bitch when a headache was ripping my head apart.

I peeked into the room he'd exited and found it was an office. Nodding towards it, I said, "Sit," making sure to use the bossy tone I usually reserved for my kids.

His brows lifted, but he didn't argue this time. A couple of moments later, I stood behind him and massaged some oil into his forehead, temples and then the back of his neck. As soon as my fingers touched him, I knew this was one of my worst ideas ever. And I had a lot of freaking bad ideas. But this one took the cake. Touching him and being this close to him caused my belly to flutter all over the damn place. I couldn't remember the last time a man made me feel this way. Shit, it had to be because I hadn't had sex in six months. That long without it would probably make my belly flutter over any man.

Liar.

Shut up.

He's hot.

Ah no, he's moody as fuck.

Yeah, but he's still hot. You would fuck him in a heartbeat.

My fingers froze in the middle of massaging the oil into his neck.

I totally would fuck him.

Shit, shit, shit.

King stretched his neck from side to side. "You finished?"

"No," I blurted, taking hold of his neck to stop his movement. "Sit still."

He pulled away from me and stood. "We're done," he said, his tone signalling that this wasn't up for discussion. He didn't know me, though. Everything was always up for discussion. Especially when I knew I was right.

Straightening my shoulders, I said, "We are not done, King. Your neck and shoulders are so hard and tight. I've got something to rub into them that will help with that."

He glanced down at my bag sitting on his table. "How much shit do you carry in your bag?"

"Clearly lots of shit that you need." I couldn't work out why he was being so bloody difficult about this. "Look, I'm just trying to help you because you seem to be in a lot of pain. Are you always this obstinate when someone tries to help you?"

Scrubbing his face, he muttered, "Fine," before sitting back down.

Finally.

Getting him to do what I wanted was almost as frustrating as getting Zara to do something.

I grabbed my hot pepper muscle stick out of my bag and unscrewed the lid. I then placed my hand on his shoulders and gently massaged him through his shirt, feeling for knots. He needed more than this muscle stick.

"You need a massage," I said, figuring I was wasting my breath.

"I don't have time for a massage."

"Yeah, I figured you'd say that, but you should make the time. You'd be a new man after a few massages."

"Fuck, Lily, can you just get this shit rubbed on so I can get back to work?"

I could have seriously throttled him and his moodiness. Instead, I decided to get this done and get the heck out of there. Tapping his back, I said, "Take your shirt off."

He took a few moments, but he did what I said, pulling his black T-shirt over his head and dumping it on the desk. I wasn't prepared for what I saw next. A huge tattoo covered his back, the same image of a skull and wings that I'd seen on this building. It wasn't the tattoo that caused me to falter, though. The scars on one side of his back caused that. Some were hidden under the tattoo, but there were many that weren't. It looked like someone had taken a knife to that part of his back and tried to slash it to pieces.

What had King lived through to end up with so many scars on his body? My heart hurt just to think about it.

Pulling myself together, I ran the stick over his shoulders and upper back. The heat from it would help relax his muscles. I would have preferred to place a warm towel over his back after applying it, but I figured I had zero possibility of getting him to agree to that. So instead, I used my hands and massaged the balm into his skin, trying to get extra heat in that way.

As I worked my way up his neck, he dropped his head forward and groaned.

Holy shit.

That sound coming from King did things to me.

Really freaking good things.

If he didn't really need this, I would pack up and leave right now.

I did not need him to be doing those really freaking good things to me.

But *he* needed this, so I stayed.

He ended up allowing me to massage him for a good ten minutes before growling, "That's enough," and abruptly standing. Grabbing his shirt, he threw it back on before facing me. "Pack up your stuff and I'll walk you out."

I frowned, unsure why he was being so brusque with me. This was different to the crankiness of earlier. It was like he couldn't get me out of here fast enough. "Did I do something wrong? I thought the massage was good."

His features hardened. "I've got shit to do."

I stared at him, incredulous at the way he was treating me. "Fine," I muttered, throwing my stuff into my bag and slinging it over my shoulder. "Let's go."

He led me through the clubhouse, out to where I'd parked my car. We didn't say a word to each other, and he grunted at anyone in his way to move. This was the asshole King that my boss had warned me about that first day in the hospital. I'd never met a man like him, and I really didn't like him when he acted this way.

He pushed through the front door of the clubhouse and held it open for me to exit. Our eyes met for a moment as I passed by, but still, no words were exchanged. It wasn't until I was halfway to my car that he finally said something. "Thanks for what you said to Skylar today."

I slowed.

And turned.

The tone of his voice had softened, as had the hard lines on his face.

My brows pulled together as I asked, "You spoke with her after I finished?" That made no sense, though, because he'd been in the office at that time.

He shook his head. "No."

I walked back to where he stood. "I'm confused, King. How do you know what I said to her?"

His eyes bored into mine. "I stopped by to see you during her session."

"But you didn't come in."

"You were laying down the law with her, and she needed to hear that, so I didn't interrupt. Fuck knows she doesn't listen to me when I tell her the same shit."

"I'm hopeful she listened to me."

"She did."

I smiled. "Good. I'm glad." I took a step back. "I'll be over again tomorrow afternoon to see her."

He nodded, but didn't say anything further.

As I drove down the driveway to the gate, I peered in my rear-view mirror and found him watching me. God, he was a complex man. One minute, so rude and gruff, the next, not as hard and much more likable. I had to wonder how the people in his life put up with him. I wasn't sure I could ever put up with a man like him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

King

I rubbed the back of my neck as I listened to the shit pouring out of Bronze's mouth. None of it was anything I wanted to hear.

I cut him off. "It's fucking bullshit, Bronze. I want Nitro out of there, and I want you to find out what the fuck is going on with that now that Marx is dead."

"I'm telling you, King, they're not releasing him anytime soon. Ryland is gunning for you harder now than he ever was. He's convinced you're behind Marx's death. And as for you getting in to see Nitro, forget it. They're not letting anyone in to see him."

Fuck.

Everything had turned to shit yesterday morning after Marx had been found dead in his cell. My visit with Nitro had been cancelled, as had Tatum's for later in the week. The lawyer hadn't been able to find out much, and then Billy had stuck his fucking nose in after Tatum involved him. I needed Nitro out of there fast.

"Why am I paying you, Bronze? If you can't fucking do what I need done, I'm just sinking cash into a black fucking hole of no return. Get this shit sorted."

I ended the call and slammed my phone down onto the desk. This day was going from bad to worse. After a failed lead on Romano's whereabouts this morning and then one of my men being

beaten up in his home, I could have done with some good news for once. The headache Lily managed to ease last night had come back full force.

"King, are you okay?"

I lifted my head to find Ivy standing in the office doorway, watching me with concern. Since her attitude towards me had thawed three days ago, she and I had engaged in a few conversations. I'd done my best to stay clear of her, but we ran into each other randomly, and she seemed to want to talk.

"Yeah. You?"

Her mouth pulled into a frown and she stepped into the office. "You don't look okay."

I scrubbed a hand over my face and blew out a long breath. Frustration over the whole fucking situation of her husband coming after my club caused me to lash out. "Yeah well, that's because your husband is fucking with me. It'd make my life a whole lot fucking easier if you'd give me some helpful information about where the hell he is."

The ice I'd managed to thaw days ago returned to her gaze. "I've told you everything I think would be helpful. Maybe you should just let me leave here and go find him for you."

"You're not leaving here until I know you're safe, so don't bring that up again," I snapped, still unable to control my frustration.

"You make no sense half the time! Snapping and snarling all over the place, contradicting yourself. But then, that was always the case between us, so I shouldn't expect any different."

She thought *I* made no sense? If only she could have seen shit from my perspective, she would have understood the whiplash I'd felt over *her* actions. Fuck, it just reinforced that I'd made the right choice years ago. I decided to shift the conversation because we weren't going to agree on this. "Are you feeling okay?" I'd checked in with Winter each day who kept an eye on her for me, so I knew she'd been recovering well.

The ice in her eyes frosted some more. "Did you seriously just ask me that?"

Jesus, we were going from bad to fucked-right-up. "Fuck, Ivy, did I seriously ask you what?"

"Were you implying that I wasn't feeling well and that's why I said you make no sense? Because I *am* feeling okay and that *wasn't*

—

"When I ask you something, I'm not fucking hinting at something else." I grabbed my phone and moved towards the door, crowding her. "We're done here."

She glared up at me. "Yeah, we are."

I watched her as she walked away from me, wondering how the hell to best deal with this situation between us. The past was best kept there, and I would do that, but in the meantime, we had to co-exist under the same roof without these misunderstandings. But fuck, even when we were getting on, disagreeing with each other was our go-to move.

I exited the office as I continued to contemplate a solution; however, Axe met me on the way to the room we'd set up for surveillance, and interrupted all thoughts I had.

"I finally heard from my guy. Marx retracted everything before he died. They've got nothing on Nitro or the club as far as he's concerned."

"So they have no reason to continue holding him?"

"Not unless they have something else on him." He paused for a beat. "There's more, though, that isn't good. They're investigating Bronze for ties to the club. That's why he hasn't been able to access any information."

Fuck.

"Have they got anything solid on him?"

"It appears so, but that's not based on fact. It's just the feel my guy got when he talked to his contact. I've asked him to keep searching."

I stabbed at my phone, dialling Bronze. When he picked up, I cut straight to the point. "Sara sends her regards." *Our code to let him know he was compromised.*

"Fuck," he muttered. "Twenty minutes."

I ended the call and glanced at Axe. "I've gotta take care of this. I'll be back in an hour or so. Let Hyde know."

"Will do," he said as I left him to return to my office.

Moving fast, I opened the safe and grabbed out the package I'd hoped never to need. I placed my phone in the safe and grabbed out my burner that wouldn't signal my location to anyone. I then quickly made my way out to my bike and headed to the meeting point Bronze and I had designated years ago. It pissed me off that I had to

let him go. But there was no way I'd leave him out in the cold with his dick swinging in the wind. Not after everything he'd done for me.



I'd started working with Bronze seven years ago after his wife, Sara, had been killed in a hit-and-run accident. I liked to deliver justice to those who killed that way, and I had, but not before I'd used what I'd learnt about the driver for my benefit. I'd known Bronze for about two years when his wife died. He'd investigated the club a few times and for some reason that was still unknown to me, he'd gone easy on me each time. So when I went looking for a cop to add to my payroll, Bronze had been my first choice. His wife's death made it possible for me to convince him to say yes. I'd offered up the name of the killer and my assistance when he took vengeance, in exchange for his agreement to work with me.

"What the fuck's going on, King?" he asked as he slid into the booth at the back of the noisy, out-of-the-way café where we'd started our working relationship all those years ago.

"You're being investigated for ties to the club. I don't have hard facts yet, but I don't doubt it's true. It also accounts for why you can't get any information at the moment."

He dropped his head into his hand and swore before looking up at me again. "So this is it then?"

I nodded. "Yeah." Sliding the package I'd brought with me across the table, I said, "Here's the agreed cash, burner, ID and list of contacts you can use to disappear."

"I have to see Hailee—"

"No," I said forcefully. "You need to walk out of here, get on a fucking train and get the fuck out of Sydney. And you need to never come back. They'll fucking crucify you if they can prove the shit we've done over the years."

"How the fuck can they prove any of that shit? Have any of your guys talked?"

I clenched my jaw, hating every fucking minute of this. "We have a rat, but I don't know who yet. We're working on that."

"So you find him and you take care of him."

“Fuck, Bronze, you of all people know it’s not that fucking easy. Sure, I can take care of him, but the damage has been done. You’re a target, and they won’t stop coming for you just because their source is dead. They’ll find someone else. They’ll investigate the hell out of you until they can pin something on you.” I leant forward. “You need to leave now, and you need to leave fast.”

His face morphed into a canvas of anger and bitterness. “I should never have—”

I stood, done with this conversation. “There’s no fucking point looking back. That shit can’t ever be changed. I’ll make sure Devil takes care of Hailee. And I’ll take care of Matty.”

I walked out of that café with a new, fiercer determination to find the motherfuckers who were intent on bringing down my club. And whoever was behind Bronze being targeted would die at my own hands. Slowly and fucking painfully.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

King

“We’ve found the guy who beat Mace up,” Hyde said after I arrived back at the clubhouse and filled him in on Bronze. It was the best fucking thing I’d heard all day.

“Let’s go then.”

“Who do you wanna take?”

“Just you and me.” I had enough fury burning through me to take on ten of these cunts. Hyde and I could manage one on our own.

He swiped his phone off the desk and stood. Stretching his neck from side to side, he said, “I’m gonna fucking enjoy this.”

Adrenaline surged in my veins. “You and me both, brother.”

Forty minutes later, I kicked down the back door of the house where our target supposedly lived. Storming into the place, I followed the sound of a man’s voice in one of the bedrooms. Hyde followed me, his violent mood matching mine.

We found the motherfucker sitting on his bed, talking on the phone with his back to the door. Our approach was quiet enough that he didn’t hear us coming. The fucker was talking loud enough to not hear much else regardless of how noisy we were.

I moved close to the guy, hooked my arm around his neck and squeezed the fuck out of him while Hyde ripped his phone away

and crushed it beneath his boot.

The guy tried to fight me off, clawing at my arms and taking swings at me, but I was so fucking jacked up and ready for this, that nothing would stop me. Stepping back, I dragged him off the bed and then twisted him to face me so I could slam him up against the wall. My fists took over at that point, and I channelled every ounce of fury coursing through me into punch after punch. By the time he slumped to the floor, blood splatter covered me and a good patch of the wall behind him.

Hyde rummaged through the guy's belongings while I stood staring down at the asshole. He glanced across at me and said, "You gonna take it easy for a moment? We still need to talk to him."

Crouching, I ignored Hyde and lifted the asshole's chin. "Alan, open your fucking eyes."

He leant to the side and spat some blood from his mouth before cracking one eye open. "Go fuck yourself."

My fury roared to life again, and I grabbed his shirt with both hands, dragged him up and shoved him across the room into another wall. "Who the fuck sent you to beat one of my guys up?" I demanded as I stalked to where he lay sprawled on the carpet.

Groaning as he tried to sit, he muttered, "He was yours? Fucking deserved it."

Before I had a chance to react, Hyde stormed across the room and kicked him in the stomach. "Yeah, motherfucker, he was ours." He bent and reefed the guy up to a sitting position. "Now, who the fuck are you working for?"

Alan tried to smile, but his face was so battered he hardly managed it. But I heard it in his voice when he said, "You can fucking kill me if you want, I'll never tell you."

"Careful what you wish for," Hyde snarled.

"Sit him against the wall," I said as I reached into my back pocket for the pliers I'd brought with me. It was either them or the knife, and today I was in the mood for a little teeth pulling.

Alan did his best not to show fear as I crouched in front of him again, but it flickered in his eyes. I held up the pliers. "How much do you like your teeth, Alan?"

"Fuck you," he said, before spitting in my face.

I saw red.

It fucking blinded me.

My taste for blood roared stronger than it had in a long time.

Hyde gripped Alan's jaw and held his mouth open, while I took hold of his front tooth with the pliers. "You want to keep this tooth, start fucking talking."

His face flashed with horror. "Fuck, man! I don't know who it was! I swear."

I didn't hesitate—I ripped his tooth out, the crunch of it satisfying as fuck, while he writhed on the floor, trying to escape Hyde's hold.

"Oh fuck, fuck, man... fucking hell!" Alan chanted his words as if they would make everything better. Nothing would make it better for him now, because even when he gave me what I wanted, I had no intention of leaving this house until he had suffered for what he'd done.

Grasping another tooth with the pliers, I demanded, "You like this tooth, motherfucker?"

He tried to fight Hyde and turn his head away, but failed. He was a mess of blood and fear, and I figured I almost had him where I needed him.

Turned out I was a lot closer to that than I realised. He mumbled something I could barely make out, so I let go of his tooth and said, "What?"

His chest heaved with what appeared to be relief when Hyde also let him go. "It was Tony Romano. He paid me."

I dumped the pliers on the floor so I could pull him up. Sitting him in the armchair next to the bed, I barked, "Now is the time to keep talking. Otherwise, I swear to fucking God, I'll yank every last fucking tooth from that mouth of yours."

He only hesitated for a moment before spewing the information out. He couldn't get it out fast enough. Romano's men had hired him and one of his mates to take out as many of our club members as they could in the next week. His goal at Mace's this morning had been to kill him, but Mace's neighbour had interrupted him before he could finish the job. Unfortunately they had no way of contacting Romano's men to set up a meet that we could intercept. The deal had been for them to wait to be contacted again. We discovered too late that their houses had been bugged so Romano's men could keep watch of them. That meant they now knew we'd found these guys. They were useless to us.

Hyde's face turned thunderous as he shoved a pen and piece of paper at Alan. "Write your friend's name and address down. And make sure it's the right fucking address."

Alan scribbled the information as Hyde pulled rope from the bag he'd brought with him. We tied the asshole up, ensuring there was no way in hell he'd be able to escape. Grabbing the paper with the address on it, I looked down at Alan and said, "Sit tight. We'll be back once we've paid your friend a visit." I failed to mention the fact that neither of them would live to see another day. That information would be my gift to him when I returned.



"King, you crazy motherfucker! It seems you've finally gone and pissed someone off enough for them to come at you," Nash Walker said later that afternoon when he and some of the Brisbane chapter arrived.

I threw some of the whisky sitting in front of me down my throat. Hyde and I had spent the last hour in here drinking after taking care of the two assholes sent by Romano. The buzz filling my veins was exactly what I fucking needed.

Scott Cole joined us, and I motioned for Kree to pour a round of drinks for everyone. "Heard you and Hyde got your hands a little dirty this afternoon," he said.

I drained my glass. "Not fucking dirty enough as far as I'm concerned."

The bar filled up as Griff, J, and Havoc eventually found their way inside, and my men returned from a long day out dealing with club business.

It had been eight days since Jen and her baby had been murdered. Between keeping the club running, ensuring the safety of our families, and chasing our fucking tails trying to find Romano, we'd hardly drawn breath. All of us were wound so fucking tight that we were close to breaking point. Cole and his boys arriving gave us a breather from the stress.

As the sounds of laughter and loud, alcohol-fuelled discussions filled the bar, Axe motioned for me to follow him and Zane outside.

The rain that had fallen all day had subsided, but thunder continued to roll through the sky, with the occasional flash of lightning.

"I just heard back from my guy, and he was right that the cops have stuff on Bronze. They've been watching him for a few months and also have a source who's been feeding them information. You think he'd turn on you for them?" Axe said.

I shook my head. "No. He's gone."

"Gone?"

"We'd always agreed that if shit came to this, I'd set him up with cash, a new identity, and a network to help him disappear. I did that today. He's long gone."

"And his family?" Zane asked.

Neither of them knew Bronze's story, so I filled them in on how we came to work together before adding, "Devil is with Bronze's sister, and I've let him know what's happened. He'll make sure she and her family are taken care of. Bronze knows that."

"I hope you're right about him," Axe said. "He could cause you a lot of problems if you're not."

"Yeah, he could. But he won't." Bronze and I may have had a lot of fucking disagreements over the last seven years and gone head-to-head often, and he may have been on the other side of the law to me, but we were connected in ways no one knew about and would never know about. That was as per Bronze's wish. Those ways hadn't been planned, and I'd never done the things I'd done for him as a strategic move to keep him in my pocket, but I knew deep in my bones that because of what I'd done, Bronze would never turn on me or the club.

I watched as a car drove up the driveway towards us. Narrowing my eyes, I tried to figure out who it belonged to. It was almost 6:00 p.m. and I wasn't expecting anyone.

Lily.

Skylar was expecting her.

My belly tightened.

Fuck, the physiotherapist with a body made for fucking. Every time I saw her, I noticed something new about her. Yesterday it had been the way her neck flushed when she was cranky and bossy. And fuck had she ordered me around. Anyone else who tried to pull that shit on me wouldn't make it through the front door of this clubhouse again, but there were two things about this woman that altered that

consequence. One, Skylar needed her, so I chose to put up with her attitude. And two, there was something about Lily's smart mouth that turned me the fuck on. However, as much as I may have wanted to fuck her senseless, I wouldn't risk putting Skylar's rehab at risk. Women did some crazy fucking shit after I screwed them. I wasn't interested in anything but sex, and I could get that anywhere, so I'd keep my dick in my pants where Lily was concerned.

But that was easier said than done when she was standing in front of me. And when she'd massaged me yesterday, I'd gone to fucking war with myself over wanting her. I'd given her ten minutes to rub that shit into my skin. It was nine minutes more than I could handle. As I'd walked her out, I'd decided to find some pussy to work that need out of my system. But club business had gotten in the way, and I never got around to that. So here I was, a good two weeks since I'd been laid, thinking about all the ways I'd make a woman I'd never fuck, come.

"Fuck," I muttered, "I've got shit to do."

Ignoring Axe's and Zane's confused expressions, I turned and headed back inside, not stopping until I made it to my office. Sitting at my desk, I pulled out the bottle of whisky I kept in my drawer and took a long swig as I thought about going in search of a club whore. While neither of the ones here today were my preference, that didn't matter. Both were good with my needs and more than willing to let me fuck them how I wanted.

I shoved the whisky bottle back in the drawer and stood to leave when the half-opened office door creaked open some more. "King? Are you in here?" The door opened all the way and Lily smiled up at me. "Sorry to barge in, but I have some information to give you. I saw you outside so wanted to catch you now in case you leave while I'm with Skylar."

I stared down at her, taking in the tight jeans she seemed to like to wear. Her long dark hair was long enough to cover her tits, but today they were on full display because she'd swept her hair up into a ponytail. Fuck, my dick jerked to life as I thought about running my tongue down between her breasts while I wrapped my hands around her throat.

"King?"

"Yeah." I dragged my eyes up to her face and found her watching me intently, her face flushed. "What information?"

She thrust some papers at me. "Just some recommendations for furniture and other things that would help Skylar's recovery. Mostly, she needs a different chair to sit in. The one she has is too low. And she also needs a stool to keep her feet up."

I took a step back to rest against the desk and look over the information. She'd detailed the items and listed places where I could get them. Glancing at her, I said, "Thanks for this. I appreciate it."

She smiled again. "If you need help with any of it, just call me." Moving next to me, she reached for one of the pieces of paper. Pointing at it, she said, "And this guy? I know him well, so if you mention my name, he might give you a discount." Handing the paper back to me, she frowned. "Are you okay?"

Jesus, she was closer than I'd prefer, but I didn't shift away from her. Not when she smelt so fucking good. "Yeah. Why?"

"You're grimacing. Have you got another headache?"

I was grimacing due to her proximity, not another headache, but before I could answer her question, she dumped her bag on the desk and madly searched in it for something. Pulling out her bottle of peppermint oil, she said, "Here, let me rub some more into your temples."

Grabbing her wrist to slow her, I shook my head. "I don't have a headache."

She stopped and looked down at my hand around her wrist, before looking back up at me. "Oh, okay. That's good." Her words were a little breathless, which only fucked with my dick some more.

We watched each other in silence for a few moments, until her phone rang. Digging it out of her bag, she pursed her lips together and said, "Sorry, I have to get this. It's Linc."

I nodded, expecting her to take it outside of the office, but instead, she put the phone to her ear and said, "What's up, Linc?"

As she listened, her face twisted with what I assumed to be frustration. Holding her free hand up in the air, she said, "Hold up a minute. You agreed to help the kids with their homework and assignments, so why are you guys at the movies?"

Linc said something, to which she replied, "This is bullshit. And it means that I'm going to be up late with Zara tomorrow night helping her, because her assignment is due on Friday. If I'd known you had no intention of working on that tonight, I wouldn't have let

them sleep over. I could have split the assignment time over two nights that way."

I watched with amusement as Lily waved her hands all over the place throughout the rest of the conversation. She was pointing and jabbing her fingers as if he were standing in front of her. When the call ended, she looked at me with wide eyes and said, "Oh my God, I could kill that man! Do you know what he's done now?"

I tried not to laugh. "What?" I asked as I crossed my arms over my chest and settled in to hear what she had to say.

Dropping her phone back into her bag, she said, "He's arranged tickets for them all to go to some motor racing thing on Saturday night. It starts in the afternoon, and he wants them from lunchtime."

"Is this a bad thing?"

Her eyes widened some more. "Yes! Well, I mean, it's awesome he wants to spend time with them. I'm all on board with that. But, Robbie has karate on Saturday. He'll have to miss it now, and *that* is bad. Linc shouldn't have organised stuff without asking me first."

"Why is it bad for Robbie to miss karate?"

She exhaled loudly as if I'd asked the dumbest question. Or maybe it was just complete frustration; I couldn't be sure because I didn't know her tells. "My son's coordination isn't the best, and he doesn't really love sport. However, he likes karate, and it's been so good for him. Plus, he's come out of his shell there and made friends, which is something he struggles with at school. He'll be disappointed to miss karate, but I know he won't say anything to his father because he doesn't like to rock the boat where Linc is concerned. On top of that, his instructor told me they'll be going over some important stuff this week, and I don't want Robbie to miss out on it."

"Can you take Robbie to karate and then drop him off to Linc afterwards?"

She pulled a face. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because my car isn't working at the moment, so I can't get him there."

"But you can get him to karate?" She wasn't making a lot of sense.

"Well, I can get him to karate in my sister's car, but she needs her car straight after that so I wouldn't be able to then get him to Linc."

"Is that your sister's car you're driving today?"

"Yeah."

"What's wrong with yours?"

"It needs new brakes. My mechanic can't fix them until next Monday, and I don't know of any other good mechanics."

I mentally ran through everything I had on tomorrow and worked out I could spare one of the boys for a while. "I'll send someone over to your place tomorrow to fix them. Just leave your keys somewhere outside and text me where they are."

Staring at me like I'd just offered her the world, she said, "Oh wow... are you sure?" I didn't miss the way her body visibly relaxed, some of the tension she'd been carrying now gone.

I uncrossed my arms and stood. Moving around the desk, I said, "Yes." Grabbing the bottle of whisky from the drawer, and two glasses from the cabinet behind me, I poured two drinks. Passing her one, I said, "Here, you look like you could do with this."

I'd half expected her to argue with me, but she didn't. Instead, she took the glass and downed half of it in one go. Wiping her mouth, she nodded. "I most definitely did need that." She then threw the rest back before placing the empty glass on the table. Meeting my gaze, she said, "If I didn't have to drive home, I'd beg you for more."

The thought of Lily begging me for shit wasn't a thought I needed in my head, so I changed the subject. "Did you pull your ex's name off your gym membership?"

A smile spread across her face. "I did. He mustn't have been to the gym since I did it, though, because he hasn't called me about that yet." She paused for a moment before adding softly, "Thank you for that tip. I need to stop letting him walk all over me with some stuff."

I drank some of my whisky. "Yeah, you do."

She picked up her bag. "Thanks for the drink and everything. Are you sure you don't need some more peppermint oil before I go see Skylar?"

The last thing I needed was her hands on me. "I'm good." Jerking my head towards the door, I said, "Go."

Blasting me with one last smile, she nodded. "I'll text you about my keys tomorrow."

I scrubbed a hand over my face after she left. Christ, I really fucking needed to get laid now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Lily

“Cheers!” Adelaide grinned at me as she raised her glass. “And now it’s time for us to find you a man who will fuck that celibacy out of you.”

I returned her grin and nodded. “Hell yes!”

After dropping Robbie to Linc after his karate class, I’d called my bestie and begged her to take me out for the night. It was the perfect opportunity; it wasn’t often I had a Saturday night to myself. Addy had rounded up the girls and we’d arrived at the club just over an hour ago. I had enough alcohol in me that all my problems didn’t seem like problems anymore. Fuck, even Linc could call me and say pretty much anything without pissing me off.

After I’d taken a long gulp of my cocktail, I eyed Quinn who sat next to me. “Are you still seeing that butcher? The one from the butcher shop with all the hot dudes.” It was my favourite butcher to buy meat from. I swore they had a policy of only hiring sexy men with beards.

Mmm, beards... King had a beard.

Shit, where did that thought come from?

Stop kidding yourself. You’ve been thinking about that man for days.

Quinn waggled her brows. “Yes, and he’s fucking good in bed. Let the record show how much I love you, babe. I had plans with

him for hot sex tonight, but I cancelled that for you."

"Aww, you loves me, Quinny," I gushed as I leant my head on her shoulder for a moment.

Our other friend Georgia laughed from across the table. "I love it when Lily gets drunk. She gets that smooshy, lovey vibe going."

"Yes!" agreed Addy. "I love watching her hit on guys when she's all smooshy. They bloody fall at her feet."

"Girl, they do that even when she's not drunk," Quinn said.

Adelaide laughed. "She's been celibate for so long I'd forgotten that."

"I'm right here and can hear everything you're saying," I said.

Quinn smiled at me. "And you're all smooshy, so you don't really care what we're saying."

"True," I said and then drank some more of my cocktail, smiling like a loon.

My phone buzzed with a text.

"Oh for fuck's sake, that better not be Linc," Adelaide muttered.

"I'm ignoring it if it is," I said, checking the text.

King: Your brakes still good?

My tummy did somersaults. We'd been exchanging texts since he had one of his guys fix my brakes. Mostly he checked in on my car, and I checked in on Skylar. So nothing fun, but I couldn't deny I got a thrill every time I saw his name pop up on my phone.

Me: I guess so.

King: You guess so?

Me: Well I'm not out driving around at the moment. I'm getting trashed and looking for a man.

He didn't come back with a reply, which disappointed me.

"Who was it?" Adelaide asked as I stared at the phone, willing him to send another text.

"King."

"Who's King?" Quinn asked.

"The sexy biker dude who fixed her brakes," Adelaide said.

I looked up from my phone. "We met when his sister was in an accident. I worked with her after her op."

My phone buzzed again.

King: Watch out for the assholes.

Me: May have had too many drinks to spot them.

Me: But I'm not looking for a husband here.

Me: Just need someone who knows what he's doing for a night.

Again, no reply.

"Ooh, Lily, what about this dude coming our way?" Quinn practically bounced in her seat as she smiled at the guy and motioned for him to join us.

He was definitely good-looking. I could tell that much through my alcohol haze. And tall, which was always important as far as I was concerned.

"Hello, ladies," he said, settling himself between Quinn and me. Nice strong voice, which was another tick.

"Umm, girls," Adelaide said as she slid off her seat. "I need the ladies. Who's with me?"

Quinn and Georgia quickly slid off their seats, too. "Be back soon, Lil."

The hot dude watched them leave before turning back to me with a smile. "I take it they didn't really need to go to the ladies."

"Correct. They're keen for me to get laid tonight, and it looks like you might be just the guy to take care of that for me." I threw the rest of my cocktail down my throat.

His smile grew. "I like your style." He nodded at my empty glass. "What are you drinking?"

"A Margarita please."

"Don't go anywhere, gorgeous. I'll be right back."

I tracked his ass as he walked to the bar. *Nice, but not as nice as King's.*

I got lost in thoughts of King's ass when my phone buzzed again.

King: Don't accept drinks off anyone.

Me: Oooh Mr Bossypants is in the house.

King: I'm serious. Fuck knows what shit they'll drop in there.

Shit, he was right. And I'd just let a guy buy me a drink. I glanced across at the bar to see if he'd been served yet. Squinting, I located him still waiting for the bartender. My gaze dropped to take in his hand on the ass of the woman standing next to him. She giggled at something he said and then leant in close to whisper in his ear.

I sighed. I'd met my first asshole for the night.

Well, he could buy me a drink, but I would not be drinking it, and I sure as heck wouldn't be sleeping with him tonight.

I went back to texting King.

Me: So I just met my first asshole. Ugh. Tell me how Skylar is and take my mind off the fact I may not be getting any sex tonight.

King: She's having a rough night. Anxiety high today.

Me: You think I should call her? Would that help?

King: No. Go get drunk.

Me: OK, but let me know if you need me.

A few minutes later, the guy with the drinks came back to the table, smiling at me like I was a sure thing. Sliding my drink in front of me, he said, "So I didn't catch your name before."

"Dude, I saw you chatting with the blonde in line while you got the drinks. I'm thinking you should go back to her because I'm not interested anymore."

He glanced back at the bar and then at me again. Plastering a confused expression on his face, he attempted to spin the truth. "Oh

her, she was all over me. I couldn't get rid of her."

God, did men really think women were stupid?

"So grabbing a woman's ass is how you try to get rid of them?"

He scowled. "Fuck, lady, are you always this bitchy?"

My phone rang, King's name flashing across the screen.

I answered it as I said to the dude, "I'm only this bitchy when a man tries to fuck with me. So take the drink and do your best to find some other woman to fuck with."

With one last scowl, he picked up the drink and left me.

King's voice rumbled through the phone. "That the asshole?"

I sighed again. "Yes. You know, I'm not convinced I'm cut out for this finding-a-man bullshit. I don't do well with getting all pretty and flirting in the hopes a guy will like me. I'd much rather rock up wearing my sweats and find someone who can appreciate my personality. That would be a whole lot freaking easier, and I wouldn't have to wade through all the assholes who just like my tits." I wasn't sure if it was the alcohol in me or the fact I liked talking to King that made me vomit all those words, but either way, I was helpless to stop them.

He was silent for a beat, and then surprised me when she said, "Not all men are assholes, Lily. Keep looking. They'd be fucking idiots to only want you for your tits."

My tummy did somersaults. "You know, King, you can say some really nice shit sometimes."

"Yeah, well maybe you could tell Skylar that." Weariness crept into his tone when he mentioned Skylar's name.

"What's going on? I told you I'd come over if she needs me."

Silence again. And then—"She needs you."

He may have said that Skylar needed me, but by his tone, I had to wonder if he did, too. Or maybe that was just me being drunk.

I slid off my chair. "I'm on my way."

"I'll send someone to get you."

"No, I'll just catch an Uber."

"Lily," he started, but I cut him off.

"King, no. I'm getting an Uber. It'll be faster than me waiting for your guy."

"Be careful," he muttered before hanging up.

I wasn't sure what he meant by that, but I didn't waste time trying to figure it out. I went in search of my friends and let them know

where I was going, and less than ten minutes later, I was on my way to see King. Actually, I was on my way to see Skylar. But the fact I'd also get to see King caused my core to clench. I'd had just enough drinks tonight that it was anyone's guess what I might say to him. Or what I might beg of him.



Skylar was in bad shape when I arrived. Anxious, in pain, and in a foul mood with her brother, she had me a little concerned as to how I was going to calm her down. King stood in the doorway of her room watching us for a while, until Skylar told him to leave us alone. After that, it didn't take me half as long as I thought it might to soothe her worries and lull her to sleep. She didn't like taking drugs to help her anxiety, but tonight she agreed to a sleeping pill. I figured if she could just get some sleep, she may wake refreshed enough to deal with things better.

It was after midnight when I left Skylar's room and went looking for King. I wasn't quite as drunk as I had been when I arrived, but I was still relaxed and feeling quite floaty—the complete opposite of King's tense state.

I found him sitting at the desk in his office. The room was dark except for the glow of light from the lamp in the corner of the room. King sat in the office chair, a half-empty glass of whisky in his hands, and all the troubles in the world on his shoulders.

Why did I always want to fix men? Well, not so much fix them, but help them when they were down. I'd had this nurturing streak for as long as I could remember. Even back in high school when I met Linc, I wanted to help him. My instinct to nurture was the reason why I still let him get away with a lot of stuff. He'd been struggling for the last year after losing his job and trying to find regular work, and on top of that, his father was really ill, so I cut him some slack. He may have cheated on me and hurt me, but I wasn't the kind of person to play tit for tat.

Looking at King sitting in the dark, his body rigid and his expression grim, I felt that burning need to nurture. It made no sense to me since I hardly knew him. And while King didn't strike me as the kind of man who people took care of—I imagined he was the one

who always did the taking care of—I wanted to offer him something. Even just a conversation.

He met my gaze, his face not softening even a little. “What?” It was almost a bark. A demand. I wouldn’t have stood for it with many people, but I made allowances for King. He’d shown me enough good sides of himself that I’d tolerate his bark.

Entering his office, I walked to the desk and wiggled my ass onto it so I sat next to him. King didn’t argue; he sat quietly watching me. But he didn’t look happy.

“You should pour me a drink,” I said.

He slowly lifted his glass to his mouth and emptied it. “You don’t need another drink.”

I raised my brows. “How do you know what I need?”

He placed his glass on the desk. “I don’t, but I know it’s not that.”

I eyed the bottle of whisky sitting on the desk, on the other side of him. Deciding he wasn’t going to give me what I wanted, I leant across him to grab the bottle.

He hissed and muttered, “Fuck,” which I ignored as I unscrewed the lid and poured some whisky into his glass.

Focusing my gaze back on him, I drank some of the whisky before saying, “Skylar took a pill. She should sleep all night.”

“Good.”

I drank some more of my drink. “You’re a man of few words, King. Normally I like that about people, but I kinda wish you’d say more.”

His jaw clenched as he watched me intently. King had a way of making me feel like he was undressing me with his eyes, even when his gaze never left mine. Maybe it was my soul he was undressing, not my body. Whatever it was, it awakened a part of me that had been asleep for far too long.

I didn’t just want his eyes on me; I wanted his hands.

His mouth.

His tongue.

God, I wanted that body of his to take mine in ways it had never been taken.

Just for one night.

Tonight.

He picked up the bottle of whisky and took a swig. "I'll get one of the boys to take you home."

I shook my head. "No, I don't want to go home. I want to stay here with you."

His body stiffened more than it already was. "No." His denial was harsh. And final. But I'd had enough to drink to ignore it.

I placed the glass I was holding down and pressed both hands to the desk either side of me. Putting all my weight on my hands, I lifted my ass so I could slide across the desk, closer to him. The red dress that Adelaide had insisted I wear, barely covered my thighs, and his gaze finally dropped to my legs.

"King," I started, as I tried to swing my leg closest to him around to settle in between his legs.

He stopped me, though. Placing his hand on my thigh, he held my leg down. "I said no." Forceful again. I couldn't work out why he was so against this. What man said no to a woman who was practically throwing herself at him?

I narrowed my eyes at him. And then I asked him the strangest question that I knew the answer to even as it fell out of my mouth. But damn it, the alcohol loosened my tongue, so I had little control over what I said. "Are you gay? Or do I just not do anything for you?"

Before I knew what was happening, he moved to stand in between my legs, wrapped one hand around my throat, and growled, "You don't wanna go there with me, Lily. I am not the kind of man a woman like you fucks."

My heart and soul roared to life as my veins pulsed with desire.

Oh God.

He was exactly the kind of man I needed to fuck me.

I needed wild, uncaged and raw.

I'd had enough humdrum, monotonous sex to last me a lifetime.

I ached for the kind of encounters that left me breathless.

My heart racing.

Alive.

I didn't want to know what was coming next.

I craved thrills and surprises.

To be jolted and rocked and pushed into tasting life like never before.

I wanted a man so hungry for me that he'd lose himself to his animal side.

This man would give me all that. I saw it in his eyes. Heard it in his voice. Recognised it in the way he held himself and moved.

"No, you're not," I agreed, because it was the truth, "But I can't get you out of my mind. Just give me one night. I just need one night where I don't think about all the shit I have to deal with in my life." I curled my hand around his wrist. "And I think you do, too."

He inhaled sharply before exhaling the breath and running his gaze over my body. All the while, he kept his hand around my neck. He didn't speak, but everything about him told me what I needed to know.

King wanted to fuck me.

I'd never had to encourage a man to sleep with me, nor had I ever really been the one to initiate sex. I loved sex, but I wasn't overly adventurous with it or confident when it came to asking for what I wanted. However, I really wanted it tonight, so I tried to force his hand.

I reached for his belt and undid it. I almost had his zip down when he let me go and stepped away from me.

Eyes flashing with fire, he growled, "This isn't fucking happening, Lily. You need to get off that desk and go the fuck home."

"Why?" I demanded as I slid off the desk so I could move close to him again. "I felt you, King. You want this as much as I do."

His control finally snapped, and he backed me up against the desk. Taking hold of my throat again, he said, "You have no fucking idea what I want. If you did, you'd run and never come back." He paused, lowering his gaze to my chest. His eyes lingered there for a long few moments, which only served to make me more needy. I didn't care if he thought I should run from him. I wanted him to devour me. When he met my gaze again, he said, "You need to leave before it's too fucking late for both of us."

I gripped his biceps. "I don't know what you mean, but I don't care. I'm not leaving."

He dropped his head and rasped, "Fuck." It took him a few moments to lift it again, and when he did, I sucked in a breath at the change in his eyes.

I'd never had a man look at me the way King was.

It was indecent.

Dark desire blazed from his eyes.

I had no doubt he wanted to consume me in every way possible.

Spinning me around, he pressed me against the desk. One hand roughly grabbed my waist while the other slid around my neck again. Pulling my head to the side, he growled against my ear, "Do you know what I like to do to women, Lily?" My gasp encouraged him. "I'm rough in every way you can imagine. I'll strip you and fuck you without a fucking care for your comfort. I'll take what I need, over and fucking over, until you're raw from my hands, my mouth, my dick." His voice dropped lower, darker. "And when I'm finished, you won't hurry back for more."

My mind and body burst with anticipation. I wanted every single thing he'd just said to me. He'd already made my heart beat faster than it ever had. Now I wanted him to do filthy things to me.

When my only response was a moan, he reached for the bottom of my dress and roughly yanked it up. While my mind rushed to keep up with his actions, he had his hand in my panties and his fingers inside me.

"Oh God," I whimpered, my legs struggling to hold me up while his fingers worked me towards an orgasm. I was so wet and ready for him that it wouldn't take long.

His mouth remained against my ear. "Do you like pain, Lily?"

My legs swayed. "I don't know."

His thumb roughly circled my clit while he reached deep inside me, blowing my damn mind. "You've never had it while being fucked?"

"No."

"Fuck." That dark tone returned to his voice. It had a deliciously scary feel to it, and I wasn't sure whether to actually be scared or not. He ground himself against me while pushing me harder against the desk. The bite of pain that caused heightened my pleasure, surprising me. "I *will* hurt you if I fuck you. Are you ready for that?"

I could hardly get a handle on my thoughts, let alone utter any words. When I didn't respond to him, he turned me to face him and gripped my cheeks, his wild eyes demanding my attention. "Answer me. Are you ready for me to hurt you?"

Panting, I nodded. *God, I was ready.* "Yes."

His eyes searched mine, looking for what, I wasn't sure. He swore again, growing angry. "You have no fucking idea what you're

asking for.”

I opened my mouth to tell him he was wrong, but he dropped to his knees and grabbed hold of my legs as his tongue found my pussy. I almost died at that point. I was sure of it. King almost killed me with pleasure. He thought I wasn’t the kind of woman who fucked men like him. I’d argue with him over that until I was blue in the face. I was the kind of woman who had never fucked a man like him, but I’d never known what I was missing.

His fingers dug into me as he gripped me harder.

His lips, tongue, and teeth devoured me.

Thoroughly.

He ate me like I was his last meal.

His moves were savage and crude.

The sounds he made were carnal.

And when I came hard, my entire body shuddering with the kind of pleasure I’d only ever dreamt of, he stood and looked at me with ferocious energy. “You’ll never be ready for me.” Shoving my panties at me, he ordered, “Get dressed. I’ll take you home.”

With that, he stalked out of the office, leaving me staring after him in shock.

He was wrong. And if he thought his warnings would make me run a mile, he’d have to think again.

CHAPTER THIRTY

King

I sucked on my smoke, dragging the nicotine deep into my lungs. It hit the spot, but only for a brief moment. I'd hardly slept in the past two weeks, and instead, was fuelled by whisky, cigarettes and an unrelenting need for vengeance. But that shit was starting to take its toll. We needed an end to the madness we were stuck in. Kick and I were about to pay a visit to an old friend who we hoped would share some useful information that wouldn't end in us hitting another fucking dead end.

"You want anyone with you and Kick?" Hyde asked, joining me outside the clubhouse.

Shaking my head, I dropped the cigarette and stubbed it out. "It'll only take two of us. We'll meet you and Cole at the drop-off point after. He organised for the rest to get there first?" We had a shipment coming in today, and we weren't taking any chances with it. Romano had fucked with our business for long enough; he would not be fucking with it any longer. I'd organised for some of my guys to get to the drop off early to ensure there were no surprises from Romano, and had asked Cole to send his men ahead too.

"Yeah, he's taken care of that."

Kick came our way. "We ready?"

I looked at Hyde. "Keep me updated with any news on Nitro."

"Will do," he said, turning at the sound of approaching footsteps.

I glanced around and met Axe's gaze. "You good for today still?" I asked.

"You may change your plans after I tell you Romano has been arrested."

I frowned. "Is this true or some bullshit story again?"

"True. I've just confirmed it. Not sure yet what they've picked him up for, but my guy's looking into it."

"Let me know when you hear back from him." I looked at Hyde. "Check in with our men down in Melbourne. Find out what's happening at Romano's headquarters. Our plans for today don't change, but we need to find out where they're holding Romano and who we can use to get to him."

Axe and Hyde left us, and Kick and I were almost to our bikes when a white Holden station wagon drove towards us. As it drew closer, I realised it was Lily. My gut tightened at the memory of Saturday night when she'd thrown herself at me. *Fuck*. I did not need that in my head when I was about to take care of club business. She was a fucking distraction I couldn't afford. And yet, I'd struggled to remove her from my thoughts since I'd driven her home that night.

The feel of her cunt.

The taste of her.

The sounds she made when she came.

I'd wanted nothing more than to lay her out and fuck her raw.

She'd fought me, and almost fucking shattered my restraint, but I hadn't given her what she'd wanted. Hell, she had no idea that what she thought she wanted wasn't what she'd get from me. We hadn't exchanged words on the drive to her place afterwards, and I hadn't been sure she'd show up for Skylar's session today, but thank fuck she had.

She parked her car and walked to me as Kick continued on to his bike. Today she'd swapped her tight jeans for black tights that were covered with long black boots to her knees. As my gaze got stuck on her legs and those boots, I took in the stiletto heel on them. Jesus, she wore that shit to work?

"King." Her voice cut through my thoughts, and my eyes found hers.

"You're early." Usually she came by after work, not around lunchtime.

She smiled, and it hit me in the gut. Lily's light fucking shone bright. Why the hell did she want to fuck me and allow my darkness to taint her? "I have the day off work and am taking the kids and their grandmother out for dinner, so I wanted to see Skylar now. How was she yesterday?"

"Much better. Did she text you? She mentioned she would."

"Yes, she did, but I'm always interested to hear it from a family member's perspective when I'm working with a patient. Sometimes it's different, you know?"

I heard everything she said, and understood it, but failed to respond, because everything else about her caused my mind to stray to the memories I had of stroking and sucking her pussy. The feel and taste of her was lodged in my brain, and I craved more.

"King, are you listening to me?"

Fuck.

"Yes," I snapped, pissed at myself for wanting her. I didn't fucking think about women in this way anymore. Not since I'd sworn off getting involved with anyone after Jen.

She pressed her lips together as she reached into her bag. "Okay, well I'm gonna head in there now to see her. But I wanted to give you this." She shoved a bottle of peppermint oil at me. "For when you've got a headache. Just rub some into your temples, forehead and the back of your neck." She closed her bag and took a couple of steps towards the clubhouse before adding, "Use it whenever you've got your cranky pants on too. It might work wonders."

That smart mouth of hers was a shot straight to my dick. Not the kind I usually preferred, but fuck, I couldn't deny how much I wanted to fill that mouth with my cock.

"Kick," I called out, "I've just gotta take care of something before we leave."

Without waiting for his response, I stalked inside and made my way to Skylar's room. I had something I needed to discuss with Lily about Skylar's recovery, and she'd taken off before I could do that.

By the time I reached my destination, Skylar and Lily were deep in conversation.

"What's Linc done now?" Skylar asked, her eyes alight in a way they only seemed to be these days when Lily was around.

"Ugh, he keeps coming over to my place even though I've asked him not to. He's doing my head in."

"Don't let him in, babe."

"I haven't been, but this morning he let himself in with the key I didn't know he still had."

"Oh God, you need to get that key off him or get the locks changed."

Lily nodded. "I'm getting the locks changed. I just have to wait until my pay comes in on Thursday. Honestly, though, it's a freaking expense I don't need."

"Has King paid you yet?"

"Yes, but I've put that money aside to pay for Zara's braces. I'll just wait until I get paid later this week."

"Do you want me to hit King up for more cash?"

"No! He already paid me way more than he should have. You know, for a grumpy guy, I think your brother has a soft side under all that bullshit he's got going on. I've never come across a man who looks after his family the way he looks after you."

"Shit, you're not into him, are you?"

"I'm not gonna lie, he's got the best ass I've ever seen, but I don't have time in my life for a man. The last time I dated, it distracted me from my kids, and I promised myself I wouldn't do that again."

I decided not to interrupt them, and instead, put the peppermint oil in my office before going back to Kick. As I passed Skylar's room on the way back outside and heard them laughing, I was reminded again that not fucking Lily was the best decision I'd made since I'd decided to hire her. Skylar needed the friendship more than I needed to get laid. But that ex of hers needed to be pulled into line.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Lily

“Mum, I’m on my way now. I’m sorry I’m running late, but I got tied up at the bank talking to the guy about consolidating my credit card debt.”

My day off that was supposed to be relaxing had turned into a big fat mess of stuff not going right after I’d left Skylar. To say I felt a little frazzled was an understatement. Especially after Linc had called and asked me if I’d go out with him and the kids for a family dinner on Saturday night. I didn’t know where he was going with this, but it didn’t feel like anywhere good. If I said no, the kids would get upset because they loved us all being together. If I said yes, it could give Linc the wrong idea. Why was there no manual for divorced couples to consult in times like this? There freaking needed to be one.

“Darling, don’t stress and don’t speed. You know my blood pressure goes through the roof when I think you’re speeding.”

“Mum, you have low blood pressure.” Jesus, my mother was a drama queen at times.

“Well, Lily, I can assure you it is high when you put me under pressure.”

“Fuck, Mum, how am I putting you under pressure? I’m not speeding. I promise.” I tacked the promise bit on the end there be-

cause she liked it when I made her promises. She didn't much care if they were broken; she just liked to think people were working hard for her benefit. My mother liked attention. I still wasn't convinced I actually came from her.

"Please don't swear. You know I don't like it."

I'd had enough of this conversation. We weren't getting anywhere with it. "I gotta go. The cops are probably out doing random checks on people using their mobiles while driving, so I better hang up before they catch me."

"Oh my goodness, why aren't you using your hands-free?"

I was, but I liked to freak her out sometimes. "Shit, Ma, I see a cop. Hanging up now."

By the time I got home, she may have had a stroke from her high blood pressure.

I was the worst daughter.

I was going to hell for the grief I gave my mother.

I pressed the accelerator a little harder in an effort to get home faster so I could make sure she didn't have a stroke.

Jesus, now you're buying into her drama.

I sighed.

This was one long-ass day. And it was only going to get longer because I still had to get through dinner out with my mum and the kids. What I needed was to think happy thoughts for the rest of this drive home. I'd fill my well with happy, then I'd do dinner, and then I'd have a long bath. With some wine.

King.

Shit, shit, shit.

Why did my mind instantly go to him when it searched for happy?

Because he made you very happy the other night, Lily.

My legs squeezed together as I remembered his mouth on me, his fingers inside me, and his tongue working me. The man was skilled, that was for damn sure. Not to mention skilled at saying no. I couldn't figure him out. And I still couldn't get him out of my mind.

I indicated to turn into my street and a few moments later, pulled into my driveway, surprised to see two bikes parked outside. I parked in the garage, grabbed my stuff and hurried inside to find out who was here. And came face-to-face with King when I stepped inside my home.

Coming to an abrupt halt, I frowned. "King?"

Good God he looked good today. It was in the way his clothes clung to his body. I'd always had a thing for black tees stretched across muscles, and he wore one today. My eyes were also drawn to the tattoos covering his arms, his fingers, and the small patch of chest I could see. I couldn't drag my gaze from them.

"We're almost finished and will be out of your hair soon," he said, confusing me.

I finally looked up at him. Ignoring the way he watched me with heat—the kind that made me squeeze my legs together again because it reminded me of the way he'd looked at me the other night—I asked, "What do you mean? What are you nearly finished?"

My mother bustled in at that moment, smiling the smile she reserved for men she really liked at King. "King, while you're here, do you think you could possibly check the oil and water in my car please?"

My eyes bulged. And I finally lost my shit after holding it in all freaking day. "Umm, can someone please explain what universe I've stepped into here?" I looked at King and asked, "Why are you in my house?" before looking at my mother, and asking, "And why are you casually asking him to check your car like you guys are good mates?"

King's lips twitched as an amused expression crossed his face. "I'm changing your locks."

I stared at him. His answer hardly answered any of my questions. "Why are you changing my locks?"

Mum stepped forward, almost in between King and me. "Lily dear, King filled me in on the news that Linc still has a key, and he told me you asked him to stop by and do the locks. I don't know why you didn't tell me about Linc. I swear, that man—"

I grabbed King by the wrist and dragged him into my bedroom. I would have preferred to drag him anywhere but my bedroom; however, it was the only room in the house where I could be guaranteed privacy. Once I had him in there, I closed the door behind us, placed my hands on my hips and demanded, "How do you know about Linc? And why would you lie to my mother about me asking you to change my locks?" I held up a finger, letting him know not to talk yet because I had more questions. "And while we're on it, how did you even know I wanted my locks changed? Did Skylar tell you?"

And why would you think it was okay to just drop on over and change them without asking me?" My eyes widened as one more thing crossed my mind. "And fuck, why would my mother just let you in?"

I was out of breath by the time I got all that out, and sucked some air in as I waited for his response.

He didn't speak straight away, but rather, just stood there watching me with that same amused expression of a few moments ago. And then—"That's a fuckload of questions."

"Yes! And I'd like answers to them please."

He opened his mouth to speak, but the door to my bedroom flung open, interrupting him.

"Lily, I really need—" My sister's mouth snapped closed when her eyes landed on King. "Oh, my," she said, looking him up and down, "You must be the hot biker dude I've heard all about. Lily wasn't kidding when she said you had muscles to die for."

I wanted the floor to open and swallow me whole, which was a strange thing for me. I didn't tend to get embarrassed easily, and not with men. If I liked a guy, I didn't hide that from him. But for some reason, I didn't want King to know I'd been discussing his level of hotness with my sister. I felt shy with him, which *really* freaking confused me.

You didn't feel shy with him the other night.

Oh God, shut up. I was drunk.

Thanks to what my sister had just revealed, and the thoughts of Saturday night now in my head, I blushed. I, Lily Bennett, a thirty-three-year-old woman, stood in front of a biker I wanted to have sex with, and freaking blushed. And he didn't miss it. I knew this because heat flared in his eyes again as he watched me do it.

I threw up my hands. "You all need to leave. Now! I need a moment."

Brynn reached for King's arm and dragged him out of the room while informing him, "When Lily needs a moment, it's best to give it to her. Trust me on that."

Once the door was closed, and I was alone, I collapsed onto my bed and exhaled loudly. I felt all mixed up. Muddled. My life had turned messy, and the train I was on seemed to be hurtling so fast I couldn't get off. The thing was, though, it had been this way for a

long time, and I hadn't felt so flustered with everything before. This was a new development, and I couldn't tell what caused it.

I walked into my ensuite and splashed some water over my face. Staring at myself in the mirror, I mentally repeated some affirmations that usually calmed me.

I am fearless.

I am doing my best.

I am kickass.

Shit.

It was King.

He was the new development in my life.

It didn't matter how many affirmations I repeated, they wouldn't get rid of this nervous energy that seemed to be camped out in my tummy.

Why did I like him so much? I mean, the man was moody *all the time*. He was impatient. He yelled a little too much for my liking. He was demanding. *So freaking demanding*. He argued with me over stuff that really didn't need arguing over. I mean, I specialised in helping people with headaches, so he should just let me help him with that. There were a lot of things not to like about him.

But damn, there were a lot of things I *did* like that I had no control over liking. Why did God insist on giving us no control over who we were attracted to? I blamed God for this either way. Because, quite freaking honestly, if I could choose, I'd choose *not* to want King. He was hard work, and that was the last thing I needed in my life.

The sound of my bedroom door opening and then clicking shut startled me. Bloody Brynn never did pay much attention when I told her to give me a mome—

King appeared in the doorway behind me.

I gripped the vanity harder and tried like hell to quiet the swarm of butterflies flapping in my stomach. It was a useless exercise, though, because they kept on flapping as he stood there watching me.

"I'm not finished having my moment," I finally managed to get out.

He didn't move, just continued watching me. "I heard you telling Skylar about your ex and the locks. I didn't lie to your mother. She just didn't listen to what I said. I can't tell you what possessed her to

allow two men she didn't know into your house, but I'm not going to stand here and say I shouldn't have done it. You needed locks. I could make that happen."

"I'll tell you what possessed her. *You*." I turned to face him. "You are the bossiest, most controlling and demanding man I know. And you're good-looking. My mother didn't stand a chance."

His nostrils flared as heat filled his eyes again. Closing the distance between us, he slid his hand around my waist and pulled me hard against him. "I fucking swore to myself I wouldn't touch you again, but you're hell on a man's restraint." He dropped his gaze to my neck as he brought his free hand up to grasp it. Circling his thumb over my throat, he said, "The taste of you is burned into my memory, and for the fucking life of me, I want more."

Having him this close, our bodies pressed together, was too much for me. My mind, already a mess, burst into a thousand streams of thoughts. My skin pebbled with just as many feelings. But every last one of them disappeared the moment he slipped his hand into my pants to find my pussy. His eyes didn't leave mine for a second. They took in the pleasure I experienced with each stroke of his finger.

The world fell away as King stripped every last thought from my mind.

"Fuck," he growled when I bit my bottom lip and moaned. His strokes became rougher, and our bodies moved together as he reached deeper and worked me harder. The pain from his fingers digging into my neck barely registered.

I was floating.

Soaring.

So high.

And then, in a flurry of fingers and lips and tongues, I careened over the edge into more pleasure than I ever thought possible. It wasn't until I came down from the high that I fully realised we were kissing. I'd processed that fact when he first claimed my lips, but I'd been completely lost in the moment that I kissed him without thought. With King, I didn't think; I felt. And it felt so good that nothing could break that moment.

Needing more, I moved my hands to his face, clutching him like I was afraid he would disappear any moment. He seemed to like the

way I held him because he growled again and deepened our kiss. His tongue dominated mine as he consumed all my senses.

I never wanted this kiss to end.

I wanted a lot more, and I didn't want it from anyone but him.

His body jerked suddenly, and he let me go. Taking a step back, he muttered, "Fuck." His eyes were a raging storm of emotions as he said, "I didn't come here to fuck you."

Breathless and with my thoughts all still in a jumbled mess, I said, "You haven't fucked me."

He scrubbed a hand over his face. "I may not have had you with my dick, but I've had my mouth, fingers and tongue all over that sweet cunt of yours, Lily. I've made you come twice. That's close enough to fucking you."

"I want more."

"You don't." Even while he said that, I knew by the way his eyes wandered down my body that he wanted this too.

"Why do you keep saying that?"

"Because I have nothing to offer you but the kind of sex that will fuck you up."

"I'm not looking for a relationship, King."

"And I don't have one to promise you, but you're not listening to me—I'm not into your standard sex. The shit I want... you wouldn't."

I moved close to him. "And you're not listening to me. I want you to fuck me up. I want it rough. I want you to leave me raw. I want pain. I've only ever had sex a few ways, and I'm bored with that. I want to try it your way."

He took all that in and watched me silently while he processed it. I thought I saw the moment where he lost the war with himself—the moment where he would agree to what I wanted—but then he shook his head once and forced out, "No."

Before I could argue with him again, he stalked out of my bedroom, the door slamming behind him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

King

Tatum hit me with a foul glare. "I'm going to pick him up. If he wants to come back here after, I'll bring him."

I shoved my fingers through my hair, feeling every ounce of frustration she was causing me. We'd just got word that Nitro was finally being released, and she insisted on challenging me over who would collect him.

I jerked my chin towards the front door of the clubhouse. "Go. But tell him I want to see him today. Or tonight. I don't give a fuck which, but make it within the next eight hours."

She continued glaring at me as she picked up her keys and phone. Without another word, she exited the building. Thank fuck Nitro was getting out; I wouldn't have to deal with her anymore.

"You think you two will ever get on?" Kree asked as she wiped the counter of the bar where I sat.

"I doubt it. She's too fucking stubborn. I don't know how the fuck Nitro puts up with her."

Kree slowed her movements. "From what I've seen, you've chosen women with a stubborn streak in the past too. It's funny what love does to us."

Love fucked people up. Of that, I was sure. She was right, though—I'd fallen for women who challenged me endlessly. Never again.

And fuck if Lily didn't slide into my mind then.

It had been two days since I'd changed her locks and almost fucked her. It was getting harder to turn her away, so I'd made sure I was nowhere around when she came to see Skylar yesterday. And I'd do the same today. Hell, I'd do it every day going forward. Lily was an illicit pleasure I wouldn't allow myself.

When I didn't respond to what she'd said, Kree changed the subject. "Hyde told me I might be able to go home soon. That you guys are almost finished dealing with stuff. How long do you think that'll be?"

"Hyde wouldn't have said that, Kree. You've misunderstood." We still had to take care of Romano, and fuck knew how long that would take. I wasn't about to make her a promise I couldn't keep.

"What wouldn't I have said?" Hyde asked, taking the stool next to me.

Kree looked at him. "I thought you said I'd be able to go home soon."

"Fuck no. I said home was looking good, meaning we're all itching to get back there."

I kept it to myself, but I also wanted her husband taken care of before she left here. I'd mentioned it again to Zane, who'd told me he'd have news for me on that in the next couple of days. He'd gone past the deadline I'd originally set, but with everything going on, I'd let it slide.

My phone rang, taking my attention off the conversation.

Axe.

"Tell me you've got something good for me," I said. We'd been waiting to hear more about Romano since he'd been arrested, but there had been radio silence on that.

"It's good, but not completely what you're after. Still nothing on where Romano is or what they're doing with him. Shit has been locked tight on that. But Zane and Devil have found your rat."

He was right—it *was* good news.

My entire body thrummed with anticipation.

I was way past the point of ready to deal with this motherfucker.

"Who? And where is he?"

"It's Tate. They've found him in Gosford and are on their way back to the warehouse with him. I'll let you know when they've arrived."

Fucking hell. Tate was Storm. He'd turned nomad years ago after we'd had a disagreement. But I wouldn't have figured him for a fucking rat.

I eyed Hyde after ending the call. "Devil and Zane have our rat. It was Tate."

He scowled. Hyde and Tate had never gotten on. "That mother-fucker will pay for this shit."

I nodded, my mind already churning with a million fucking questions for the cunt. "Yeah, he will." Moving off my stool, I added, "I'm gonna go have another chat with Ivy. See if she can shed any light on this."

I found her a few minutes later, lying on her bed, staring at the ceiling. She didn't look at me when she realised I stood in the doorway, but rather she kept staring up as she said, "I want you to let me leave. Tony isn't a threat to me anymore." Her voice revealed her bleakness, but that wasn't new to me. I'd watched her mood shift over the last week, from hot-tempered to this resigned attitude. She hadn't argued with me in the past seven days. She'd pretty much kept to her room and stayed quiet. I'd avoided her because I didn't want us to get into shit again. But this new mood concerned me.

Resting against the doorjamb, I crossed my arms over my chest. "He's a threat until he's dead."

"I have somewhere I can go. Somewhere he won't find me."

"Where?"

"A friend." She finally looked at me. "Please, King. I need to get back to my life, and I can't do that here." She sat up and swung her legs over the edge of the bed so she faced me. "I thought maybe we could find a way to get on after I was sick. You seemed to let your walls down a little when we talked. But now I can see we'll always argue over stupid things. It's just who we are, but I don't want that in my life. It's too hard, and I'm too sad over everything to keep fighting with you."

Fuck.

I hated seeing her like this. It stirred something deep inside me that was long buried. Something I'd left behind and forgotten after one too many betrayals when I was younger.

Compassion.

I used to feel it, and maybe I still did every now and then, but only for the very few I allowed close. This feeling teasing its way out

from the depths where I'd shoved it differed, though, to anything I'd allowed in the last fifteen years. It disturbed me in its intensity. I didn't want to feel it. Had no need for it in my life. But I couldn't fucking ignore it because it was right there as I listened to Ivy. In my chest and my gut and my head. It just fucking sat there, waiting for me to do something with it.

"Where's your friend?" Just asking that question filled me with misgiving. I didn't want to put her back out there where her husband could hurt her, but fuck, keeping her here was killing her light. Maybe I had to let her go.

"He's in Sydney."

"Who is it, Ivy? I need to vet him before I consider this."

She stood and walked to me. "You don't need to check him out. He and I have been friends for years. You just need to stop thinking you're responsible for my happiness. I'll admit, I came here with a lot of hate in my heart. I hadn't fully let go of what happened between us, but I feel like I'm starting to. And for the first time in years, I feel hopeful about my life. Tony kept me down for so long that it fucked with my thinking. This time away from him is helping clear my head." She paused and moved even closer to me. Smiling up at me, she placed her hand on my cheek and said softly, "You don't have to take care of me anymore, King. I can do that myself."

It could have been her touch, or maybe the way she looked at me differently to how she had since she'd been here, or fuck, it could have been my screwed-up thinking while talking to her, but I found myself agreeing to something I never thought I would. "You can leave. Not today, though, but probably tomorrow. I've got something to take care of first."

She moved her hand from my cheek and smiled. "Thank you."

The moment caught me by surprise. This was the Ivy I'd loved. Softer, open, laid bare. Vulnerable. When there were no walls between us, anything felt possible. I liked the sense of calm and ease that brought with it.

I nodded. "I have a question for you. Did you know Tony had a club member in his pocket?"

"No. Why?"

I straightened, uncrossing my arms. "We've found a rat, and I know Tony had someone feeding him club information, but I don't

know if that information was coming from just one person or whether there are more out there I need to be looking for."

She shrugged. "I didn't know about this, sorry. But it wouldn't surprise me if he had more than one. Tony has always been anal about knowing every little detail about everything, so it'd make sense that he wouldn't just rely on one person."

"Fuck," I muttered.

"I'm sorry you have to deal with this, King. It's all my fault." Her voice cracked as tears fell down her cheeks.

My arms were around her before I even thought about it. Pulling her close, I cupped the back of her head and pressed it to my chest. "Don't ever fucking apologise for shit you had no control over. This is all on Tony. Not you."

Her arms circled me, and she held on tight. "If I'd never married him, this wouldn't be happening to you now."

If I hadn't fucked our relationship all those years ago, she wouldn't have married him. This was on me, not her, and I'd be the one to fix it.



Just under three hours later, I stared at our rat as he sat tied to a chair in the middle of our warehouse. Nervousness blazed from his eyes as he watched me. *Good*. He should have been fucking nervous, because what I had planned for him, he wouldn't have wished on his worst enemy.

Dragging a chair over, I sat in front of him and yanked the gag from his mouth. "What's it been, Tate, three years since we've spoken?"

He swallowed hard a few times, seemingly relieved to be rid of the gag. "Not fucking long enough."

I felt surprisingly calm considering the anger raging through me and what I was about to do with it. But that was usually the way when I knew what was coming. It was only when shit crept up on me, catching me off guard that my crazy took over. I wasn't sure which I preferred, but if I'd been put on the spot and forced to decide, I'd have to say this way was my preference. Having had the

time to contemplate in painstaking detail every hurt I would inflict doubled my pleasure.

Every blow.

Every bruise.

Every cut.

The mental imagery was painted by the strokes of my wrath and tended to by my burning need for retribution. Sometimes that need was so strong and so violent I believed it wasn't just about the matter at hand. I never forgot a wrong, and they had a way of adding up in my head. Every now and then, someone suffered at my hands when I was dancing to the beat of decades' worth of hurts.

Today I had my fucking dancing shoes on.

"So you've been talking to Tony Romano about us. And the feds. Anyone else I should know about?"

His lips pulled up into a scowl. "I've got nothing to say to you, King."

I arched a brow. "Really?"

He didn't reply to that. Just sat there staring at me.

And still my calm state remained.

I lifted my gaze and looked at Hyde who stood behind him. Next to him was Devil. Behind me were Axe and Kick. Everyone was impatient for this to happen. Everyone but me. For once, I was enjoying taking it slowly.

"King."

I turned at the sound of Nitro's voice and found him walking my way. Standing, I took a step towards him, but thought better of my plan and, without warning, faced Tate again and punched him hard in the face, knocking him and the chair backwards. His head hit the cement floor with a hard whack, activating bright lights in my brain. Bright fucking lights of joy.

I then gave my attention to Nitro, grinning. "It's about fucking time they let you out."

"Yeah, brother." He looked around at everyone before focusing his gaze on Tate. "So he's our rat?"

I nodded. "He is."

Nitro grunted as he stalked to where Tate lay sprawled on the ground. Pulling his knife from its sheath, he cut the ropes securing Tate to the chair, gripped his shirt, and yanked him to a standing position. Then, faster than I'd ever seen him move, he walked Tate

backwards and slammed him against the brick wall. "Motherfucking cunt!" he roared. Pummelling him, he bloodied Tate up until his face was almost unrecognisable.

I gave him a little time to get that shit out of his system. Fuck knew, if I'd been locked up, I'd wanna beat the shit out of the guy who may have had something to do with keeping me there. Plus, I derived great satisfaction watching the pain Tate experienced at Nitro's hands.

"Stop," I ordered, joining them. "We need him conscious for most of this."

Nitro punched him a couple more times before letting him fall to the ground. Raking his hand through his hair and jabbing a finger at me, he demanded, "When we take Ryland down, he's mine."

I nodded. "You get first shot at him, brother, but we share in that one, too. I'm saving some special shit for that cunt." Looking down at Tate, I said, "Now, this one... he and I are gonna have some fun."

Reefing him up, I moved him back to the chair and forced him down on to it. He grunted in pain as I settled him there. I gripped his face hard and bent to look into his eyes. "Do you know what one of my favourite sounds in the world is?" I squeezed his cheeks harder, zeroing in on the agony that caused. "That right there. Those little whimpers of pain. They light some dark shit up in my head." I released his face, shoving it away from me before I sat on the chair across from him again. "However, I really would prefer to hear you detail everything you've given Romano and the feds, and you should know that if you don't, I'm going to fuck you up in ways that will paint my mind the blackest of black. I will draw that shit out for days, weeks maybe. I'll string you up here and drop by every night to remind you why you wished you'd just given me the information." I leant forward, my face hardening. "I don't fucking appreciate club members who turn their back on their brothers. I will make you bleed, and then the club will get their shot at you. By the time we're finished, you won't know your ass from your mouth, up from down, white from fucking black." I sat back and crossed my arms over my chest. "On the other hand, you give me what I need, and we'll take it easy on you."

His eyes darted around the warehouse, between everyone here. I saw the fear in them, but I wondered how much more I'd have to push him to trigger that completely. I trained my men well—they

didn't give in to their fear easily. And Tate used to be one of my men, so fuck knew how many hours this would take.

He met my gaze again and spat some blood. "Do your worst, King. I'm not giving you what you want."

I nodded. "Okay, if that's the way you wanna play this, I can go along with that." I stood and looked at Nitro. "Strip him and hang him upside down. I'm going to get everyone some food. When I get back, we'll play."



It took me eight hours to break him. And a lot of fucking torture. But I finally got the information I wanted, and I now knew what we were up against with the feds. He'd given them more than he gave Romano, and what he'd given them would fucking crucify us.

After I'd dragged every last piece of information from him, I stood silently watching him, contemplating what would convince a club member to turn on their brothers. It was something so foreign to me that I couldn't even begin to wrap my head around it.

He lay on the ground at my feet, his body riddled with bruises, swelling, deep gashes, and blood. Every one of us had their turn at him, but now he was all mine, and while I was mentally exhausted from the day, my body was raring to go.

It tasted blood.

Knew what was coming.

Wouldn't fucking stop until Tate's last breath had been taken from him.

I crouched next to him. "Why did you do it?"

His breaths were laboured, and I knew he would struggle to answer me, but Goddammit, I wanted a fucking answer.

I forced one of his eyes open and demanded, "Why the fuck did you do it?"

He wheezed and attempted to open his mouth. It took him a bit, but he managed to get out, "Cash."

Cash?

He fucking betrayed his club for some fucking cash?

I hadn't expected that answer. Hell, I didn't know what I expected, because I just couldn't fucking understand any motivation to do

what he did. But cash felt like an even bigger fuck you than any other reason.

I pushed up out of my crouch, angry. Angry as fucking shit. It was the kind of anger I would struggle to get out of my system.

"Fuck!" I roared, slamming my boot down onto him.

I kicked him over and over, trying desperately to rid my body of this fury.

Time slowed, or maybe it raced.

I had no concept of it while my depravity consumed me.

I kicked and beat and slashed his last breath out of him.

For the club.

For me.

For the fucking code of loyalty he'd shat all over.

When I was done, I stared down at his lifeless form and started calculating the next step for the club. He'd screwed us over, but we weren't down for the count yet. Not even fucking close. We were just getting started.

I took a shower, dressed in clean clothes and headed out to my bike after calling Kick to let him know Tate's body needed to be disposed of. It was nearly 10:00 p.m. and I was wired. I needed to take the edge off, and the best way to do that was to fuck it out of my system.

I had two options.

Find a club whore to take care of that or finally get my fill of the pussy I couldn't get out of my mind, to hell with the consequences.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Lily

"So you're going fishing with him again?" I asked Brynn as I wandered through my house cleaning up, the phone wedged between my ear and my shoulder.

"Yes. You know what's weird? I kinda like it with him."

"Ah, that's because he's hot. I don't think it has much to do with the fish." I picked up the last sock on Robbie's bedroom floor and straightened. "Are you sleeping with him yet?"

"Lil, he's a prostitute. I don't sleep with men that bang a hundred women a week."

"A hundred? You have to be kidding." I had no idea, though. Maybe she wasn't. God, I was so naïve when it came to some things. Marrying your childhood sweetheart, having three kids and a busy job would do that to you. I just didn't have the time or the energy to learn all the ways people had sex or how many people a prostitute slept with in a week. I really needed to change this.

Brynn laughed. "I was exaggerating. Anyway look, I have to hang up and do some shit before I go to sleep, but can I drop by in the morning and grab your picnic set?"

"Sure." I made a mental note to buy her one for Christmas. My sister was the least domesticated woman I knew. It wouldn't occur to her to buy one.

"I love you."

I traipsed into the laundry to put a load on before I went to bed.
"You better."

"Hey, why does Linc have the kids tonight? I thought he was only having them every second Wednesday night?"

"I have no clue. It's like he's decided all of a sudden to try to be the best dad in the world. And he's being super nice to me, too. I'm actually a little worried about where he's gonna take this."

"You think he wants to get back together?"

"Maybe. I hope not, though, because I do not need the headache of saying no to him."

"Oh, God."

Oh God was right. Linc didn't seem to understand the meaning of no. When he wanted something, he just kept pushing until he got it.

Our conversation was interrupted when someone banged loudly on my front door. I almost jumped out of my skin at the noise.

"Shit, Brynn, I gotta go. Someone's knocking on my door."

"Who the hell would.... Oh, you think it's the hot biker?"

Yes, I did, and if it was, he'd be getting a stern talking to. "Yes. I'll see you in the morning."

I ended the call and stalked to the front door. "King, if that's you—" My words instantly dried up the moment I laid eyes on him.

Holy. Shit.

I gripped the door to steady myself.

King was here to fuck me.

He didn't have to utter a word for me to know that; I knew it simply by looking at him.

Hunger radiated from him in a way I'd never seen it radiate from a man.

Taking a step inside, he grabbed me by the neck and pushed me up against the wall while kicking the door closed. He pressed our bodies together as his eyes bored into mine. They were as dark and demanding as he was. King wasn't voicing his request. His eyes were doing all the asking.

"Yes," I said, my voice all breathy.

His grip tightened around my neck and his nostrils flared as he forced a breath out. My answer seemed to anger him. But then, his

mood already seemed darker and more intense than usual. When his mouth claimed mine, I experienced that ferocious energy firsthand.

He didn't just kiss me; he ravaged me.

Whatever emotions were running through him ran through that kiss. It was savage, and it stole my attention like nothing ever had. It drove all thought from my mind and demanded my submission.

King wanted control of me.

When he came up for air, his eyes sought mine again and he finally spoke. "This"—his fingers dug into my neck where he held me—"is what I need. Can you give me that?"

The air was thick with need, raw and edgy. Both his and mine. But what enslaved me was the danger bleeding from him. I had no idea what I was truly agreeing to, but I was helpless to say no. I'd told him I wanted his fucked-up sex, and I hadn't been lying.

I nodded. "Yes."

A hiss escaped his lips before he surrendered to what he wanted.

Finally.

Lifting me, he threw me over his shoulder and carried me into my bedroom. He dropped me on my bed and ordered, "Clothes off and then kneel on the end of the bed."

With my heart beating fast and my hands a little shaky, I did as he said. He switched my lamp on and stood at the end of the bed watching every move I made. I'd always liked King's eyes on me, but this took that to a whole new level.

When I'd stripped down to nothing, he reached for his belt and undid it. Working it, he formed cuffs that he restrained my wrists with. After securing the belt in place, he slid his zip down and removed his jeans. He then lifted his tee over his head and dropped it to the floor.

King stood naked in front of me, and my gaze travelled the length of his body. He was a masterpiece, a masculine powerhouse of hard muscle and brute strength. I shivered, thinking about what he would do to me. And when I saw his piercings, my core clenched. Both his nipples were pierced with silver hoops, as was the skin at the base of his cock. It was a pubic piercing. I knew that because one of my favourite singers had one, and I'd read the articles about how good they were during sex.

Moving closer, he said, "Turn around and place your hands on the bed."

I held his gaze for a beat longer than he preferred, and he ordered gruffly, "Now."

Turning, I obeyed his command. I had to use all my upper body strength to hold myself up due to my hands being bound together, and I knew instantly that this would soon become hard. I didn't have long to think about that, though, because King's hands landed on my ass, consuming my complete attention.

His touch surprised me. It wasn't rough, but rather gentle as he ran his hands over my ass cheeks and then down the backs of my legs. When he got to my knees, though, his gentle touch disappeared.

Gripping my legs just above the knees, he separated them. With my ass in the air and my legs apart, I felt exposed to him in a way that both thrilled and bewildered me. He was pushing me to do things I'd never done. And we were only just getting started. My mind raced, wondering how much further he would push me. But not for long, because as soon as he'd parted my legs, he took hold of my bottom and bent to lick my pussy.

He licked the entire length of it while a deep growl vibrated from his mouth.

My body quivered as pleasure jolted through me.

The pleasure built as his tongue entered me and his mouth worked my pussy.

Oh God, I desperately wanted to grip the sheet, but I couldn't. And the longer he spent with his mouth to me, the harder it became to hold myself up. My wrists, arms and shoulders burned with the effort it took not to collapse. When I reached the point where I didn't think I could stay up any longer, I dropped my elbows to the bed, but King had other ideas.

He lifted his face from my pussy. "Keep your arms up."

"I can't—"

He cut me off, his voice harsh. His order final. "Up."

When I didn't move straight away, he grabbed hold of my hips and yanked me backwards, towards him. It all happened so fast I didn't have time to think. Caught off guard, my face landed on the bed as he dragged me, burning my skin with the speed he moved. When he had me at the end of the bed, he flipped me onto my back and stood with his legs caging mine in.

Placing his hands on the bed either side of me, he brought his face close to mine. Eyes flashing black, he demanded, "Do you want me to fuck you?"

I nodded. "Yes."

"Did you listen to me when I told you it would hurt?"

"Yes."

He grabbed my face. Squeezing me hard, he said, "I don't think you took it in." Easing the pressure of his grip, he said, "So I'm going to tell you again and give you one last chance to walk away."

"You don't need to tell me again. I remember."

His jaw clenched. "I'm getting close to breaking point here, Lily. You need to be sure."

I didn't know whether to be excited about his breaking point or scared of it. God, he wasn't like any man I'd ever been with. But that was the point. "I'm sure."

He tightened his grip on my face again, the pain sharp. "When I tell you to do something, you do it. And you don't fucking talk back to me. We clear?"

I couldn't talk while he held me like this, so I nodded.

Letting my face go, he ordered, "Back on your hands and knees."

When he had me where he wanted me, he took hold of my ass again and buried his face back in my pussy. He then proceeded to edge me close to orgasm before pulling me back by withdrawing from my pussy. He did this over and over until I could barely concentrate. My body ached and burned. It also sang with bliss. The alternating sensations were a kind of ecstasy I never knew existed. And King knew exactly how to use them both to work me into a state of frenzy where I begged him to make me come.

He didn't, though. Just as I thought he was about to give me what I wanted, he flipped me onto my back and undid the belt, freeing my wrists. I stared up at him, breathless and needy, so relieved to have the belt removed. His eyes met mine, but it was as if he didn't see me. It was like he was completely lost in this experience.

He moved onto the bed, over me, and dipped his head to suck on one of my nipples. His hands skimmed down my body to my legs and he spread them out, pushing them hard against the mattress. He kept hold of them there, his mouth still on my breast, while he ran his dick along my pussy.

My back arched as I flung my arms out and turned my head to one side. I'd used all my energy holding myself up, and pain still burned in my arms, but this felt so good.

I needed him inside me.

Now.

I reached for his face and pulled it away from my breast. "I need you to fuck me," I begged.

His jaw tightened and a vein pulsed in his temple. Letting go of my legs, he took hold of my wrists and brought them together on the mattress above my head. His fingers bit into my skin, and I winced at the pain. That drew his attention. He seemed to like it.

"I am nowhere near ready to fuck you," he growled as his eyes ran over every inch of me. Keeping hold of my wrists with one hand, he brought his other one down to my pussy. Roughly pushing what felt like three fingers deep inside me, he said, "We've got hours ahead of us before you'll get my dick, and the more you beg me for it, the longer I'll make you wait."

He wasn't giving me what I wanted, but God if he wasn't giving me what I needed.

I'd been waiting forever for a man like King.

One who would challenge and dominate me in this way.

A man who pushed me out of my comfort zone.

King spent the next two hours stripping away my comforts—the pieces of myself I held onto tightly so as not to make myself vulnerable. Because even though I was naked, my soul was still fully clothed. Opening myself up during sex and laying my needs and wants on the table was something I'd never done. Not since the one time I'd told Linc a fantasy of mine and he'd told me there was something wrong with me for wanting that. I'd protected myself after that. Had stayed safe and not dug deep within to ask if I was getting what I needed.

I'd used sex as a way to be close to someone else. I'd never used it to get close to myself.

King undressed my soul.

He took what he wanted from my body, was brutal with me, but in the process, my essence was laid bare.

I connected with my core.

My feminine centre.

And I realised it wasn't wrong to want the things I wanted.

By the time King was ready to fuck me, my mind and body were exhausted but awakened and ready for him. He found a condom and then came back to where I lay on the bed. Every inch of my skin hummed for him as he slid an arm under me and pulled me up.

He positioned me so my head hung over the side of the bed. He then wrapped both hands around my neck, just under my jaw, and pressed upwards, restricting my breath slightly. His eyes were focused completely on my neck. There was something about it that put him in a trancelike state.

Without warning, he thrust inside me. He moved so ferociously that he almost forced me off the bed. It was his hold of my neck that kept me from that.

I clung to the sheet while he slammed into me. His movements were slow to begin with; he was more into the choking than the fucking. I couldn't get enough of either. I also couldn't get enough of his piercing. It hit my clit every time he pushed inside. The pleasure was so intense I decided that if I never had sex again, it wouldn't matter because this was the best of my life.

"Fuck," he roared, moving faster and loosening his grip on my neck.

I found his eyes and didn't let go.

I wanted to watch him come.

Needed to see the moment this man lost himself completely.

But as he fucked me harder and faster, I drifted into my own trance.

I was so close to falling over the edge into absolute bliss.

My skin blazed with the need to get there.

My body begged for it.

My brain shattered completely.

I was reaching.

Crying out.

Aching.

Somewhere in there he let go of my neck, yanked me back fully onto the bed, and pounded so hard into me that I ended up with my head against the headboard.

I came first.

He wasn't far behind me, but by then I was adrift and only vaguely aware of his thunderous growl of release.

King had fucked me thoroughly and sleep claimed me fast.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Lily

I rolled over and cracked an eye open to check the time on the clock beside my bed. It was just past six in the morning. The morning after King fucked the hell out of me.

God, I could hardly move. The man had made good on his promise of rough sex. He'd dedicated time to every inch of my body, giving both pleasure and pain. I wasn't sure how I'd get through the day after last night.

I managed to leave my bed and throw on a T-shirt and panties before heading out to the kitchen to make a coffee. I was disappointed King had left without saying goodbye sometime during the night, but reminded myself it was what we'd both agreed to. No relationship, just sex.

I was lost in my thoughts when the door to my back patio slid open and King stepped inside.

I jumped. "Holy shit. Way to give a girl a heart attack." Frowning, I added, "I thought you'd already left."

His eyes slowly ran down my body before meeting my gaze. "Just getting my shit now and leaving."

The flare of excitement I'd experienced when I realised he was still here turned to another round of disappointment. "Oh okay. Do you want a coffee before you go?"

He shook his head. "No."

"Lily." My sister's voice floated from the front door to the kitchen. A moment later, she joined us, her eyes widening as she took in King. Her mouth spread into a huge smile, and she said, "I see you broke the drought."

King shifted his gaze from me to Brynn and then back to me, but didn't utter a word.

"Yes," I said as I pulled a mug down from the cupboard. I didn't want to get into a discussion about my sex life right now. "You want a coffee, Brynn?"

"I would love one. A coffee with you and King sounds like the perfect start to my day."

"He's not staying." I glanced across at him, finding him still watching me. His gaze caused butterflies in my tummy. God, I needed to get a grip. He was just the guy who broke my drought. Nothing more.

"Oh really?" Brynn asked. "You're leaving so early?"

Before King could answer her, my mother appeared on my back patio.

God help me.

She slid the back door open and came to an abrupt stop when she spied King. The smile that filled her face matched the one on Brynn's when she'd found King in my kitchen. Entering the house, she said, "I see I no longer need to get that dating profile of yours up, Lily."

I seriously wanted to bang my head on the kitchen counter.

Looking back up at them all, I said, "I'm only going to say this once—yes, I had sex last night, but no, it doesn't mean I'm dating." I directed the next bit to Mum. "And that doesn't mean you should go hiring me a prostitute or go filling out dating profiles for me. I'm quite capable of finding myself a man when I decide I want one."

Mum looked a little put out. Waving her hands dismissively at me, she said, "I beg to differ on that last bit, my darling. You haven't so much as looked at a man in six months. I think you are most definitely out of practice."

"She's not out of practice," King rumbled, unleashing another round of butterflies in my tummy.

When he pulled out his keys, I asked, "Are you leaving now?"

"Yeah."

"I'll walk you out."

He shook his head. "No, stay with your family." And then he was gone.

Brynn and Mum both stared after him. "Don't feel like you need to stay with us," Brynn said. "Go say goodbye to your man."

"He's not my man, Brynn. It was just sex."

Mum's lips flattened. "Oh Lily, it isn't just sex when a man looks out for you like King has."

"Yes Mum, it is. And it was." *And I already want more.*

Brynn narrowed her eyes at me. "But you like him, yes?"

There was no point lying to her. My sister saw through all my lies. "Yes, but he—"

"No buts, Lil. Life is too short for buts," she said.

"It's also too short for wasting time on something that will never happen. And King is most definitely in that category."

It was great sex. Amazing freaking sex. But it was time to go back to being his sister's physiotherapist and nothing more.



"You're doing so well," I said to Skylar at the end of her session that afternoon. "We can probably look at cutting back our sessions to a couple of times a week now."

She sat in the armchair in her room, feet up on the stool King had gotten for her. "Sure, if you think I'm ready."

I smiled. "I do. I'm going to write you up a new plan of exercises, and I'll drop back to visiting you Mondays and Thursdays." My reasons were based purely on Skylar's needs, but it wouldn't hurt for me to visit the clubhouse less often.

As I packed up my stuff, she said, "Thank you for being so amazing, Lily. I don't think I could have gotten through the last couple of weeks without you."

She'd come a long way, both physically and mentally. And I had no doubts she could manage her recovery on her own now, with just check-ins from me to make sure all was progressing well.

I slung my bag over my shoulder. "You've absolutely got this. And you know I'm just a call or text away if you need me."

"Hey, are you going to see King on your way out?"

I nodded. "Yes."

"Can you tell him I've decided we should have tacos for dinner."

"Sure. Is he cooking?" I threw in that last question as a joke. It seemed unlikely to me that King would be making dinner.

She laughed. "You sound surprised. And yes, he is. He spent some time with me this morning and told me he wanted me, Axe, Annika, and the kids to all have dinner together tonight. I have no idea what's gotten into him, but I like that he wants to hang out. It's been too long since we've had family dinner together."

I headed for the door. "I'll let him know, and I'll email through your new exercises."

"Thank you," she said as I left the room.

Anticipation filled me as I walked the short distance to King's office. I had no idea if he'd be there, but I hoped so. I wanted to pay him back for the locks he'd installed the other day. I also just wanted to see him and talk to him. It was crazy since I'd never have him again, but I couldn't help myself. I liked spending time with him.

He glanced up from his desk when I entered the office, his eyes spending time on my body before meeting my gaze.

"Hey," I said, my voice full of hesitation even though I was trying hard not to show the awkwardness I felt over the situation. We'd experienced some highly intimate moments together last night and it confused me to go from that back to the business relationship we'd had before then. I had never had a one-night stand before. All the sex I'd ever had was part of a relationship, so this was new territory for me.

"How's Skye doing?"

Okay, back to business. I could do that.

I took a deep breath to centre myself. "She's really good. I'm going to cut back to seeing her twice a week from now."

His brows drew together. "Why?"

"Well," I started to say, but my voice cracked with nervousness. Swallowing hard, I continued, "Her progress is good, and she doesn't really need me to be with her so much now. She can manage her exercises well without me. I'll just swing by and make sure she's continuing to improve. And, well, it'll save you money you don't need to spend."

"I want to spend the money, Lily. Don't cut back the sessions."

The gravel in his voice hit my core, electrifying my skin. I didn't know whether to read between the lines with what he said or not.

"Okay," I agreed softly, wishing I had a lot more experience with men so I was better able to navigate whatever this was between us. "Oh also, she said to tell you she wants tacos for dinner."

He nodded, but didn't reply to that, just continued watching me.

Becoming flustered under his intense gaze, I smoothed my skirt when it didn't need smoothing. And blurted out, "How much do I owe you for the locks? I'll bring the money by tomorrow or if you need it sooner, I can drop back later with it. Or put it in your bank if you give me your details. However you want—"

"You don't owe me anything."

"No, I do, King."

"You don't." His tone turned hard, his statement absolute. I didn't care for that tone.

I stopped smoothing my skirt and straightened my shoulders. He would not be getting the last word on this. And he sure as heck wouldn't be refusing my money. "You took time out of your day and brought one of your men with you to do the job. You paid for the locks. You also checked my mother's oil and water. I appreciate all of that. What I don't appreciate is the way you bulldoze me when I approach you about some things. I always pay my own way in life, and I would like to pay for my locks. I'd also like to pay for your time, but I'm guessing that would be pushing for too much where you're concerned."

He stood, his jaw tight, his shoulders tighter. Walking around the desk, he went to the door and closed it. He then moved behind me, his body to mine. He caged me in so my legs were pressed hard against the desk, my hands flat to it, my ass tilted back as I bent forward.

With one hand around my waist and the other inching up my leg to reach under my skirt, he growled against my ear, "*I* appreciate the fuck out of many things in life, Lily, one of them being when a woman doesn't argue with me. You won't be paying me a cent and you won't mention those locks again." He slipped his hand into my panties as he nudged my feet apart. When he pushed his fingers inside my pussy, he added, "Do you understand?"

I didn't want to understand, but his ways were persuasive to say the least. I still had some fight in me, though. "No, I don't. We hardly know each other, so I'm not sure why you want to pay for my stuff." It really made no sense to me. I'd never met a man who randomly

paid for my shit. Hell, I'd never even had a date pay for my meal. And I'd paid Linc's way for many things for a long time.

His fingers stroked me expertly, and I squeezed my eyes shut as the pleasure engulfed me. "This doesn't feel like not knowing you," he rasped, grinding his dick against my ass.

Oh God. It really didn't. And that was the source of my confusion. Gripping the desk, I said, "I don't know what we're doing, King. We said one night."

His mouth pressed harder against my ear, his teeth grazing my skin. "You fucking came undone last night. You want more than one night."

I couldn't argue with either of those statements. I wanted so much more sex with him. But where would that lead? King had made it clear he didn't want anything more than to fuck me, and I thought I could get on board with that, but now I wasn't so sure. Not after the amount of time I'd dedicated to thinking about him today. Not to mention that every time I closed my eyes or had a moment to myself, images of him fucking me filled my mind.

"Lily, stop thinking," he ordered as he lifted my skirt. "Tell me you want this."

My body fought my mind, and in the end, won the war. "I want this." The words fell from my lips before I could stop them, but I wouldn't take them back. When his hands were on me like this, and his mouth was promising me dirty things I never knew I wanted, King owned me. All I could do was go along for the ride and pray I came out unscathed when he was done with me.

He didn't waste a second once I'd given him what he wanted. He grabbed hold of my neck and forced me down over the desk. My skirt was pushed up over my ass, my panties ripped from me. The sound of a condom wrapper filled the air as he slid his zip down. One hand came back to hold my neck. I couldn't see him, but every noise he made, and the speed with which he worked told me he was as desperate for this as I was.

He slammed into me.

There was no gentle from King today. He took what he wanted with a savage energy that pushed me over the edge from wanting this to needing it like I needed air.

I didn't want gentle.

I wanted what he offered, any way it came.

And I knew that would be my downfall in the end because I'd never wanted sex this much.

Every part of my body ached from what he'd done to it last night, and his rough treatment now only added to that pain. But God if I didn't love every second of it.

It didn't take either of us long to come. When he was finished, he moved away from me, disposed of the condom and zipped himself back up all while I tried to get my bearings. My panties lay torn on the carpet, so I pushed my skirt down and straightened my top. As I ran my fingers through my hair, fixing it, my hand brushed across my neck and I grimaced at the pain I felt there. King had left bruises both times he'd had me.

His eyes met mine before dropping to my neck. He didn't comment, just clenched his jaw as he stared at me. I wasn't sure, but it seemed to anger him, but then, he was always in some kind of mood, so who knew what stirred his disapproval.

A knock on the door cut through our silence. "King, are you in there?" It was a female voice I didn't recognise, and my tummy knotted as I thought about him with other women. The thoughts came from nowhere, slamming into me and causing my head to spin.

I took a deep breath and picked up my bag, determined to clear my mind of whatever was going on in there.

You have no claim on King.

You need to remember that.

Oh God.

Why did I think this was a good idea?

Jesus, get your shit together, Lily.

"Fuck," King muttered, raking his fingers through his hair. He stalked to the door and yanked it open. "I'm busy. Can you give me a moment?"

"I'm leaving," I said, walking to the door.

King stepped to the side and glanced at me. My eyes, though, were on the dark-haired woman standing in the hallway watching me with great interest.

"Hi," she said, "I'm Ivy. I'm sorry to barge in when you two were in the middle of—"

"No, it's good." I turned my gaze to King. "We were finished."

Ivy looked between King and me, her expression changing into something that seemed a little dark. Jealous maybe. I wondered who she was to him for her to have that reaction. She covered it quickly, though, and smiled at me. "Great, because I need some time with him."

Oh.

Okay, so they were close.

With one last glance at King, I exited the office and hurried to my car. My cheeks heated with the foolishness I felt over my reaction to Ivy. I was like a damn teenager jealous over her crush. It was crazy behaviour, and it surprised the heck out of me. I didn't do crazy. I did calm, rational and sensible. I was the woman who spent her life looking after her family, being the responsible one, and not getting sidetracked by men who drove her to act in ways she never had before.

I would go home and I would get my shit together.

And I would put King out of my mind completely.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

King

I watched as Lily rushed out of my office. *Fucking hell*. After having her last night, I'd intended to move the fuck on and never go back for seconds. Not because I didn't want her again, but because I *did* want her again. Lily stirred a hunger in me I hadn't known for almost a decade. Not only did I want to fuck her, I wanted time with her. I liked talking to her. Hell, I liked fucking arguing with her. But I'd sworn years ago never to go down that path with a woman again, so I needed to keep my hands off her. That was turning into something I didn't seem able to do.

"Who's that?" Ivy asked, drawing my attention back to her.

"Skylar's physiotherapist."

She brushed past me into the office. "Yes, it looks like it," she said as she looked down at Lily's panties on the floor.

I ignored the chill in her tone. After our conversation the other day, I'd thought we were good, but I should have known Ivy and I would never be good. "You ready to go?" I was honouring my promise to let her leave, and had agreed to take her to the train station.

"Yes, but I can catch a cab if you're busy."

"I'm not busy."

We watched each other in silence for a few moments. I was filled with misgivings about allowing her to leave, but I wouldn't go back on the agreement. Romano was behind bars, and she'd assured me she had someone who would help her disappear. She was the happiest I'd seen her since she'd turned up over two weeks ago, and I wanted that happiness to continue. Being here with me only made her sad and angry. It was time to let her walk out of my life again.

My phone rang, breaking our silence.

Axe.

I put the phone to my ear. "What's up, brother?"

"Ryland has been replaced as head of the case against you and the club. I'm still waiting on further info, but it looks like he's been suspended."

"Why?"

"It seems he's on someone's payroll. Not sure on that yet either, but I'm working on it."

"Fuck," I muttered.

"Yeah. My thoughts exactly. I'll let you know as soon as I know something," he said, ending the call.

"Is everything okay?" Ivy asked.

I shook my head. "No. I'm going to get one of the boys to run you to the train station. I have something I need to take care of."

Her smile faded, but she said, "Okay, thanks." She walked to the door, glancing back at me briefly to say, "Thank you for taking care of Tony for me."

After I'd organised Kick to take Ivy where she needed to go, I rested my ass against the desk and took a moment to get my thoughts under control. Shit was changing and not in good ways. Ryland being replaced wasn't great. It was better the devil we knew with him. Fuck knew who would take over. Also, we were still in the dark as to Romano's location. The feds had him tucked away somewhere safe. And while I'd agreed for Ivy to leave, I would worry about her until we had her husband sorted. On top of all that, the club was struggling with everything going on. We were stretched thin trying to keep business running as usual while also working like fuck to fix the shit we were in. Add to that the fact I'd sent all family members away, and my men were starting to grow restless. I needed to pull us all back into line and get us ready for the next part of this battle.

I headed out to the clubhouse bar in search of Hyde. Finding him drinking with Nitro, I sat with them and detailed where we were at with Ryland as well as my thoughts on the unrest in the club. I then said, "We need a club get together tomorrow night. Something to bring us all back together and on the same page."

Hyde nodded his agreement. "I'll organise it."

"We also need a new plan to allow for everyone to have a couple of days off to visit their families. We've got Cole and the Brisbane boys here. They'll boost our numbers to make that possible." I looked at Nitro. "Can you get a roster sorted for that?"

"Will do."

I couldn't put my finger on what it was, but something had my gut churning. Something didn't fucking feel right, and I needed to figure that shit out fast.



I surveyed the clubhouse bar late the next afternoon, taking in my men. They'd started drinking just after three, and I'd let them all know our plan going forward. It was exactly what they needed to hear, and I watched as the tension eased with the knowledge they'd have time with their families soon.

"Everyone seems much happier," Annika said, joining me at the table where I sat in the corner. "It's amazing what some alcohol will do."

I drank some of my beer. It wasn't the alcohol that had caused this turn in mood. It was the brotherhood. It was always that. But I'd found unless someone was part of it, they struggled to wrap their head around just what the club meant. Every one of us would lay down our life for our brothers. Sometimes, though, the battles we waged took their toll. It was at those times we had to draw close and trust in our brothers to get us through. That was what today was about.

"How are the kids?"

"They've had enough, King. How much longer do you think this is going to go on?"

"They were okay at dinner last night."

"That's because you were there. They love you being around."

"I don't plan for this to take much longer, Nik." Axe had a lead on Romano's whereabouts, and we were following up on that. I was hopeful to have him dealt with in the next day, but I didn't tell her that in case shit went south.

"Good." She stood to leave. "One other thing—I really like Lily. She's such a great influence on Skylar. You did good there, big brother."

I finished my beer before heading out, too. I wasn't hanging around tonight. My head was all fucked up, so I needed some space to figure some of that out. I grabbed my shit from the office and dropped in on Skylar to check on her.

She glanced up at me from the bed where she was doing some study. "Ooh King, I'm glad you came by. Lily left her phone here." She held it out to me. "Can you please take it to her. She's probably stressing, wondering where it is."

I took the phone, but I wouldn't take it to Lily. I'd get Kick to run it over to her. "I'll get it to her," I promised.

Skye smiled, and I admitted to myself how right Nik had been about Lily's influence on our sister. Her anxiety had levelled out and she hadn't argued with me in days. "Thankyou," she said.

I pulled up a chair and spent some time chatting with her. Half an hour passed as she told me about her progress with Lily and the study she had to catch up on. We laughed and joked around with each other, and it felt like the easiest half hour I'd had in too fucking long.

"Something's going on with you," she said as we laughed over something silly she'd done that morning.

"What?"

"I don't know, but last night you wanted dinner with us all and now you're just sitting with me cracking jokes like I'm not sure I've ever seen you crack them." Her face softened. "It's nice, King. I like seeing you smile."

I stretched my neck. "I'd say it's because I haven't had a headache for a couple of days."

She narrowed her eyes at me. "Maybe. Whatever it is, I hope it continues. You need some happiness in your life."

"Okay," I said, standing, "I've got stuff to do, so I'm gonna head out. You need anything?"

"No, I'm good. Just please don't forget to get Lily's phone to her."

As I walked out to the bar to find Kick, Lily's phone rang. Her sister's face popped up on the screen.

I answered the call. "Yeah."

"King?" My gut tightened at Lily's voice. Jesus, she had this fucking effect every time I spoke with her.

"You left your phone with Skylar."

"Oh thank God. I thought I'd lost it. I'll come back and get it. Thank you."

"I'm on my way there with it now." *Fuck.*

Silence.

And then, softly and so fucking sweet it hit my gut again—"I really appreciate that."

Christ, I'd never done sweet. But hell if it didn't get me hard.

"I'll see you soon." I stabbed at the phone to end the call and shoved it in my pocket.

Fuck, I got myself into some shit sometimes.



Lily's sister answered the door when I arrived. "King," she greeted, a huge smile on her face, "Come in." She practically pulled me into the house and to the kitchen where their mother was pulling a roast out of the oven.

"You're just in time for dinner," Hannah said. I knew her name was Hannah because she'd spent a good twenty minutes telling me about her family the day I'd changed Lily's locks. In that time, I'd learnt everything from what an asshole Lily's father was to how they'd decided on Lily's name to their favourite holiday spot to the fact Hannah was desperate to marry her two daughters off because she didn't want them to end up alone like she was. Where Lily was straight to the point, her mother was wordy, and where Lily was practical, her mother seemed frivolous.

I placed Lily's phone on the kitchen counter. "I'm just dropping this off."

Hannah pulled a face and waved me off with one hand. "Don't be silly. We have plenty of food. And besides, you will kick yourself if you don't try Lily's famous roast beef." Her face pulled into a smile as she lowered her voice and shared what seemed to be a se-

cret, "She's also made a caramel slice that the kids love. And I have to say it really is her best dessert. My girl is an excellent cook, but sometimes her desserts are kinda so-so. Not this one, though. This one you will want to stay for."

"You mean you don't love my baked cheesecake, Mum?"

I turned to find Lily standing behind me, a playful smile on her face.

"Oh Lily, I was just trying to let King know that tonight he really should stay for dinner."

Lily's gaze met mine, her smile still in place. As her eyes dipped down to take in my body, she said, "Stay." And fuck if that didn't make me wanna stay.

Ten minutes later, we were seated around her dining table. It was a rowdy dining table and it threw me back years to when I sat around Margreet's dining table with our large family. Lily's kids were hesitant with me at first, but when her middle daughter asked me what it was like to ride a bike, they warmed to me fast. By the time we'd finished dessert, they'd asked if I would stay and watch *Thor* with them after dinner.

"Kids, King probably has to get back to the club. He doesn't have time to watch a movie," Lily said, looking at me with an expression I couldn't quite read. She seemed a little unsure of shit, and I didn't blame her. I had no fucking clue what we were doing here either.

"I'm good," I said as I jerked my chin at Robbie. "Go get the movie set up. I'll be there in a minute."

"Awesome," he said as he ran out of the room. The girls hit me with smiles, too, and then followed him. Hannah and Brynn were busy in the kitchen, leaving Lily and me alone.

"You don't have to stay and watch the movie," she said, fidgeting with the tablecloth.

"Do I strike you as a man who does shit he doesn't want to do?"

The uncertainty disappeared from her face and she smiled. "No, you do not."

I stood. "You watching it with us?"

"Ah that would be a no. I've already seen it like four times. I'm going to go take a bath while you babysit."

"Fuck," I muttered. "I did not fucking need that mental image when I'm about to hang out with your kids."

She grinned. "Enjoy the movie, King."

I left her and made my way out to the living room where the kids had the movie ready to go. This night had turned into the strangest fucking night, but I couldn't deny it felt good to be with Lily and her family. Even when Hannah joined us and didn't shut up during most of the movie, I felt more relaxed than I'd felt in years.



Lily was still in the bath two hours later when the movie finished. The kids scattered to their rooms, and Brynn and Hannah had gone home a little while before the movie finished. I turned off the television and went looking for Lily.

Leaning against the doorjamb of her bathroom, I crossed my arms over my chest. "Have you been in there all this time?"

She cracked an eye open and shook her head. "No, I did some laundry first and got some stuff ready for tomorrow."

"What's happening tomorrow?"

"The girls are both hanging out with their friends while I take Robbie to karate and then to the science centre. It's gonna be another long-ass day."

"Today was long?"

She sighed. "Every day is long, King."

Fuck, guilt hit me over pushing her into adding to her long days by working with Skylar. "Maybe you should cut your sessions back with Skye."

She sat up, and my eyes were drawn to her tits that were now on display above the bubbles. "What is this?"

I frowned. "What is what?"

She pointed her finger between the two of us. "*This*. You having dinner with my family and then watching a freaking movie with my kids. You being nice to my mother. God, you being nice to *me*. Where's the moody man I know so well? And why are you saying I should cut back my sessions when you told me just yesterday not to?" She stood and got out of the bath, coming to me, water and bubbles dripping everywhere. A fierce expression had settled on her face. Jabbing me in the chest, she added forcefully, "You are so freaking confusing!" Then grabbing her towel, she wrapped it around herself and walked into her bedroom.

I reached for her arm and yanked her back to me. "I don't know what the fuck this is, but I can't stay away. That smart mouth of yours, and sweet fucking ways turn me the hell on. And your family? I like them. They're honest and real, and you don't fucking find that often anymore."

Her eyes searched mine for a long few moments before we got to what was really doing her head in. She pushed out of my hold like she was trying to keep some distance between us. "You made it clear you don't want anything but sex, and I figure you're not just getting that from me. Which is fine. I'm not saying it's not. But I'm not into that, King. I thought we were just going to sleep together once, and I was good with that. Kind of. But then I met Ivy and I realised I am so far from good with it, it's not funny. So you should go back to doing what you were doing before you met me, and we should call it quits."

Fuck I liked a woman who got to the fucking point and didn't play games with me.

I pulled her close again. "We need to get a few things straight. One, I'm not fucking Ivy. That's an old relationship that will never be revisited. Two, I'm not fucking anyone else. And three, there is no fucking way you and I are calling it quits." I gripped her waist and backed her up against the wall. "I wasn't looking for a relationship, and I can't say it's high on my priority list, but I also can't say I don't want to keep seeing you. What I *can* say is that I don't want to see anyone else." My mouth brushed her ear as I added, "You are the only woman I want to fuck."

Her hands came to my chest and she tried to push me away. "King—"

I refused to budge. Taking hold of her face, I angled it up to mine. "I'm not letting you walk away from this, so don't even think about that."

Her eyes widened. "So what, you'll just force your way into my life?"

"I won't need to. You want this as much as I do. And fuck, the way you opened up to me when I fucked you, you can't deny how good that sex was."

She contemplated that before scrunching my shirt into her hands. "Has anyone ever told you how infuriating you are? Because you are. And yet, all I wanna do is kiss you. It's freaking maddening to

me how you manage to get away with shit." And then, before I had a chance to kiss her, she pushed me away and escaped my hold. Walking to her wardrobe, she threw over her shoulder, "FYI, my body is still sore after you fucked the hell out of it, so there won't be any sex for you tonight. Plus, my kids are here tonight, so there's that, too."

Fucking hell, this woman.

"I didn't come here for sex, Lily."

She dropped her towel, giving me half a minute with her body before she covered it back up with a T-shirt. *Nowhere near fucking long enough.* "So are you staying or are you going? I'm good with staying, because I like having you to cuddle up to."

I jerked my chin at her bed before pulling my shirt over my head. "Get your ass in there."

She grinned. "Now there's the King I know." And then she made my fucking day by doing what I said.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Lily

I wasn't sure what I'd agreed to with King. All I knew for sure was the man was pushy with a capital freaking P. The other thing I knew for sure, and I was surprised as hell at, was that he could get through a night in my bed without trying to fuck me. That's not to say he could go a night without having his hands all over me, and his body pressed as hard to mine as possible, but I had to give him credit for respecting my wishes.

I woke up this morning wrapped from head to toe by his arms, torso and legs. When I tried to move, he tightened his hold on me. The weird thing was he was still asleep. It seemed King liked to look out for those around him while he was sleeping just as much as he did while he was awake.

I managed to wiggle my way out of his embrace and get up to use the bathroom. Entering the bedroom when I was finished, I found him awake, arms rested behind his head, watching my every move. "Morning," I said.

"Morning." Those eyes of his held a smile I wasn't sure I'd seen before. It was subtle, but it was there. And I liked it.

"I'm going to make a coffee. You want one?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

I hit him with one last smile before leaving the bedroom. Thoughts of what I was going to tell my kids about him sleeping over filled my mind as I headed into the kitchen. I'd dated a few guys after divorcing Linc, but none of them had ever stayed the night, not even the couple of relationships that lasted longer than a few months. I'd never been comfortable having them sleep over, and I had to wonder why I'd thrown all those hesitations out the window for King. Maybe it had to do with the fact my kids seemed to really like him. Or maybe I really was that distracted by the man that all common sense eluded me.

I'd just filled the kettle and switched it on when Linc's voice sounded from the back door. "What the fuck, Lily? You changed the locks?"

I stalked to the door and glared at him through the glass. "Yes, I did, to keep you out. You don't live here anymore, Linc, and I've asked you multiple times not to come by whenever you want or let yourself in. So I changed the locks."

"Fuck. Let me in, woman."

Oh my God, he did not just call me that. "Don't call me that! I am not your damn woman."

"Lily, for fuck—" He abruptly stopped talking as his gaze was drawn to something behind me.

Turning, I found King watching Linc with a murderous expression.

Oh goodness.

Shit, shit, shit.

"Who the fuck is that?" Linc demanded.

King's nostrils flared. He stepped forward, closer to me, and I knew simply by looking at him that this situation was about to go bad.

Placing my palm on his bare chest, I said, "King, let me deal with this."

His jaw clenched, his eyes coming to mine only briefly before locking back onto Linc. Ignoring my request, he growled, "You need to pull your head in and apologise to her."

Linc scowled at him. "She's my fucking wife, mate."

"And that's why you're standing out there and I'm standing in here," King said. His shoulders were like rocks. "Back the fuck up, apologise, and then leave."

Linc rattled the door. "Open this fucking door, Lil, and let me in."

Before I could say or do anything, King slid the door open and stepped outside. I knew that if I allowed this to continue between them, someone was going to get hurt. And I was fairly sure it wasn't going to be King. Moving as fast as I could, I got in between them and pressed my hands to their chests, trying to keep them apart.

Glancing madly between them, I said, "You two both need to take a step back. I have three kids in this house, and I do not want them to wake up to a punch up." I glared at Linc and added, "Especially not one involving their father."

Neither backed down straight away. It wasn't until I pushed both of them that King came to his senses and took a step back.

I looked at him. "Thank you." And then to Linc, I said, "The locks have changed. Deal with it. We've been divorced for three years, Linc, and we're never getting back together. I am not your wife anymore, and you can't keep dropping in here whenever you want. I'm not going to say this again. And also, you should know that I took your name off my gym membership, too."

He stared at me like I had three heads. "You're fucking kidding, right? We've been together since we were kids, Lil. Suddenly you meet a new guy, and I'm out in the cold?"

I expected King to get involved again, but he impressed me by staying back and letting me handle this. It was clear from his body language, though, that if I wasn't able to deal with Linc, he'd be more than happy to step back in.

"You cheated on me, Linc! Remember that? This has nothing to do with King, and everything to do with me finally figuring out that I need to set some boundaries with you. I can't expect you to respect me if I don't respect myself enough to do that." I jabbed a finger in the air at him. "Things will be changing around here, and that includes your freaking child support payments. I'm not accepting any bullshit from you going forward."

"You've turned into a bitch, Lily," Linc said.

King lost his shit at that. Moving to Linc, he grabbed him by the shirt and threatened, "You call her a bitch again, you and me are gonna have trouble." He then shoved him away and guided me back inside, closing the door after us.

Linc got the message after that and stormed out of my backyard. His car screeched away from the house soon after. Less than a

minute later, I burst into tears. Crying over Linc wasn't something I was in the habit of doing, but dealing with his shit had become a heavy burden to carry. Usually I just got on with it, but there was something about having King's support that affected me. I didn't feel so alone with this now.

"Fuck," King muttered, pulling me into his arms. "Don't let that asshole get to you."

His arms around me felt good. Soothing. I buried my head against his chest and took a moment to gather myself. King was right—I wouldn't let Linc get to me—but it didn't hurt to let my emotions flow rather than bottling them up like I had been.

I took a deep breath and lifted my head, looking up into King's eyes. "Thank you."

"I didn't do much, Lily."

I smiled. "You did."

The last three years as a single mum had been a hard slog, but if I were honest, the few years before that were just as hard, even while still married. People often said to me how difficult it must be to raise my kids on my own, and sure, it was, but what they didn't realise was that even when you were in a marriage, it could sometimes feel like you were doing it all alone. Linc had checked out of our marriage long before he'd cheated on me. He also hadn't been the kind of man who was always there for me as a husband or a father when I needed him to be. I'd learnt to rely on myself pretty early on. King didn't understand that in the short time I'd known him, he'd come through for me in ways my husband never had.

"Morning," Zara said sleepily, wandering into the kitchen. She eyed King, and I waited nervously for her reaction. I needn't have been worried. She hardly acknowledged his presence before grabbing a drink of water and wandering back out of the kitchen.

I made our coffees and as I was finishing up, King moved behind me, placing his hands either side of me on the kitchen counter. With his mouth to my ear, he said, "I need you tonight. Can you make that happen?"

I nodded, my body shivering just thinking about it. "Yes."

My need matched his, and I would do whatever it took to make that happen.



"I owe you big time," I said to Brynn over the phone later that day as I watched Robbie geeking out over stuff at the science centre. We'd had a busy day between grocery shopping, housework, karate and now the science centre. Brynn had just agreed to babysit the kids tonight so I could spend time with King, but I was wondering if I'd even have the energy that sex with him demanded. The man was brutal in both how he fucked and for how long he fucked.

"I'll sleep over so you don't have to worry about getting home at a certain time. And then tomorrow we can go to that farmer's market I've been wanting to go to for ages."

"Ugh," I groaned. I was so not a market girl, but Brynn loved them and was always trying to get me to go with her. "Really? That's how I have to pay you back?"

"Is King not worth the market?"

She had me there. Sex with King was worth all the markets. "Fine," I grumbled. "We'll do the market tomorrow. And you can tell me all about your hot fishing date on the way." We hadn't found the time yet to talk about her date with the prostitute. I was hanging to hear all about it. "Did you ask him how many women he bangs in a week?"

She laughed. "Let's just say we had other things to do rather than talking about that."

"Oh my God, Brynn! You fucked him?"

"That will have to wait until tomorrow to be discussed. You need something to look forward to if you have to go to the market."

"You are so right, but this is gonna be the longest wait of my life."

"Okay, I've gotta go. I'm going to cook the kids something special for dinner, so I'll be at your place from about three, okay?"

"Sounds good. They'll be excited," I said before ending the call.

Robbie came running over to me, excitement plastered over his face. "Can we stay for at least another half hour? They're doing a special show soon, and I really wanna see it."

I smiled. "Of course, baby."

He threw his arms around me and hugged me. "You're the best mum!" And then he was gone again.

I would miss his affection when he grew out of it. I definitely missed Zara's. She still hadn't completely forgiven me for the boyfriend thing, but she'd definitely calmed down over it. That kinda made me nervous, though, because I wondered why. I made a mental note to follow up on that tomorrow. I couldn't afford to let my guard down for one second with that child.

But for the rest of today, I was focused on myself and getting laid. I sent King a text to let him know tonight was on.

Me: Babysitter sorted. Let me know what time to come over.

King: Any time after seven.

I started to type out a sexy reply, but then deleted it. King didn't seem like the kind of man who made time for sexting. I thought about it some more and decided to hell with it, he could just choose not to reply if he wasn't into it.

Me: I can't stop thinking about your hands around my neck.

He didn't come straight back to me. It took him about five minutes, but I figured I hit the mark by the reply I got.

King: Fuck

Me: And I really liked your belt around my hands.

Again, five or so minutes passed before he texted back.

King: I'm in the middle of shit

I stared at the message, a little unsure of what he meant.

Me: And?

This time he didn't text, he called and got straight to the point when he said, "I'm dealing with club business, and your texts are distracting as fuck."

I grinned, loving that I'd stirred him up. "Are they getting you hard, King?"

"Fucking hell," he muttered. "That's a fucking understatement."

"So I shouldn't send you any more? Or what about a boob pic?"

"I have to go. Don't send me any more shit. I'll see you tonight."

The call ended, and I sat on the chair watching my son having a great time while I grinned like a loon. Somewhere along the way, life had gotten really freaking good.



Sometimes in life, you didn't see things coming. They blindsided you. I'd had a few of those moments in my life—when my father had walked out of it right before my twelfth birthday and the day I'd caught Linc cheating on me. Each of those times, my sister had been there for me. We'd got each other through the heartbreak of our father leaving, and then she'd gotten me through my break-up with Linc. We shared a connection I held dearer than almost anything in my life. With Brynn by my side, I felt like anything was achievable and any situation could be survived.

I had never imagined a life without Brynn.

Could never imagine it.

That afternoon, I was blindsided for the third time in my life.

Robbie and I arrived home from the science centre. His friend who lived next door waved at him as we pulled into the driveway,

so he left me to go see him. I slung my bag over my shoulder and exited the garage into the house. Brynn's car was parked in my garage, so I was surprised to find the house in silence. She usually blasted music while she cooked. Maybe she'd decided not to cook after all.

"Brynn, where are you?" I called out as I walked to the kitchen. "I have some goss to share with—" I came to an abrupt halt as I entered the kitchen.

Oh God.

No.

I was seeing things.

My heart raced as I stared at my sister lying on the floor with blood oozing out of her.

I screamed. I know I did, but I couldn't hear it.

I scrambled to the floor to pull her into my arms.

I couldn't think straight.

"Brynn, no!"

I sat with her head in my lap, clinging to her. Willing her to not die.

Gulping down breaths, I suddenly realised I should check for a pulse.

There was a pulse.

With shaky hands, I reached into my bag and pulled out my phone. Somehow I called 000 and got through the call.

"Brynn!" I cried out as if that would magically fix her.

My chest hurt.

I couldn't do this.

I needed Brynn to get me through this.

I dialled King. It was instinctual. There was no thought process. Somehow I just knew he was my person. *He* would get me through this when my sister couldn't.

He answered on the third ring. "What's up?"

I gripped the phone hard and tried to talk, but the only sound that came was a wail.

"Lily, what?" he demanded. "What the fuck has happened?"

"It's Brynn... She's been shot. I need you."

"Fuck. I'm on my way."

I couldn't breathe.

My heart was going to explode out of my chest.

My sister could not die.

I couldn't do life without her.

Hurry, King.

I need you.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

King

I paced the hospital corridor early Sunday morning, my mind working out how I would avenge the shooting of Lily's sister. There was no doubt in my mind this was Romano's doing. And that shit was on me. I hadn't taken enough precautions to keep Lily and her family safe. I thought I had, but clearly I fucking hadn't. Her sister wouldn't be lying in a coma if I had.

Fuck.

I shoved my fingers through my hair and stopped pacing as I watched Lily walk my way. Empty eyes met mine, and I swallowed hard. Her arms circled me and she clung tightly as she sobbed. I held her for as long as she needed. I gave her that now because I wouldn't be giving it to her later. This would be the end of the road for us. No fucking way was I putting another woman's life at risk simply because she was in my life. Lily would never become a casualty of my war.

"Thank you for staying with me all night," she said softly when she let me go. "I couldn't have gotten through it without you."

I nodded, but I had no words for her. Not when the only words that would be honest enough were—*this is my fucking fault.*

"I'm going to take Mum home. The doctor has given her something to help her sleep." Another sob escaped her lips as her hand

flew to her mouth. "I've never seen my mother so distraught." Her eyes pleaded with mine for answers when she added, "It will kill her if she loses Brynn."

I knew she wanted me to say everything was going to be okay, that Brynn would pull through and they'd go back to life as they knew it, but I couldn't. That had never been my experience in life, and I wouldn't lie to her just to make her feel better. Lies only helped in the short-term; they just made shit worse after that.

"I'll take you home," I said, needing to give her that before walking away from her. I'd already organised for some of my men to watch her mother's house. Once I'd dealt with Romano, I'd be completely gone from her life, and she'd be safe again.

"Thank you."

Forty minutes later, she glanced at the bikes outside her mum's place as I pulled into the driveway. "Who's here?"

I parked the car and looked at her. "I've put some of my guys here to watch over you."

She frowned. "Do you think whoever did this will come back?"

I knew she thought it was a robbery gone wrong, and I would have liked to let her continue thinking that, but I couldn't. She had to be prepared in case shit did go down again. "I don't know, but they may. Hopefully it will get sorted, and the guys won't be here long."

Her eyes widened. "Oh my God, King. Are my kids safe?"

"Yes. These men are my best, Lily. Military trained. You're safe."

Her shoulders sagged. "Thank you," she said before brushing a kiss over my lips. "I really would be lost without you right now."

Fuck, I was a bastard. I wanted more of that kiss. It would be my last taste of her. Gripping the back of her neck, I pulled her mouth back to mine and kissed her for a long fucking time. It was rough and demanding, and she gave that to me even though her world had turned upside down. Even when she was struggling just to breathe, Lily gave. I didn't deserve a woman as good as her in my life.

We woke her mother, and I got them both inside. Linc was there with the kids, and I stayed out of his way. As little as I thought of him, Lily would need him, and I hoped to fuck he came through for her.

We got her mum into bed, and then I helped Lily shower and dress before settling her in bed, too. When I brushed a kiss across her forehead and stood, she frowned. "Are you leaving?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

"Why?"

I rubbed the back of my neck. "I've got shit to take care of."

"Oh, okay. Do you know what time you'll be finished?"

"No." It came out hard, but I couldn't help that. I had to shut the fucking feelings I had for her down, and hard was the only way I knew how to do that.

She frowned again. "King, what's going on?"

"I don't have time to get into it. I have to go."

She was silent for a beat. "Well, I'm going to head back to the hospital in a few hours. I'll call you then and see where you are."

"Don't call me. I'll be on my way to Melbourne."

She sat up, her features filled with confusion. "I don't understand what's happening here. Why are you going to Melbourne? And when will I see you again?"

I took a step back at the same time I clamped ice down over my heart. When I answered her question, I let that ice coat my words. "You won't see me again. This is over between us." *This has to be over between us.*

I stalked out of the house without waiting for her response. By the time I reached the car, I'd switched to battle mode. The only thought in my head was that I had to obliterate Tony Romano's operation. Something I should have done a lot fucking sooner.

"King!" Lily called out, running out to the car. "Wait!"

My jaw clenched as I opened the car door. "Go back inside, Lily. This isn't up for negotiation."

She stood on the other side of the door, staring at me with shock. "I don't understand. Why?"

I ignored the tears streaming down her face. Refused to see them. *I'm doing this for her.* "Because you don't belong in my world, and I don't belong in yours. Now go the fuck back inside. We're done."

She flinched as if I'd punched her. And then she stared at me like she didn't know who I was. Wrapping her arms around her body, she moved away from the car. She didn't utter another word.

As fast as we'd begun, we were done.

And I was reminded once more that the journey through life was best taken alone.

KING'S PLAYLIST

Did you know I have a playlist for every book I write? They're on Spotify [here](#).

King's list:

To Be Alone by Hozier
Bloodstream by Ed Sheeran
My Sacrifice by Creed
Best of You by Foo Fighters
Sympathy For The Devil by Guns N' Roses
With Arms Wide Open by Creed
Let's Hurt Tonight by OneRepublic
Choke by OneRepublic
I Love You Always Forever by Betty Who
Still Falling For You by Ellie Goulding
Remedy by Adele
Water Under The Bridge by Adele
River Lea by Adele
It's Gotta Be You by Isaiah
Spaces by One Direction
Long Stretch of Love by Lady Antebellum
One Great Mystery by Lady Antebellum
Smooth by Florida Georgia Line
Beautifully Unfinished by Ella Henderson
Hard Work by Ella Henderson
Long Way Down by One Direction

Over You by Daughtry
Waiting For Superman by Daughtry
Start of Something Good by Daughtry
No Surprise by Daughtry
Torches by Daughtry
Go Down by Daughtry
Baptized by Daughtry
I'll Fight by Daughtry
High Above The Ground by Daughtry
Undefeated by Daughtry
Losing My Mind by Daughtry
When We Were Young by The Killers
White Blank Page by Mumford & Sons
Home by Nickelback
The Betrayal - Act III by Nickelback
What Are You Waiting For? by Nickelback
Break Me Shake Me by Savage Garden
Desperado by Rihanna
The Sound of Silence by Disturbed
Down With The Sickness by Disturbed
River by Bishop Briggs
Coming Undone by Korn
Pain by Three Days Grace
State of My Head by Shinedown
Running Away by Midnight Hour
Fire Away by Chris Stapleton
Your Betrayal by Bullet For My Valentine
You Want a Battle? (Here's A War) by Bullet For My Valentine
Love On The Brain by Rihanna
Stay by Rihanna, Mikky Ekko
Love The Way You Lie by Rihanna, Eminem
But We Lost It by Pink
I Am Here by Pink
Wild Hearts Can't Be Broken by Pink
You Get My Love by Pink
Try by Pink
Take My Heart by Birdy
Wings by Birdy
Light Me Up by Birdy

Strange Birds by Birdy
Standing In The Way of The Light by Birdy
When She Says Baby by Jason Aldean
Boy by Lee Brice
Turnin' Me On by Blake Shelton
The Wave by Blake Shelton
I Don't Dance by Lee Brice
Red by Taylor Swift
Thunder In The Rain by Kane Brown
21 Guns by Green Day
Never Be The Same by Camila Cabello
Way Down We Go by Kaleo
You Are The Reason by Calum Scott, Leona Lewis

KING'S REIGN

KING'S REIGN

The epic conclusion to King's story.

I was chasing pure darkness.

Succumbing to the needs I'd forced to the far edges of my soul.

Running like a madman towards evil.

Then I found her.

She breathed life into me when I hadn't thought there was any life beyond what I knew.

She gave me hope after I'd forgotten what it was.

She helped quiet the demons raging deep inside me.

Now I will lay myself bare for her.

I will bleed for her.

I will love her madly, deeply, passionately, completely.

DEDICATION

This one's for all my amazing readers.

CHAPTER ONE

King

Some say the art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting. I didn't buy that shit for a second. I've always said show the fuck up with the biggest army you can amass and crush the motherfuckers with brute fucking force.

I was here to crush Tony Romano's empire with the kind of force that would tell the world never to fuck with Storm again.

We'd arrived in Melbourne just after 8:00 p.m. and had staked out both his home and his business headquarters for the past two hours. Biding our time. Something I wasn't good at, but Axe had convinced me this was the best course of action to ensure we were running on good information that left little room for surprises when we did attack. I'd left a skeleton crew back in Sydney and brought just over forty men with me. Zane and Griff were in charge of surveillance, pulling intel on how many men we were dealing with inside. Last week, they'd found the floor plans for each building and had mapped out different scenarios for how to infiltrate and attack. The thing I wanted to make sure of before we went in, guns fucking blazing, was that there were no women or children who'd be caught in the crossfire. The intel so far led us to believe there weren't, but Zane was making sure that information was accurate.

Hyde approached me as I watched the entrance to Romano's headquarters. A van had just arrived and five more men were about to enter the building. "You sure you don't wanna just burn the joint down and be done with it, brother?"

I turned to him. We'd been going back and forth over this question for about an hour, and disagreed on it. As far as we knew, there were about thirty guys in the building. Hyde held concerns that was too many for us to deal with. "I want to look these motherfuckers in the eye and see them bleed. And I want to make sure every last fucking one of them dies. There will be no survivors here today."

"Okay, we do this your way, but if shit gets out of hand, I'm torching the place and getting us the fuck out of there."

I clenched my jaw, pissed that he kept arguing over this. "No." No fucking way was I not getting my hands dirty with these cunts. If they wanted to come at me the way they had, they would feel the full extent of my wrath.

He returned my scowl. "King, you're running on emotion, and we both know that's a dangerous headspace to be in with this kind of shit. I don't wanna see our club wiped out because you couldn't fucking think straight."

"I fucking said no, so drop it. And if you can't, you can stay the fuck out of this entire operation," I barked before turning back to continue watching the building.

"Fuck," he fired back before stalking away from me, muttering some other shit under his breath I couldn't work out, nor had any fucking interest in trying to.

As he left, Zane made his way to me. "Best we can figure, there won't be any collateral damage if we go in now."

"You're sure?"

He gave a quick nod. "Yes."

I glanced at Axe who'd also joined us. "You agree we're good to go?" My brother was the only person whose opinion I ever gave this much weight to. He'd proven his skill in this kind of situation a long time ago, and while it sometimes killed me to take his suggestions on board, I almost always did.

"I do. There may not be a better time than right now. Most of the guys inside are concentrated in the back corner of the building. That neutralises a lot of the risk associated with this. And there's no one at Romano's home, so it's good timing there, too."

I texted Nitro who was at Romano's home and told him to proceed. I then spoke into my handheld radio that connected me to Kick and Devil who were at various points around this building. "Go!"

We moved fast and silently towards the perimeter, entering the building as Zane and Griff had planned. That was after Axe and I slit the throats of the two guys guarding this side of the building. Griff had shut down the video surveillance, allowing us to enter with ease. That I finally had some of Romano's men's blood on my hands lit my fucking mind up.

I needed more.

I fucking hungered for it.

This shit had been going on for too long; I was like a jittery fucking addict waiting for his next hit.

My finger twitched at the trigger of my gun.

If only Romano were here.

Fuck, I wouldn't kill him on sight; I'd take him with me so I could keep him like a fucking toy that needed to be played with daily. Pull that fucker out every hour and give him some King love. *The kind of love my father taught me.*

Once inside, I led the way to the back corner room, meeting the two other teams of men who'd entered at different access points. Darkness blanketed the building, the only light spilling from the back like Zane had predicted.

Devil, Kick, and Hyde locked eyes on me. Without pausing for even one fucking second, I stormed through the door and opened fire the minute my gaze landed on the first of Romano's motherfuckers.

Surprise rolled across his face before terror as he took in my gun. I zeroed in on that terror, feeding the craving that lived deep in my soul. Satisfaction filled my veins exactly like the addict I was, and every instinct I had for death and torture roared to life in a way it never had before.

There will be a bloodbath here today.

I'd been shutting my shit down for far too fucking long.

Keeping a tight fucking rein on my crazy.

No more.

I would allow every impulse I had to take over and run its course. And when the chips fell wherever they did, I would pick

those fuckers up and do it all over again with the next enemy on my motherfucking list.

The sound of gunfire filled the room, mine leading the way. There had to be twenty guys in here, some cutting coke, some counting cash, some watching over the operation. That they only had four guards on the building—the two where we'd entered, and two more at other points—told me whoever Romano had left in charge didn't know his ass from his elbow. With this kind of shit going on in here, I would have blanketed the building with protection.

We were thirty to their twenty, and we had the element of surprise. But while I didn't think much of whoever was running this show, I had to give it to them—they were ready enough for an invasion like this. Guns swiftly appeared, and we had to react fast to avoid bullets. That only sparked my mania.

My mind disconnected from everything but the task at hand.

Kill.

Annihilate.

Ruin.

The carnage surrounding me stoked the fire of hate burning deep inside me.

Romano had kept me down for long enough; I was back on my fucking feet now.

Give me all you've got, motherfuckers.

"King!"

My gaze sliced to where Kick pointed, and I roared with rage as I eyed one of our men going down. A moment later, I had my arm hooked around the neck of Romano's guy who was about to bring his blade down on my man.

Squeezing tight, I snarled, "You ever felt the cut of a knife, cunt?"

He thrashed against my body trying to break free of my hold. "Fuck you, asshole!"

I jerked him against me again, making sure I choked some of the life from him. "It hurts for sure, but I'm not here just to deliver some fucking hurt. I'm going to sink that blade into your body and twist and dig the fuck out of your insides until your screams are burned into my brain. And until you're eyeballs roll back and you're dreaming of hell because even it'd be better than meeting me."

"Do your fucking best," he managed to get out as I shoved him to the ground.

Dropping my gun, I ripped the knife from his hand as our eyes locked. I bent over him and sliced his shirt down the middle. I needed to see the blood drain from his body. Needed *that* seared into my brain. Romano wasn't here, but I would take what I required from this motherfucker. And what I fucking required was to channel every ounce of my fury and pain into making someone else hurt like I did.

I plunged the blade into his chest. The kind of rush a junkie would do anything for surged through me. But it wasn't enough.

The second thrust of the blade sparked a disconnect between my mind and my humanity.

I detached myself from everything with the third.

Almost there.

I floated outside of myself as I stabbed him the fourth time.

Now I was chasing pure darkness.

Succumbing to the needs I'd forced to the far edges of my soul.

Running like a madman towards the evil that infected the parts of me I could never eradicate.

His blood was my blood.

I fucking bled the same pain he did.

His cries were my cries.

And finally, when he took his last breath, he was as dead as I was.

My frenzy finished when blood and guts lay sprawled out before me, a feast for my black heart.

I stood and dropped the knife on his dead body. Blood covered every inch of my skin. I barely noticed it, though. The high buzzing my veins stole my attention. Every single last speck of it.

I was just getting started.

Tonight we would blaze chaos through this city.

Anarchy was the only answer to Romano's deeds.

Hyde stepped in front of me and snatched up the knife. "It's done, brother."

My eyes cut to his briefly before glancing around at the slaughter. Death surrounded us. It filled my senses in exactly the way I needed it to. But my wrath still raged, and I knew it wouldn't be sated until I had Romano's blood on my hands.

I looked at Hyde. "Everyone?"

He nodded.

I picked up my gun. "Light the fucking match."

Sweeping my gaze over the room one last time, I stalked out, my mind already shifting to the next stop on tonight's death train. My men followed, Hyde and Devil torching the joint, leaving Romano's empire in a state of destruction. Next stop, his allies. If they didn't agree to our terms for how we would conduct business going forward, they would suffer my wrath, too.

CHAPTER TWO

King

The headache I'd had for days sank its claws deeper into me. Nothing I took came close to easing it. Not even the shit Lily had given me.

Fuck.

I exited the clubhouse bar and headed to my office. Shutting myself in, door closed, I dumped my phone on the desk, switched the lamp on, and reached for the bottle of whisky that had become my saviour. I guzzled a mouthful, hardly noticing the burn as it slid down my throat.

Sitting, I rested my head back against the top of the chair and took another swig of whisky. I couldn't get this shit into me fast enough. My only goal tonight was to knock myself the fuck out and silence the thoughts and feelings slowly killing me.

Last night we'd cut a path through Melbourne, making it very fucking clear Romano no longer held any power in that city. Blood had been spilt. Fuck, for some, it had flowed. But in the end, I'd made every last motherfucker understand that Storm now ran Melbourne. And they'd spread that news around today. I'd taken a lot of fucking calls when we'd arrived back late this afternoon. We'd stepped on a lot of toes, pissed a lot of people off. I couldn't have cared less. I'd already told Winter to pack his bags and prepare to

move to Melbourne. He'd be heading up our operation down there. I'd never been interested in that city; now I'd take it over.

A knock sounded at the door, and Axe stepped inside. His gaze landed on the whisky in front of me, and he frowned. "You okay, brother?"

"Yeah. What's up?"

He moved further into the office, a look of concern on his face. "Just got word from my guy. He's been able to confirm that Romano is working with the feds. They turned him."

I threw some more whisky down my throat. "And his location?"

Axe shook his head. "Still nothing on that."

I motioned my hand at him. "Get him on the phone."

"No."

I worked my jaw, unable to calm my rising irritation. "Axe, get him on the fucking phone."

His eyes turned hard. "What, so you can fuck this up? I let you talk to him, we won't have a contact in the feds anymore."

"Fuck," I roared, slamming the bottle down. Standing, I met him where he stood, my body tense with determination. "You've got skills I don't, brother, but right now, we don't have time to fuck around waiting for you to work this guy. It's time for me to have a word with him."

Deadlocked, we wasted a minute while Axe got to the realisation I wouldn't let this go. He could be a stubborn motherfucker sometimes.

"Jesus, Zac," he muttered, smacking his phone into my hand. "Try not to screw this up for me. I've used this guy for a few years now, and he knows his shit. I don't want to lose him."

His use of my name lightened my mood. I lifted a brow. "You only use that name when you want something."

"I want you to tread carefully. You think you've got that in you? 'Cause I sure as fuck don't."

"No." He was right—I didn't have that in me. Scrolling through his phone, I said, "What's his name?"

He rattled off the name and I dialled the guy. While I waited for him to answer, I looked at Axe. "The time for restraint has passed, brother. We're not taking any fucking prisoners anymore."

He scrubbed a hand over his face and turned away from me. He hadn't been this pissed off with me for a long time, but I couldn't

bring myself to give a fuck. This wasn't anything new for us. He'd come around.

His guy answered my call, "Axe, man, it's late."

"Johnny, it's Zachary King, Axe's brother. We need to have a talk about Tony Romano."

Silence for a beat. "No, we don't. I only talk to Axe."

I gripped the phone harder, willing my impatience to take a back seat. "Not tonight you don't. Tonight you tell me everything you know about what the fuck Romano's doing with your friends."

The stillness on the other end of the phone was deafening and maddening, causing my agitation to flare. "Okay, let me put this another way, Johnny. You give me what I want or I'll come at you in ways you won't like."

Axe swore under his breath, pacing the office. His angry eyes met mine, but I ignored what I saw there.

I just fucking need to know where Romano is.

"Your brother there with you?" Johnny asked, his own anger bleeding through the phone.

"Yeah, but for the record, he's not down with this request." I could be a good brother sometimes.

"Put him on."

"How about you listen to me, Johnny? You give me the information I want, and then you can talk to Axe for hours if that's what you want."

"I've heard a lot of shit about you, and now I've had the pleasure of this conversation, I'm guessing all of it was right," he gritted out. "I've told Axe everything I know. They've got this investigation locked down tight like I've never seen before. Whatever shit Romano knows, it's big."

"I'm giving you twenty-four hours to find his location. That's all I need at this point."

"Fuck. It's gonna take me longer than that. They don't muck around when they've got someone in witness protection."

I decided to take a new tack. "Here's what we're gonna do. You speed this up, get me that information by this time tomorrow, I'll leave you alone *and* throw in ten grand in cash."

He blew out a long breath. "Forty-eight hours."

I balled my fist. I did not want to wait another day, but I knew the truth in what he said. It could well take him that long. "The cash

offer is only good until tomorrow. Hurry this the hell up."

I ended the call and shoved Axe's phone back at him. "Where's Zane?"

"In the bar as far as I know."

I stalked out there and found both him and Griff. They were going over something on Zane's laptop. I pulled up a seat at their table. "I've got a job for you two. Romano's in protection. You think you can track him down within the next twenty-four hours?"

We'd suspected they had him in witness protection, but it hadn't been confirmed until now. It slanted this differently than if he was being held in prison. It meant that if we could locate him, we could deal with him ourselves rather than finding someone inside to do it.

Zane nodded. "Yeah. It's possible."

"That's what I thought," I said. Johnny might have been a fed, but he didn't have the equipment and skills Zane did. There was a reason Zane was in high demand since he'd left the military.

I stood as I saw Devil enter the bar. "Keep me updated." Leaving them, I met Devil as he found somewhere to sit. "How'd you go?"

Exhaustion lined his face. Fuck, it lined all our faces. "Her sister is still in a coma."

"And Lily?" My gut knotted. She'd invaded my head since I'd walked away from her. I couldn't escape her.

"She's at the hospital. The kids are at her mother's with their father. The boys have reported there's been no suspicious behaviour at the house. They're safe, King."

"Talk to her neighbours tomorrow. Get me a description of anyone they saw at the house that day." I wasn't leaving it to the police to bring justice for Lily's sister. I would deliver that myself. By my own fucking hand.

I headed back to my office, ready to finish that bottle of whisky. I hadn't made it to the office when a text came through that made me sit the fuck up and pay attention.

Unknown Number: Sara needs to see you.

Jesus, what the fuck was Bronze doing?

Me: You're in Sydney?

Bronze: Yes

Me: When?

Bronze: Now

Me: Give me 30

I stalked out of the clubhouse. Bronze was about to incur some of my wrath. I hadn't set him up just so he could come back and fuck himself in the ass.



"You should be a million fucking miles from here, Bronze." I'd arrived at the café before him and had sat for the past five minutes growing increasingly pissed off. "This was not the fucking plan."

He returned my scowl as he sat across from me. "You know me better than that, King. I did exactly what you would have done in the same situation."

I ground my teeth together as I ran my gaze over his face. "You look like shit." He looked a hell of a lot worse than shit. It had been ten days since I'd seen him, but it looked like he hadn't slept in a month.

"Yeah, you too, asshole."

I leaned back in my seat, trying to shake the wild energy coursing through me. I was fucking hyped up from everything going on and everything I still had to get done. It was a high I would crash and burn from eventually. Usually I'd screw my way through it, but the only warmth I craved was the one I wouldn't seek.

Huffing out a breath, I demanded, "So, what gives?"

"I've been doing some digging on Romano and his crew. One of his guys seems to be his main choice for getting shit done, so I dug deeper on him than the others. Turns out he changed his name years ago, and when I followed that, I found his history of violent crime including multiple counts of murder. I figure he's probably the guy Tony sent to take care of Jen—"

"Romano's crew has been taken care of, Bronze. This information isn't useful anymore."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "When? Because I had a buddy track this guy's credit cards, and he used one a few hours ago."

I frowned. "Where?"

"Here. Sydney." When I didn't respond, he asked, "You found Romano yet?"

I shook my head.

He slid a piece of paper across the table. "We find this guy, he might lead us to him."

I glanced down at the paper.

Fuck.

Brant.

"He's in Sydney?"

"Yeah."

"Fucking hell."

We'd taken him off our radar after Romano was arrested.

And we'd bought into the story he'd fed us about why he'd shown up on our doorstep.

For Ivy.

I yanked my phone out as a thought slammed into my head. To Bronze, I said, "What else do you know about this guy?"

"Not much, but it seems he's a loner with a taste for stalking women. He fixates on them until they become an obsession. Two of them took restraining orders out on him. One of them ended up dead three months later. I talked to the first one, and she gave me a rundown of his history with this. Turns out he's done it a few times. Somehow he escaped a murder charge and later, changed his name."

When Axe picked up, I said, "Pull Zane off tracking Romano. I need him to find Brant."

"Why?"

I gripped the phone harder. "I think he has Ivy." I paused. "And I think he's a sick fuck who will do God knows what to her."

With everything going on, we'd been distracted and taken our eyes off the motherfucking ball.

Ending the call, I said to Bronze, "You hear that Ryland's off the case now?"

"Yeah."

"Fuck, Bronze, you trust whoever's giving you information? That their goal isn't to draw you in so they can arrest you?"

"I'm taking precautions."

I leant forward. "Why? Why would you risk everything to help us? Your debt to me was repaid a long fucking time ago."

He stared at me for a long time. Silent. Like he was trying to figure that shit out, too. "For Hailee. You guys go down, she goes down, and I refuse to let that happen."

I didn't buy that for one moment.

Not fully.

Bronze had crossed a line somewhere along the way. A line in his soul. I'd watched it happen. He'd let stuff slide, had turned away when he'd seen me get my hands dirty. He may have given the impression he wasn't on board with a lot of my shit, but not once had he truly challenged me.

Bronze was caught between worlds, and his actions told me he had more than one foot in mine.

I stood. "You got somewhere safe to stay?"

His mouth curled at the ends. "Why? You gonna put me up at your place?"

My brows lifted, waiting for an answer.

He jerked his chin at the door. "I'm good, King. Go take care of business."

CHAPTER THREE

Lily

"I can pick the kids up from school this afternoon," Linc said, distracting me from staring out the kitchen window. From thinking about Brynn.

"Huh?" I'd heard him, but for the life of me, I couldn't connect dots in my head. *Why's he offering to pick the kids up?*

He moved close to me, concern in his eyes. "Did you get any sleep last night, baby?" He stroked my hair, and I let him. I knew I shouldn't. God, I was letting him do a lot of things I knew I shouldn't, but my sister had been shot three days ago and I had no idea if she'd ever wake up from the coma she was in, so all the right things had flown out the window.

And the one man I wanted to do the right things for me? He'd walked out of my life without a backwards glance.

I shivered as I remembered the way he'd looked at me before he left. *Cold*. Colder than I'd ever had anyone look at me.

He'd told me we didn't belong in the same worlds.

Told me we were done.

We'd made no promises to each other, but I hadn't expected him to cut and run in my hour of need.

That was cruel.

Heartless.

"Lil," Linc said, his hands curling around my biceps. "Did you hear me?"

I blinked and pushed my thoughts of King away. They weren't productive. I was best to forget him as fast as he had me. "I got a couple of hours of sleep." A slight exaggeration. Either way, it didn't make much difference whether it was one hour or two. It didn't change the fact my sister was in a coma.

He placed a kiss on my forehead and let me go. "Sit. I'll make coffee."

He shouldn't kiss you.

You should tell him not to kiss you.

Before I could respond, Holly and Mum wandered into the kitchen. Exhaustion and sadness hugged them, too. *How long would this nightmare haunt us?*

I reached for Holly as she walked past, my hand sliding down her arm as she continued towards the fridge. "You okay, Hols?"

She wasn't okay. None of us were. But what else did you ask in a situation like this?

She nodded but didn't say anything. Her nod was all I needed.

Mum moved past me, barely registering my presence, and joined Linc near the kettle. We didn't need words to know how the other was. *Because neither of us will ever be okay again if Brynn dies.*

Linc told Mum to sit down, he'd make her a tea. She told him she could make her own. I tuned out as they argued over it, and left the kitchen.

I needed to be alone.

I had nothing to give any of them.

Not even my kids.

Not today.

Today Linc could step up again, like he had the last few days.

I shut myself in the bathroom, stripped, and stood under the shower. Closing my eyes, I let the water cascade down my face. It soothed me a little. A momentary reprieve. No thoughts. Just me and the water and silence.

I don't know how long I stood there. It wasn't until Linc came in, held out my towel, and said, "Lil, you've been in here long enough. The kids need the bathroom," that I joined the world again.

He should not be in here.

I turned off the shower and stepped out, ignoring the way his gaze dropped to my naked body.

I allowed him to dry me off and wrap the towel around me.

I let him comb my hair.

All the wrong things.

I didn't have the energy to argue over any of it.

My mind drifted to King again.

I'd known the man just shy of three weeks. He should not have been a thought I so easily chased. Memories of his face, his eyes, his hands... they should not have crashed into me so effortlessly.

And yet, they did.

They pummelled me.

I wanted *him* to make me coffee. Argue with my mother over her tea. Tell me I'd been in the shower too long. I wanted *his* hands drying me off. Wrapping the towel around me.

I wanted King to be the one who was here for me.

But he wasn't.

And I didn't have Brynny to help me through this.

All I had was Linc.

So I let him do all those wrong things.

And avoided thinking about the way he looked at me. Because when the only energy I had was barely enough to get me through moment to moment, I had none to think about the fact my ex was likely misreading everything and making plans to move back into my life.



Linc dropped Mum and me off at the hospital after he took the kids to school, on his way to work. If I wasn't so wrapped up in myself, I would have cheered over the fact he'd found a steady job. As it was, I only just noticed a car that pulled out of a parking spot abruptly, almost knocking me over. Everything happened in a blur. Mum pulled me towards the footpath, away from the car before I was hurt. After, we stood in shock staring at each other until she wrapped her arms around me and cried.

We stayed like that for a long few minutes, shedding tears we didn't know we still had in us. It seemed tears lived deep inside, in

limitless quantities.

By the time we stepped off the lift near the intensive care unit, Mum's face showed how close she was to shattering. I wasn't convinced she'd be able to sit here for another day, watching tubes and machines and doctors and nurses helping my sister fight for her life. Two days of this had revealed the desperation that long days filled with nothing but silence and beeps from those machines caused. I'd sat by Brynn's side, teeth chattering from the frigid air, heart aching with pain from sadness and uncertainty, and I'd prayed like I'd never prayed even though I didn't believe in praying anymore. I'd made God promises I wasn't sure I could keep. And even when there were no tears streaming down my face, they drowned my soul.

I can't lose her.

A new wave of agony washed over me as we approached the unit. It knocked the breath from me, and I grabbed at the railing on the wall to hold myself up. The world spun, and black dots stole my vision.

I can't do this.

I can't do life without her.

Oh God.

I can't breathe.

I hunched over and tried like hell to suck air deep into my lungs. I felt like wire had wrapped itself tightly around my chest, suffocating the life from me.

Just as my knees buckled and I started to go down, strong arms circled me, and a deep voice sounded at my ear, "I've got you."

Devil.

He stopped my fall and held me until I breathed, "Thank you." I turned and frowned. "Why are you here?"

A look crossed his face that I couldn't quite place. Regret, maybe. "I wanted to check in on your sister. And on you."

"Why?" Devil seemed like a good guy, but it wasn't like we were friends. I was missing something here.

His forehead crinkled as he hesitated to answer my question. Finally, he said, "Just making sure you guys are okay."

The puzzle fell together. "Did King send you?"

More hesitation. "We want to—"

I cut him off. "No. King made it clear what he wants, and it's not making sure I'm okay. Tell him I don't need you guys checking on

me. And tell him to take his men off watch duty, too. The police have a lead they're following up, and they think it was a random robbery gone wrong. Whoever did it isn't coming back, so we're safe."

"He's not going to listen to anything I have to say, Lily."

I wrapped my arms around myself. Was he trying to insinuate this would have to come from me? There was no way I'd be calling King to say any of this to him. I didn't have that in me today. "You need to make him listen, Devil. Please."

He exhaled sharply before jerking his chin towards the intensive care unit. "How's your sister doing? And that's not for King. I want to know."

Tears filled my eyes. I didn't even try to stop them falling. Before Brynn was shot, I tried to never cry in front of people. Now I wore my tears like a second skin.

Swallowing my fear, I said, "The doctors don't know. She's still attached to the machines."

The regret I thought I'd seen on his face before was now clear as day. "Fuck, I'm sorry, Lily."

I nodded. There wasn't anything else to say so I left him and walked towards the unit where my sister lay battling for her life.

Will our lives ever go back to normal or will there be a new normal now?



"I'm just saying, I have to hand this assignment in by Thursday, so we need to either buy a printer for here or go home and use ours," Holly said that night, her voice a harsh tone I'd never heard her take.

Linc took one look at me and stepped in between us. Holly and I had been going back and forth over this damn assignment for the last fifteen minutes and weren't getting anywhere. She'd pounced on me after dinner and wasn't letting it go. I wasn't up for this discussion; I had a headache from hell and craved a bath and some silence.

Brynn's still in a coma and I'm standing here arguing over a damn printer.

Surreal.

"Hols, I'll call your teacher and organise an extension. The school won't expect you to get this in on time. Not with what's going on,"

Linc said.

"No!" Holly exploded, her anger crashing into me, startling me from my thoughts. "I'm handing it in on time."

I stared at her, confused by her behaviour. She'd visited the hospital twice since Brynn was shot and avoided talking about her aunt. Anyone who didn't know us, wouldn't realise she was going through something as devastating as she was. I knew everyone experienced hard situations and worry differently, but this seemed extreme.

I touched her arm. "Baby, don't do this," I said softly.

She frowned, pulling her arm away. "What?"

The hole in my heart grew a little bigger as I watched my daughter struggling. "Don't shut down on what's happening."

Her face pulled into a scowl. "I'm not shutting down, Mum. Some of us just have stuff we still have to do. If I fall behind on school, it'll only be harder to catch up after this is all over."

I didn't understand what she meant by that. "You mean after Brynn comes home?"

Her eyes stayed locked to mine while she remained silent. I knew by her refusal to answer my question that she didn't have faith she'd ever see her aunt again.

Oh God.

Pain sliced me.

I have to keep the faith.

She looked at Linc. "Can we just go buy a printer?" Harsh again. Bleak. *My poor baby.* But I couldn't reach her. God, I could hardly reach myself.

Linc nodded and they left me alone with my thoughts. Mum had refused dinner and had locked herself in her bedroom. Zara and Robbie were also in their rooms. Thank goodness my mother had a big house. Beds for all of us, even Linc who had taken it upon himself to move in and help us through this.

The police had given us the go-ahead this afternoon to move back home, so Linc had spent a few hours there cleaning up after he collected the kids from school. He'd had to get the key off me, and that had brought King front and centre in my mind again. The man was such a strong presence even when I tried to push him to the side.

And now I was thinking about him again.

Ugh.

I stalked to the kitchen to grab a smoke. My attempt at quitting had flown out the window completely. Everything had flown out the damn window.

Once I'd located a cigarette, I headed out the front door to check the mailbox. Linc may have already checked it, but I wasn't sure. As I bent over to check the box, a car pulled up down the street. Straightening, I narrowed my eyes to watch it. A guy got out and walked to another car that was parked in front of him. *King's men*. I watched them have a conversation, anger rising in me. It struck suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, but I knew it had to be a reaction to everything I was dealing with. And yet, even though I realised that, I channelled every ounce of that anger towards King as I stomped down the street towards his men.

It was irrational.

It was ungrateful.

But I was pissed at the world, and I couldn't stop myself.

"Why are you guys still here?" I yelled as I approached them.

They both glanced at me, their faces not revealing any surprise at my behaviour.

The one I recognised as the guy King had called Mace once when I was at the clubhouse, said, "King wants your family watched."

"I don't care what King wants. I want you to leave. I don't need his protection."

He pulled a face. "Sorry, babe, no can do."

I looked at the other guy who watched me with care. "Let me guess—you only take your orders from King, too?"

"Yeah. And I agree with him. There's no harm to you if you just go about your shit while we go about ours. Keeps everyone happy."

He was right.

I knew that.

But I had this overwhelming need to remove King from my life after he'd removed himself from mine. If he didn't want anything to do with me anymore, I would slam that door closed and hammer bolts in it. The hurt he'd inflicted wasn't something I wanted to experience again. After years of keeping my heart to myself, only sharing little pieces of it here and there, I'd been ready to crack it wide open again. Not anymore.

"Give me your phone," I said to Mace, holding my hand out.

He shook his head. "No."

"I'm not going anywhere until I speak with King, so one of you needs to get him on the phone."

Mace's gaze hardened. He appeared to wrestle with his thoughts, until finally he muttered, "Fuck, Lily, you don't make shit easy for a man."

I lifted my brows, waiting for the phone.

Stand your ground.

Do not let these guys steamroll you.

He pulled out his phone and made the call, passing it to me before King answered.

Nervous energy engulfed me as I held the phone to my ear waiting for King. My tummy went crazy with nerves, annoying me. I didn't want to feel anything. Didn't want to be this affected by King.

But I was.

Damn.

"Mace," King barked, "is everything okay?"

My hand shook as it gripped the phone hard. "It's not Mace, King. It's me."

Silence.

"Lily."

Oh God.

No.

The gravel in his voice hit me first.

Then, the hint of softness.

Totally unexpected.

And confusing.

King didn't do soft, so it made no sense.

But it couldn't be denied—King had just toned himself down a level for me.

CHAPTER FOUR

King

Christ, I'd needed to hear her voice. Three days without it, and I was questioning my own fucking sanity. What kind of man thinks about a woman non-fucking-stop when he's only known her for three weeks? I'd made a mistake telling her we were done. We were a long fucking way from done.

I didn't give a fuck that she was about to let loose on me.

I'd take Lily however she came right now.

"You need to tell your men to leave. I don't need them here anymore."

I leaned back in my seat and stretched out my legs, ignoring the noise in the clubhouse bar around me. "You do need them. I'm not removing them."

"Don't you take that tone with me."

"What tone?"

"The arrogant one you like to use when you're being overbearingly assuming about something. Don't assume to know what I need or what's happening with the investigation. The police have told me —"

"The police know jack, Lily. And I'm not assuming. I know this shit for a fact."

"God," she huffed out before turning silent.

"How are you?" I asked, needing that information more than anything else.

She was quick to give me a tongue lashing over that. "No, King... just no. You don't get to ask me that anymore."

Before I got a word in, she continued, "Look, you made your choice the other day, and you didn't choose me. So please tell Mace and his friend to go home. Every time I see them, it makes me think of you, and I have other things I need to concentrate on at the moment." She paused before adding a little less harshly, "Please."

I stood. "Put Mace back on."

"You'll tell him to go?"

"Lily," I growled, "put him on."

She grumbled something I couldn't make out, and then after some rustling, Mace came back on the line, "Yeah?"

"Stay put, brother. We're not pulling out yet." No fucking way were we pulling out. I'd go over there and make that clear to her myself.

"Done."

I ended the call and headed into my office to grab my shit.

Zane met me in the hallway. "I have some good news for you for once."

"You found Brant?"

"No, still nothing there. This is about Don and Kree. She's safe now. We got Don to drop the parenting order."

I scrubbed my hand over my face, still not happy with the outcome he'd worked. We were moving closer to me putting that bullet in Don's head. "That's a temporary fix."

"No, it's permanent."

"How do you know that?"

His nostrils flared. "Fuck, King, you're not gonna be happy until he's dead, are you?"

"You've got that right. She's your cousin for fuck's sake. Do you really wanna leave her out there vulnerable as fuck while that cunt is still breathing?"

"No, but we've always known that you and I handle shit differently. Murder isn't an option in my toolbox."

"It should be. When it's family, it fucking should be." If it wasn't Zane I was dealing with here, I'd go around him and take care of this myself, but I had history with him and respected him enough not to.

"Don's gotten himself in some shit, owes money he can't afford to repay, so my guys have taken care of that in return for him staying away from Kree."

"You're fucking kidding me, right? A man like Don doesn't just walk away from his woman and kids. He's the kind to show up with a fucking 9mm and end all their lives so no one else can have her."

His phone sounded with a text. Glancing down at it, he said, "I'm keeping an eye on him, King. I'll keep you updated." Meeting my gaze again, he said with some force, "Restrain yourself from doing whatever the fuck it is you're thinking of doing. There's other shit at play here that I don't have time to go into. But it's the kind of shit that, if you put a bullet in Don's head, you'll cause worse problems for Kree."

As he walked away from me, I made a mental note to get Griff to do some of our own digging on this. I wasn't happy with Zane's plan. Far fucking from it. And there was no way I'd put Kree back out there with the way things stood.



Half an hour later, I pulled up outside Lily's mother's house. Mace sat down the street right where I'd told him to stay. I hadn't heard from him since our last conversation, and there was no sign of Lily, so I figured he'd managed to handle her. However, as I exited my ute, she came barrelling out of the house, rushing at me like a bull to a red flag. He may have dealt with her, but I'd be the one handling her.

I traced my gaze over her body, because hell, she wore a fucking skimpy black robe that barely covered her ass. I had to fight like fuck not to reach out and undo it. My imagination went wild thinking about what it hid.

"I thought you were going to call Mace home!"

I found her eyes. They screamed the wild storm raging through her. She was a beautiful hurricane I couldn't walk away from. Lily was passion and calm all rolled into one. I needed the calm to centre me, but it was the fire I craved in a woman. Beauty never spoke to me long enough to keep my attention. Fire did, though, and she blazed with it.

I was here to re-claim her.

She could fight me all she liked; I would win in the end.

And I fucking loved a good battle.

"I never said that."

Her eyes bulged with fury. "Why are you being so difficult about this? I don't freaking understand you!"

"You don't need to. You just need to turn that ass of yours around and go back inside and let me do my thing."

Eyes still wide, she threw out, "Your *thing*? What does that even mean?"

"It means that it's shit I'm not worrying you with. Go inside. This isn't getting us anywhere."

"Just so you know, when you tell a woman you've got stuff on your mind that you don't want to worry her with, it makes her worry. I'm not going anywhere until you spit it out."

"Lily," I growled, "this isn't shit I'm sharing with you. We can stand here and argue all night, but I won't change my mind."

She crossed her arms over her chest and shifted her weight to one leg like she was settling in for the long haul. "Fine by me. I've got all night."

My gaze dropped as I caught a flash of skin when her robe fell to the side, revealing the inside of her thigh. At the same time, a red Falcon pulled into the driveway and Linc jumped out and stalked our way.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" he roared.

Lily dropped her arms and grabbed hold of him trying to stop him coming close to me. "Linc," she warned, "don't get into this. Holly's watching."

He ignored her, his eyes firmly locked to mine. Shrugging out of her hold, he moved into my personal space and spat, "You need to fuck off and leave us alone to get through this. We don't fucking need your help."

My jaw clenched as I worked hard to keep myself in check. Lily's daughter stood next to her father's car watching us, and her other kids and mother were in the house. As much as I wanted to knock the motherfucker out, I didn't want to do that while her family were close. Squaring my shoulders, I said, "I'm not here to help *you*. I'm here for Lily."

"Yeah well, she's good. I'm back now."

It fucking pissed me off that he'd worked the shooting of her sister to his advantage, but I couldn't fault her for allowing him to help her through it. "Step the fuck away from me, asshole. I'm not here to get into a fucking fight with you."

He didn't. Instead, he shoved his face closer to mine and said, "Did you hear what I said? That I'm back with Lily now. Because if you didn't, you need to pay attention to that."

At the same time Lily reached for him again and said, "Linc, don't," I swung my head to face her and demanded, "That true?"

Motherfucker.

I'd missed his point the first time.

Now he had me fucking worked up.

Anger burned in my veins at the thought of him forcing his way back into her life.

Her eyes met mine, challenging me. "That has nothing to do with you."

Linc finally took that step back from me. Sliding his arm over Lily's shoulder, he pulled her close and hit me with a satisfied smile. "It's true. Now get off my property."

Every inch of my body tensed as my patience stretched to breaking point. It wasn't his fucking property, but Lily hadn't corrected him. She also allowed his hands on her. And she didn't challenge anything he said. The only fucking challenge she threw down was to me.

Seeing another man's hands on her drove me fucking wild. I wanted to rip those hands off her. Wanted to crush the motherfucker and ensure he never had the chance to put them anywhere near her again. Fuck, I wanted to claim her then and fucking there, and lay the fucking law down. That her body would know only my hands in the future.

I'd been mistaken when I thought I could shut my feelings down. Lily had worked her way into my black heart, clawing at it piece by fucking piece. Hell would fucking freeze over before I'd give up on her. I'd also been mistaken worrying that her connection to me would put her in danger. My thinking had been fucked up for too fucking long with the shit the club had going on. After taking care of Romano's men, my mind blazed bright with clarity, and I was thinking straight again. And what all that thinking told me was that

motherfuckers could come at us, but they would never defeat us. And they sure as fuck wouldn't get their hands on my woman.

I turned my gaze to Linc. "I'd like a word with Lily. Alone."

"Not fucking likely," he said, squeezing her tighter against his body.

She wiggled out of his hold. "Give us a minute, Linc. I'll be inside soon."

He stared at her long and hard before muttering, "Fucking hell," and doing as she'd asked.

I tracked his movements until he was inside. Then, pinning my gaze to Lily's, I said, "We're not done."

She frowned. "Yes, we are. That was your choice the other day, King."

"I don't give a flying fuck what I said the other day. I'm telling you now—this thing between us is far from over."

Her frown disappeared, leaving an expression that told me how annoyed with me she was. "You don't get that right anymore. You don't get to tell me anything. And fuck you. My sister is lying in a coma that I'm not sure she'll wake up from, and I've got a lot on my mind, and you wanna come around and discuss *this*? No. I'm not okay with that. Not when you made it perfectly clear where you stood the other day. Go home. I'm done with this conversation."

Not giving me a chance to respond, she walked inside, leaving me staring after her.

I was a selfish bastard. I'd pushed her away to protect her, and here I fucking was demanding her back. It completely went against my reasons for removing her from my life. Dragging her back into it would only put her at risk again. But I couldn't do it. I couldn't *not* have her. I had no idea where this need came from. I sure as fuck didn't want to feel this way. And yet I did. Hell, I wanted Lily in ways I'd never wanted a woman.

Once she was safely back in the house, I walked to where Mace was parked. Tapping my hand on the top of his car, I leant down to talk to him through the window. "Go home, brother."

"We're done here?"

I shook my head. "No. But I'll do tonight's shift."

"I'm good, King. And besides, haven't we removed the threat to her now?"

“Go. Get some sleep and be back here at six tomorrow morning. We’re keeping eyes on her until Romano is dealt with.” Fuck knew who else he had on his payroll.

“Okay, so long as you’re sure.”

I nodded and pulled out a smoke. “I’m sure.”

I lit the cigarette as he pulled away from the kerb. Dragging nicotine deep into my lungs, I thought about what I was doing. Not much of it made sense to me, but that was the fucking story of my life. The last thing I wanted was a woman by my side. And fuck knew where we’d end up. But even though I was in the middle of a fucking war that needed my full attention, and although I had a million reasons not to pursue her, Lily had become my new addiction.

CHAPTER FIVE

Lily

I pulled the curtain to the side to glance down the street. He was gone. The fact that disappointed me also annoyed me. I wanted King just as much as I didn't want him now. His arrival last night and his announcement that we weren't done had thrown me. Completely freaking screwed me up. I'd hardly slept, especially since I knew he was outside. I'd watched from my window after I left him standing on the footpath, waiting for him to leave. But he hadn't. He'd stayed all night. I knew this because I'd bloody checked almost every half hour until I finally fell asleep around three.

God.

I was going to lose my mind over this man.

I was sure of it.

That was the reason why I'd let him think Linc and I were getting back together. I'd hated letting him believe that, especially when I'd seen his reaction. His response had surprised me. When Linc had thrown it out, I'd thought King wouldn't even blink. I mean, the man told me in no uncertain terms we were over. A small part of me had been happy to see how affected he was by the thought of me back with my ex. But I didn't like playing games with men, so mostly I'd felt like a bitch for misleading him.

I had to guard my heart, though, so I'd chosen not to correct his thinking.

He'd move on soon. He'd find another woman to sleep with, and I'd be long forgotten.

"Mum," Zara said, knocking softly on my door. "Breakfast is ready." She peaked her head in. "Are you okay to come out and eat or do you want me to bring it in here for you?"

I smiled at my beautiful girl and moved to her. Wrapping my arms around her, I pressed a kiss to her head. She was coping with Brynn being in a coma differently to her sister. Zara was me, through and through. Right down to her boy-crazy bones. It was why I worried so much about her having sex with her boyfriend. I knew her next move before she did most days.

"I'm okay, baby. How are you?" It was a lie; I wasn't okay. I was exhausted from too little sleep over the last few days. I was anxious over Brynn. I was worried about how my kids were doing. I was concerned about this situation with Linc. And I was twisted up over my feelings for King. Somehow, I'd managed to go from being hardly aware of living this time yesterday to hyper-aware of everything today.

She looked at me sadly. "Do you think it means something bad that Auntie Brynn still hasn't woken up?"

My heart crawled into my throat. Getting my kids through this was the hardest thing I'd ever had to do as a mother. Because as much as I wanted to reassure her, I wrestled with the same thoughts and fears. Lying had never been part of my parenting style, but I was going to have to consider it now. And I was going to have to reach deep inside myself to give her an answer that didn't alarm her further.

I ran my hand gently down her long hair, smoothing it. "Auntie Brynn is in a critical condition, sweetheart. I'm not sure the doctors are ready for her to wake up yet. Yesterday, they told us she needs to rest in order to grow strong enough to breathe on her own. The machines are helping her do that." I actually couldn't quite recall what the doctor had said, but I was sure it was something close to this.

Zara nodded. "Okay. That's good then I guess." Her voice betrayed her inability to fully buy into that, but at least she didn't appear further distressed.

"Yes," I agreed.

Her features shifted into a frown. "What's happening with you and Dad? Like, is he moving back in with us?"

I really need to deal with this.

Like, really really.

"No, he's not. He's just helping me look after you guys while Brynn's in the hospital. And he's getting our house ready for us to move back into. That's all."

"Oh, okay." She paused before adding, "I think he thinks you guys are getting back together."

I sighed. "I'll talk to him." I lifted my chin towards the door. "Go start your breaky. I'll be out in a minute."

After she left, I pulled my phone out and sent a text to Adelaide.

Me: Sorry I didn't reply to your text last night. I was dealing with King and then I completely forgot. Sorry, babe.

Adelaide: Girl! Don't you dare apologise to me. Can I call you?

I rang her.

"How are you today, hon?" she asked as soon as she answered.

I took a deep breath. "Not good, babe."

"Okay, so I've organised the day off so I can spend it with you. You want me to swing by your place and pick you up and take you to the hospital?"

I sat on the edge of my bed and smiled through my sadness. "Has anyone told you you're the best bestie a girl can have? I would love you to do that. God knows I need to stop relying on Linc to drive me."

"Yes. How is he? Are you guys getting along okay with him being there? And wait, let's back this up a beat. What were you dealing with King for? I thought he'd fucked off?"

"Yeah, he had, but he turned up here last night after I rang him and told him to send his men home."

"Oh, they were still there?"

"Yeah. Anyway, we argued over it a little and then Linc turned up and told King we were back together. King then told me we weren't over."

"So let me get this straight. King doesn't want you except when he thinks you're no longer available? Bloody asshole."

That was a thought I hadn't been able to shift all night. The more I thought about it, the more annoyed at the whole situation I grew. "Seems so."

"Oh, babe," she said softly, "I'm sorry he's a dick. I know you thought there was something there between the two of you, but I think he did you a favour when he walked away the other day. You don't need a man who pulls that shit."

"Yeah," I whispered as tears fell down my cheeks. I felt dumb crying over him, and told myself I was only doing it because of everything else going on, but even I didn't buy that. I'd been ready to give King more than I'd been ready to give any man for years, and he'd hurt me. I'd pushed this hurt to the side for the last few days so I could just get through the days, but it had forced its way to the surface now.

"Right, we're not going to talk about him again today, okay? Let's go back to Linc. How are things there?"

I leaned forward and rested my elbows on my knees. "I'm fairly sure he truly does believe we're getting back together. I don't think he was just saying that for King's benefit. So I have to have that conversation with him today." The more I thought about what I had to do today, the more I wanted to crawl back into bed, hide under the covers and shut the world out.

"This morning?"

"Yes, I'm about to go and have it with him now."

"Good. I'll be over in about an hour or so."

"Thanks, Addy."

"Always."

We ended the call and I gathered all the strength I could find to go and talk to Linc. I found him alone in the garage, cleaning rubbish out of his car.

"We need to talk," I said when he glanced up at me.

He came my way. "You okay, baby?"

"Linc, you can't call me that anymore. I've told you that before."

He hit me with a confused look. "I thought we were working on something here."

I wasn't convinced I was up for this conversation. Not while anxiety and worry had me in their grips. My emotions were all over the

place, and that wasn't a good starting point when dealing with my ex. Linc had a way of twisting my words to suit himself, and a way of muddling my thinking. I'd known him for sixteen years. We'd been together for most of those years. He knew my triggers, and he wasn't afraid to push them to get what he wanted. I'd had to learn how to manage my boundaries with him, and that usually required me being completely on my game. Today was not that kind of day.

"I appreciate everything you've done to help me through this, but I never once said we were working on something. I'm sorry if I gave you that impression." I really didn't think I had, though. But people often took what they wanted from an interaction, and miscommunications had always been a big part of our relationship.

He stayed silent for a good few moments and then his face twisted into an ugly expression. "Is this because that asshole showed up last night?"

Before I knew what was happening, a strong desire to defend King rushed up from deep inside. It was immediate and it was fierce. And I had no idea why the heck it forced itself on me, because defending him was the last thing I wanted to do after he'd hurt me. But hearing Linc say nasty things about him drew out my protective side.

"Don't call him that. And no, this has nothing to do with King."

His brows lifted. "If you're standing up for him, that says something, don't you think? Fuck, Lil, doesn't our marriage count for something? All those years we worked towards building—"

"You really wanna go down that path? Because if you do, I've got a whole heap of stuff to get off my chest concerning the work *we* were doing on our marriage. And none of it has anything to do with King, so let's just leave him out of this, okay?"

"No, let's fucking not. He hasn't been here for you the last few days. Not like I have been. So I have no clue why you'd even look at him, let alone wanna be with him. And what about the fact you just stood by while I told him we were together? Are you playing both of us?"

He had my blood boiling now. It was as if all the sadness and worry I felt collided with my frustration and irritation, causing the perfect storm of anger. "Have I ever played you, Linc?" I yelled. "Have I ever been anything but supportive of you? God, you make me so freaking mad some days I could scream at you for hours. I'm

sorry you got the wrong end of the stick about us, but I honestly didn't say anything to make you assume I wanted you back. For the record, I will never take you back. You broke my heart when you cheated on me, and I could never trust you enough again to be with you. And as for King, what I do with him is none of your business."

His lip pulled up in a snarl. "It is if it affects *my* kids."

My eyes widened and I went at him with a ferocity I didn't know I had in me. "Do not threaten me. You will not like the outcome if you do. I've worked hard to keep our relationship civil. You wanna threaten me? I won't give a fuck about civil."

He leaned closer to me and yelled, "Fuck you, Lily. You think you're above me, but you aren't. Just because you went and got yourself an education while I stayed home with the kids doesn't mean you're any fucking better than me."

This was an old argument of ours. Linc had never moved past the insecurities he had over me earning more than him. And while I'd studied for my degree, he'd spent most of the time bitching about me being away from the family. If it had been any other day, I would have walked away at this point, but it wasn't. It was today, and he'd pushed me too far. "I've never thought I was better than you. That's your hang-up, not mine. I don't care what people do for a living or whether they've got an education. All I'm interested in is whether they care about those they love, and you proved that you don't. You can stand there and tell me you love me and that you wanna be together again, but your actions speak a lot louder than your words. I don't care about words or promises anymore, Linc. I don't even hear them. I hear actions."

Steam practically billowed from him he was that angry. Huffing out a shitty breath, he backed away and snapped, "Fine, you wanna be like that, I'm done here. I'm out. You can fucking sort your own shit out." He stared at me for a few beats, like he was waiting for me to change my mind. When I said nothing, he shook his head angrily at me and stalked inside.

I took a minute. He had me all worked up that I shook with the adrenaline coursing through me. Sagging against the wall, I got my breathing under control while I thought about our argument. It struck me how easily he turned on me. He turned mean. That definitely wasn't a characteristic I wanted in a man I gave my heart to.

Following him back inside, I found him telling Holly he would drive them to school this morning but he wouldn't be here when they got home this afternoon.

Robbie and Zara were in their bedrooms so I went back to mine. The less time around Linc, the better. My phone sounded with a text as I walked through the bedroom door.

Skylar: Hey Lily. Just checking in on you to see how you are. I'm thinking of you.

My heart sped up as I read the message. I couldn't think of Skylar without thinking of King.

Me: Thanks babe. I'm okay.

She'd been texting me every day since Brynn was shot. In a short amount of time, I'd grown to adore her. Kinda like how I'd fallen for her brother in a crazy short time.

She didn't send another text. She rang instead.

"I really doubt you're okay," she said when I answered the phone. "Give it to me straight. We're friends now, and friends don't bullshit each other."

I smiled, and for the first time in days, it was a genuinely happy smile. Funny how those who truly cared about us could do that for us even when we were going through something that had no joy in it. "I'm not okay, but I kinda am if that makes sense. I've got some really good people around me, including you, and that makes things so much better."

"Good. Now, I've organised some home-cooked meals for you with the girls here. They've all pitched in and cooked a heap of casseroles and stuff for you guys. I'm going to ask King to drop them over late this afternoon. Will you be home?"

A new wave of emotion overwhelmed me and tears streamed down my face. How was I so lucky to have people like Skylar looking out for me? I squeezed my hand tighter around the phone as I tried to talk through my tears. "You're amazing," I choked out. "Thank you."

"Oh shit, I'm sorry I made you cry."

I dashed the tears away. "They're good tears, I promise. And besides, I cry far more at the moment than I don't, so this isn't anything unusual."

She was quiet for a moment. When she spoke again, her voice softened. "How's your sister?"

I swallowed hard, the unrelenting pain slicing through me at the thought of Brynn lying unconscious on her hospital bed. It knocked the wind out of me, and I had to sit on the bed to stop myself collapsing to the floor. "I don't know," I whispered through more tears. "She's still on the ventilator. The doctors don't know when she'll wake up."

"I'm so sorry." Her voice held tears now, too. "I'm going to come and see you today. Will you be at the hospital?"

"Oh no, don't do that. You're still on crutches and in pain. I'll be okay. And besides, they won't let you into the intensive care unit. It's just family."

"I'm fine. Don't you worry about me. I'm still doing all the exercises you gave me, and getting better every day. And I don't care if I can't come in. I just wanna be there for you in case you need someone to talk to or cry with. I'll sit outside. What time will you be at the hospital? I'll ask King to drop me off for a few hours."

She'd mentioned King twice now. I'd ignored the first mention, but my body wouldn't allow me to do that twice. Because although my head stayed firmly committed to not starting up with him again, my body had completely different ideas. Kind of like my heart did.

Skylar King had the same level of determination as her brother, so I knew there was no point arguing with her. "I'll be there in the next couple of hours until around school pick-up time."

"Okay, I'll see you later. Do you need me to bring anything for you?"

"No, you're already doing so much."

After the call ended, I took a deep breath. Today would get tricky if she managed to convince King to do those things for her. Hopeful-

ly he'd be far too busy to say yes.

CHAPTER SIX

King

I stretched my neck before shoving two Advil down my throat. I avoided washing them down with whisky. There was a hell of a lot of shit to get through today; whisky wouldn't help with any of it.

It had been a long night sitting outside Lily's place. I'd headed home for a few hours of sleep after Mace covered me early this morning, but it had been broken. Sleep was the last fucking thing on my mind, though. I could run on sheer fucking determination if I had to.

"Where'd you get to last night?" Axe asked, joining me in the office.

I settled my ass against the office desk. "Had shit to do."

He gave me the look that told me he would wait for further information.

Scrubbing my hand over my face, I muttered, "I gave Mace the night off."

His eyes narrowed at me. "He was watching the physiotherapist, right?"

"Yeah."

"Since when do you take on that kind of job?"

"Fuck, brother, do we really need to play twenty-fucking-questions? I'd rather go over the shit we've gotta take care of today."

"Jesus, King, how long since you've had some good sleep? You're being extra fucking whiny today."

I glared at him. "Tell me you've heard from Johnny."

"I have. He thinks he has the location. He's confirming it now and said he'll be back in touch within the next hour with any luck."

I wouldn't ease off this guy until I had that address in my hands. "Keep on him."

"Will do."

A knock sounded at the door and Skylar called out, "King, you in there?"

I pushed off the desk and opened the door. "What's up?"

She made her way in, using her crutches like a pro. Lily had worked her magic on Skye's recovery. She went from strength to strength daily. "Can you drop me off at the hospital this morning?"

I frowned. "You don't have an appointment today, do you?" It wouldn't surprise me if she did and I'd forgotten. My head felt like it could explode with all the shit in there.

"No. I want to go and see Lily. I feel so useless and unable to help her, but I figure I can sit and just be there in case she needs someone to talk to or be with her, you know?"

My gut tightened at the mention of Lily. I knew exactly what Skylar meant. I felt useless, too. And fuck, what I wouldn't give to make shit right in her world again.

I checked the time. We'd be cutting it fine because I had a meet scheduled with Eric Bones in just over an hour, but I'd make this happen. Nodding, I said, "We'll leave in ten."

She smiled. "Thank you."

As she exited the room, Hyde came in. "You good to leave in about twenty for this meet?"

Bones had called yesterday after word had travelled about the visits I'd been making around Sydney. Visits letting everyone know Storm wouldn't take shit lying down. I'd had Eric on my list, but he'd called me first.

"Change of plans," I said to Hyde. "I have to swing by the hospital on my way, so I'll meet you there. If I'm running late, start without me. We've got too much to get through today to slow shit down."

"Agreed. See you there," he said and left us.

Axe met my gaze. "I'll call you as soon as I hear from Johnny. You gonna have time to get this done this afternoon if he comes through with an address?"

"I'll fucking make time for that." I would move heaven and earth for that. The fact Romano still breathed infuriated me. The kind of anger that made a man willing to go places he'd never considered before lived inside me over Romano. The only other time in my life I'd felt rage like this was when Margreet had been killed. A blood-bath had been my response to that. I wouldn't hesitate to do the same this time if that was needed to ensure the safety of my family and my club. *And of Lily and her family.*



"You haven't visited her yet?" Skylar asked, surprised when she realised I didn't know where the intensive care unit was. We'd arrived at the hospital five minutes ago and the need to see Lily compelled me to park the ute and go inside with Skye. I'd known it would. It was why I'd told Hyde to begin without me when he met Bones.

"I've been busy, Skye," I muttered.

We found our way to the lifts and headed up to where Lily's sister was. Skylar sent a text to Lily letting her know she was here. When we arrived outside the unit, Lily was nowhere to be seen and I wondered how long I'd have to wait for her.

I didn't have a lot of time to spare.

And yet, the tension punching through me told me I'd wait.

I needed to see her for myself. Had to see she was okay.

Skylar took a seat in the tiny waiting room. I didn't. Instead, I paced the area, my thoughts completely on Lily.

"God, King, sit down," Skylar grumbled.

I checked the clock on the wall. Fuck, the silence in here was deafening. We were the only ones waiting, and the corridor was quiet, too. I disliked noise, but I would have done anything for something to take my mind off shit.

"Send her another text."

"No. I told her I wouldn't get in her way today."

Fuck.

"I'll be back in a minute," I said, exiting the room to make a call. As I stepped out into the corridor, Lily pushed through the door from the intensive care unit, her eyes coming straight to mine.

Stopping dead in her tracks, she said, "King."

I'd caught her off guard, which wasn't my intention, but it seemed to slow down any inclination she may have had to tell me to leave the minute she saw me. Either that or she'd decided to stop fighting me. The way she looked at me was a hell of a lot different to the way she'd looked at me last night. She appeared to have thawed a little.

I ran my eyes over her. It wasn't because I wanted to fuck her, although that desire was stronger than ever. This was based on my need to know she was okay. It was a habit I'd picked up somewhere along the way in life. When I spent time away from those I cared about, I found it necessary to check for any harm that may have come to them while I was absent. It was a habit I couldn't shake.

Lily was okay. Physically, at least.

"What are you doing here?" she asked as I checked her over.

Meeting her gaze again, I said, "I dropped Skylar off."

Her brain appeared to catch up to my presence when the thawing of her ice shifted back to freezing temperatures again. "Thank you for dropping her off. You can go now."

Her words were automated. Cold. Emotionless. Like she was talking from a fucking script. It was as if she didn't even fucking know me; like I'd never been inside her. That shit pissed me off. Where the hell had her fire gone? I could handle her hate and her disappointment and her regret. Whatever she wanted to throw at me, I could fucking take. But I could never handle being frozen out like this because I knew it came from the kind of devastation that crushed a soul. And I never fucking wanted to crush her soul.

I closed the distance between us, slid my hand around her waist and backed her up against the wall. Ignoring the widening of her eyes and the way her hands pressed against my chest, I growled, "We need to get one thing straight, and one thing only. I'm not walking away from this."

Her throat worked hard as she found her words. With her hands still pushing against me, she blurted out, "I don't know what you think *this* is, but as far as I'm concerned, there isn't anything for you to walk away from."

I moved my free hand to her neck, gripping her there and circling my thumb over her throat. Bending my face to hers, I said, "That's bullshit and you know it. Stay mad at me. Stay fucked off. Yell at me, scream at me, fucking hit me, but don't you fucking shut down on me."

She sucked in a sharp breath. And then she found her fighting spirit. "This isn't something you can fix, King. You can't just swoop in and demand I forget what you did. I needed you and you just left." She pushed hard against my chest, forcing me backwards. "You hurt me, and I won't allow you to do that again."

There she was.

Fucking beautiful.

"Good," I said, my entire body blazing with heat. I could work with what she'd given me.

"Good? What the hell does that mean?"

Fuck, if only she knew how much her fight turned me on. "You're not done either, Lily. I don't expect you to forget what I did, but you'll move past it. This pull between us is too fucking strong for you not to."

"My God, you're arrogant."

"No, I'm honest."

"You're fucking presumptuous is what you are."

"We can stand here all fucking day slinging words at each other, but that would only prove I'm right." I moved into her personal space again, unable to stop myself. Fuck, I wanted this woman. Tracing my finger over her lips, I added, "If you didn't still want me, you would have ended this conversation before it even got started."

Her lips flattened and she pushed me away again. Moving past me, she snapped, "You tell yourself that, but don't ever presume to know my thoughts again. You are so wrong it isn't funny."

I watched her walk into the waiting room and sit with Skylar. Not once in our conversation had she brought up her ex. If she were committed to trying again with him, she would have thrown that at me. Not that I'd let him get in my way when it was clear she wanted me, but she hadn't mentioned his name once, signalling that was bullshit, too.



Eric Bones eyed me with hesitation. "You're stirring some shit up, King. You sure you wanna do that?"

I leaned back into the booth where we sat in the darkened corner of the dingy pub I reserved for these kinds of meetings. Crossing my arms over my chest, I said, "I haven't been so fucking sure of something for a long time."

"Fucking hell," he muttered. "It's throwing a lot of heat my way."

"And?" Did he think I gave two shits?

"Look," he said, angling forward and resting his arms on the table, "I'm just sayin' that Sydney hasn't seen any major trouble for a long time. Well, besides what went down with Silver Hell. You've mostly kept the peace with everyone. Don't force a war on all of us just because of the shit you've had going on."

"I'm done with keeping the peace when it's not warranted. It needs to be known that if a line gets crossed, Storm won't take it. I'm just letting everyone know this'll be how it is in the future."

"Yeah, well some people don't like it."

"I don't give a fuck what people like."

His face morphed into a pained expression. "I hope you know what you're doing."

This conversation had been a waste of my time. Standing, I said, "I don't do shit I can't stand behind. You wanna fucking cry over it in future, do it with your sisters. I don't have time to waste talking it out."

As Hyde and I exited the pub, my phone sounded with a text. After I read it, I looked at Hyde, every cell in my body alive with the crazy energy I welcomed. "We have an address. Call the boys. It's fucking on."

This moment had been too fucking long coming. Romano's blood would finally dirty my hands.

CHAPTER SEVEN

King

If, as claimed by some, the two most powerful warriors were patience and time, I was a motherfucking warrior when it came to Romano. He'd evaded me at every turn over the last few weeks, and before that, he'd fought a war against me in the shadows. I'd had to be more patient with him than I'd ever been with anyone. That had only intensified my hunger for his blood.

Axe's guy had come through with the goods, and after my men had surrounded the secluded property on the outskirts of Sydney and fought their way through the security guarding Romano, I finally stood in front of him.

"And so we meet," he said, his attention firmly on me. He ignored Hyde, Nitro, Cole, Nash, and Axe who stood behind me. He knew his time was up. Knew there was no point trying to find a way out of this.

"You had to know that was inevitable."

"I wasn't convinced you had it in you. I've been coming at you for a long time, King, and you never worked it out. So no, I didn't know it was inevitable."

Motherfucker.

I had missed it.

I would never make that mistake again.

My body strained to have at him, but first I needed to make sure I knew everything there was to know about this situation. Moving closer to him, I gripped his shirt and yanked him to me. "We're gonna have a little talk about that," I snarled.

He snorted. "No, we're not."

Pulling out my blade, I slowly ran it across his throat. Hard enough to let him know I wouldn't hesitate to use it, but not with enough pressure to draw blood yet. "Oh, I think we are, asshole. And while we're at it, we might as well talk about Ivy." The flare of emotion in his eyes and the clench of his jaw told me I was right in my assumption she was the key to breaking him. "Were you aware she was planning on leaving you? I'm guessing not because if you were, you wouldn't have allowed it to happen."

He jerked out of my hold. I let him go easily in an effort to get him talking. I figured I had more chance of that if I gave him some space first. "You don't get to talk about her," he spat. "Not after what you put her through years ago. You have no fucking idea of my relationship with her. I would never have treated her the way you did."

My blood roared in my ears. This guy was a piece of fucking work. It was going to take every ounce of my restraint to keep myself in check. "I know you beat the fuck out of her often enough to cause her to lose your children."

He smiled. A menacing smile. "Don't believe everything she says."

"I fucking witnessed the after-effects of her latest miscarriage, so I do fucking believe her."

His smile slipped from his face, replaced by anger. "She has ways of faking stuff."

"Jesus, what fucking drugs did you take this morning?" I shoved my face closer to his, fury heating my cheeks. "No one can fake the blood loss she had. Not to fucking mention my own doctor treated her and confirmed the miscarriage."

The glaze in his eyes told me he would dismiss anything I had to say about her. "I know my wife, King, and I know she's a lying, manipulative woman. Regardless, I love her more than you ever did."

"And yet, she left you. Says a lot about your love."

"No, it says a lot about you and how much she wanted to ruin you."

"What the fuck are you on about?"

A satisfied smile blared from him. "You met Brant, yes?"

I clenched my jaw as I nodded.

"She manipulated him into doing her dirty work. She knew he was in love with her, and she worked that to her advantage." He paused for a moment. "Ivy has carried a desire for revenge against you for as long as I've known her. I refused to humour her request to initiate an attack on you years ago, so she started in on Brant."

"I don't fucking believe you. *You* came after me using Marx. *You* killed my ex and her child. And besides, Brant is a psychopath, best I can figure. You've got shit about those two around the wrong way."

"Brant's a weak man. He's not a psychopath. Where the hell did you get that from?"

"We did some digging on him. He has a history of stalking women and murdering them."

He flinched like I'd slapped him.

I'd found something he didn't know.

When he didn't respond, I said, "He tell you she's working him or did you figure that out for yourself? And don't feel bad for screwing up on this one. We did, too." Brant had played us for fools. I imagined he'd done the same to Romano. I'd shared that sliver of information to encourage his walls down a little.

The way he glossed over it confirmed my suspicions. "Either way, it doesn't fucking matter. They're concocting something up for you. Any of the shit I've given the feds on you will pale in comparison to whatever they do to you."

And that right there was what I wanted. I didn't buy into Ivy gunning for revenge, but I *did* buy into Romano feeding the feds shit. "Ahh, Detective Ryland's told me about you singing to him."

"I don't know what you did to him, but it must have been fucking bad. The asshole can't see straight because of you."

I cocked my head to the side. "You hear they pulled him off the case? Seems he's on someone's payroll and they don't like that." I watched his reaction closely in an effort to judge if it was his payroll Ryland was on.

Confusion flickered briefly in his eyes. He attempted to cover it, but I had my answer. It wasn't Romano he'd been working with. He opened his mouth to reply, but a loud crash sounded from somewhere in the house, interrupting my interrogation.

I sheathed my knife and pulled out my gun before pushing Romano towards Nitro and ordering, "Don't let him out of your sight."

Signalling for everyone else to search the house, I stalked in the direction the sound came from. The house wasn't huge so it wouldn't take us long to find whoever it was.

It didn't.

He came charging at me as I entered the kitchen. Gun pointed at my head, he fired with one clear goal—to kill. This wasn't the fucking feds we were dealing with. This had to be Romano's crew.

My rage screamed to life and my demons raced from the far corners of my soul.

We'd been trained for moments like this from birth.

This asshole brought a gun to the fight.

He had no idea I was a motherfucking bomb.

Ducking the moment I saw him, I avoided his bullet and threw myself at him. My arms circled his body and with unrelenting force, I drove him backwards against the fridge. He hit with a thud, his head banging against it hard. His gun fell to the ground and I kicked it out of the way. I'd caught him off guard and he was slow to get his bearings.

Gripping his throat, I dug my fingers in hard as I aimed my gun at his foot. Pulling the trigger, I demanded, "Who the fuck are you?"

His cry of pain as the bullet went through his foot fed the beast inside me.

This was what I came here for today.

Blood and pain.

He scowled at me and spat, "Fuck you!"

I shot his other foot before striking him across the face with my gun as hard as I fucking could. With one last squeeze of his throat, I let him go, grasped his shirt and spun him around so I could slam him across the small room into the kitchen bench. He scrambled to get back in the fight, but he was no match for me. I closed the distance between us again and punched him. He grunted and took a shot at hitting me, but I evaded the jab and punched him again, my fist connecting with his jaw with a satisfying crack.

I was fucking manic.

Wired for hell.

I could keep going at him for hours, but all I had were minutes. Fuck, I didn't even have that. Our plan had been to get in and get

out fast. I'd gone and screwed that up by taking my time questioning Romano.

I needed to get back to him. This guy wasn't going to give me answers to my questions, and I didn't have time to drag them from him, so I struck him with my fist a few more times before putting a bullet between his eyes. A lot less satisfying than what I would have preferred to do, but it got the job done.

"King!" Hyde called out as his boots thudded through the place. "We need to hurry this the fuck up."

Yeah.

I stalked back into the living room and found Axe standing over a guy, landing punch after punch on him. The guy was covered in blood and didn't have any fight left in him, but my brother's own demons had surfaced. Once they were let loose, a motherfucker had no chance against him. Axe and I were cut from the same cloth; he was just better at controlling the darkness running through his veins.

I looked at Hyde. "Did we get them all?"

He nodded. "Yeah. There were four of them. They weren't feds. I pulled this from one of them." He handed me a piece of paper.

It was a map of the area that contained scribbled notes regarding the detail that had been guarding Romano.

"Romano's men," I said.

"That's my guess."

I shoved the paper in my pocket. "Good. With any fucking luck that's the last of them."

Turning to Romano, I pulled my blade out again as anticipation coursed through me. This was going to be over far too fucking quickly for me, but I had no choice. As much as I wanted to take him with me so I could dedicate some long days to making him suffer, what I wanted more was to make a fucking statement.

This is what happens when you fuck with Storm.

We will go to the depths of hell to find you.

And you won't be the one left standing.

My eyes locked on his.

He bucked in Nitro's hold, but we both knew this was the end of the road for him.

I called on every memory of what he'd done to my club and the people I held close.

I allowed the thoughts to swarm like angry fucking bees.

And with a roar that I dragged from the pits of my soul, I plunged the knife into his chest.

Flesh and blood and pain filled my senses as he cried out in agony.

I ripped the knife from his body and thrust it back in, twisting deep.

Pure fucking satisfaction rushed through me, but it was tinged with torment because his death would never make up for what he'd done. The lives he'd taken would never be returned. The life he'd tried to take was still in jeopardy. The suffering he'd dealt would never be eased.

I leaned in close to him and snarled through gritted teeth, "Rot in hell, motherfucker."

His head had rolled back but he dragged it up so he could look at me one last time. "I didn't kill your ex... Didn't fucking kill anyone..." He gurgled through his pain before his head lolled back again.

My mind attempted to process that, but I stumbled over it.

He did fucking kill her.

He had to have.

Because if it wasn't him, who the fuck was it?

CHAPTER EIGHT

King

“You think he was bullshitting you?” Nitro asked late that afternoon as we watched Kick and Nash trade jabs in the boxing ring we had set up out the back of the clubhouse.

I scrubbed a hand over my face. “I don’t fucking know, brother.”

This had been on my mind all afternoon, and I hadn’t come closer to figuring out where I stood on it. It was fucking convenient for him to throw that out as he took his last breath. I wouldn’t have put it past him trying to fuck with me from the grave. If I believed him, I had to entertain the thought we were still at risk while the killer remained free to attack again.

Fuck.

I was restless after killing Romano.

On edge.

I needed to work the high out of my body.

This shit churning through my brain didn’t fucking help.

Loud cheers from the boys watching the boxing interrupted our conversation. I looked over to see Nash grinning like a motherfucker with both arms raised.

Nitro sucked back some beer before commenting, “That asshole is good for the club.”

He was right. Nash was always welcome in my clubhouse. Mostly because he stepped the fuck up when we needed him, but also because he had a way of easing the tension running through the club.

Kick got up and returned Nash's grin before smacking him across the head. "Rematch tomorrow, fucker. And put your fucking dick away."

Nash's smile only grew larger as he grabbed his crotch. "You wanna see it, brother?"

Nitro chuckled, which was fucking odd for him. But that was what Nash did.

I stood, needing to get out of here. "We'll go over everything at church tomorrow."

Nitro nodded before turning his attention back to the ring.

I headed inside to check on a few things before leaving. Fuck knew where I'd end up, but I couldn't sit around doing nothing any longer.

Skylar met me as I walked the hallway to the office. "Oh good, I've been looking for you! Can you do me a favour?"

"What?" The question came out harder than I intended, but I was so fucking tense I couldn't stop it.

She frowned. "Why are you so cranky? I just asked you a question."

I worked to rein my shit in, but failed. "Fuck, Skye, just ask the fucking question."

Her lips flattened. "Fine," she snapped. "Can you drop some meals over to Lily's? Annika and Kree cooked some up for her family, and I promised her I'd get them over to her today."

I stilled, my shoulders rocklike. It wasn't a good idea for me to see Lily in the state I was in. Not when I was wired for sex. Not when all I wanted to do was wrap my hands around her neck and fuck the hell out of her. When what I needed to do was fuck the dark shit out of my head.

"Get Devil to do it."

The scowl she directed my way let me know what she thought of that. "Why are you being such an ass about this? Like, is it so hard for you to do something nice for her after everything she's done for us?"

"I've got shit to do. Ask Devil. And if he can't do it, find someone else."

"No," she said with force. "I think you should do it. I want this to come from our family, not from the club."

I stared at her for a long few moments, warring with myself over this decision. I wanted to do it. Wanted to see Lily. Fuck knew she was the only woman on my mind. While I always used sex to come down after a day like today, I wouldn't go looking for it with anyone else tonight. But no fucking way would I show up looking for it from her when she was dealing with her sister in a coma. Doing what Skylar asked of me would put me in dangerous territory. I wasn't convinced I could be near Lily and hold myself back.

I never did the right thing, though.

"Jesus fucking Christ, okay," I barked.

"Good. They're in the fridge. You should go now," she said, lifting her brows, daring me to argue with her.

I ignored that and continued on my way towards the office, my mind already focused on what I had to do. I wouldn't be going now, that was for fucking sure. I'd give myself a few hours to get my head together before seeing her.

"And stop being a dickhead," she called out as I rounded the corner of the hall.

The women in my life would be the fucking death of me.

I entered the office, my phone ringing in my pocket as I did so.

"What's up?" I answered it after seeing Hyde's name flash across the screen.

"Where are you? There's a fed out the front to see you."

And so it all fucking began again.

"I'm on my way."

This was the first we'd heard from them since discovering Ryland had been removed from the case. I wondered if the new guy would be as determined to see us go down. At least this time we weren't distracted by Romano. This time I could dedicate my attention fully to the motherfuckers.

I made my way out to the front gate, slowing as I laid eyes on the new fed I was up against.

She stepped forward, her gaze full of steel, her features schooled into an unreadable blank canvas. "Mr. King, we finally meet. I'm Detective Stark."

I levelled a harsh expression on her and crossed my arms over my chest. The sooner she got her ass off my property the better.

"What do you want?"

"Just wanted to stop by to say you left us a hell of a mess today."

I'd only just met the bitch, but my first impressions of people were usually spot on. This one had brass fucking balls. "I've been busy today, so I have no fucking clue what mess you're talking about."

"We can agree on one thing—you *have* been busy."

"Now that you've said what you came here for, you can leave."

"I also wanted to tell you that Romano was the least of your worries." She took a step away from me. "Strap in. We're in for some fun now."

I watched her leave, my mind going crazy with a million thoughts. A million fucking more than were already in there. As she drove away, I pulled out my phone and dialled Bronze.

"You find Brant yet?" he asked as he answered.

"No, but we've dealt with Romano. That's not why I'm calling, though. I've got a question for you."

"What?"

"You ever work with Detective Stark?"

He whistled low. "I haven't worked with her, but I've heard of her. She's a ballbuster."

"Yeah, that's what I got from her. She ever had any dirt on her hands?"

"Not that I know of. I'll do some digging."

"Don't fucking put yourself at risk, Bronze. Axe has a contact we can use."

"I've got nothing else to fucking do," he muttered.

"Yeah, you do. Get the hell out of town and never look back."

He ignored that. "I'll call you if I find something."

After he hung up, I looked at Hyde. "She's gonna prove more difficult than Ryland."

He nodded. "Yeah, brother. My thoughts, too."

I jerked my chin at him. "Do whatever you need to do tonight to get your head focused. Tomorrow we make a new plan. No fucking way are we lying down for these feds."

CHAPTER NINE

Lily

“Call me if you need me, okay?” Adelaide said as she exited the house, stepping out into the dark of night. We’d had a downpour of heavy rain earlier. A cold wind lingered, reminding me we were heading into the time of year I wasn’t a fan of. I didn’t mind autumn; it was winter I wished we could skip every year.

I reached for her arm and pulled her back so I could hug her. When I finally let her go, I said softly, “Thank you for today. I promise I’ll call you if I need you.”

She smiled. “I wish I could take tomorrow off, too. I’m not far, though, so call and I’ll come as soon as I can.” The sound of a car pulling up drew our attention, and Addy said, “Good God, it’s almost ten o’clock. Who would be stopping by now?”

I squinted into the dark trying to see who it was, but I knew the only person who would come by at this time of night was the one person I really didn’t want to see. *King*. My belly fluttered, betraying me, the bitch. She’d done the same thing this morning when he’d dropped by the hospital.

I was a mess over this man.

Completely confused and flustered.

“Oh no he doesn’t,” Adelaide muttered as she saw King approaching. “What the hell makes you think it’s okay to come here at

this time of night?" she snapped at him.

His scowl was unmistakable as he walked up the stairs onto the front porch. My gaze dropped to the casserole dishes he held. Odd. My attention, though, was quickly drawn back to his face as he looked at me and said, "Skylar asked me to bring these over."

It was totally King not to bother answering her question about why he'd chosen to come so late. And as hurt and angry as I still was with him, I couldn't move past the way he watched me with concern blazing in his eyes. It was so unlike anything he'd given me at any other time.

Shit.

Addy started in on him again. "Well, you can give me those and turn around—"

I placed my hand on her arm. "It's okay, babe, I've got this."

She spun her head to look at me, eyes wide with disbelief. "You're not seriously going to let him in?"

"No, but I'm not going to stand here and get into another argument," I said, giving her the look I reserved for when I needed her to let me fight my own battles. Adelaide was the kind of bestie every girl needed, always going into battle for her friends. Sometimes, though, she didn't know when to back away. This was one of those times. King and Addy both had strong personalities. If I let her continue her tirade, God knew where we'd end up.

We stood making eyes at each other for a few moments, the kind of eyes best friends made when they were trying to communicate "are you sure" and "yes, I'm sure" and "I don't think you are" and "I promise you, I am." Finally, she took a deep breath and glanced back at King. Pointing her finger at him, she said, "You hurt her again, you'll have me to answer to, buddy."

The intensity with which he looked at her and nodded his agreement took my breath away. What was going on here? Three days ago, he'd told me we were done. Now he seemed determined to disregard that decision, so much so that he took Adelaide's warning without argument. This wasn't the demanding man I knew.

After giving me one last questioning glance, Adelaide left us and walked to her car. I watched her in silence, refusing to give King my attention straight away. I needed a moment to gather my thoughts. God, I needed more than a freaking moment, but I knew he wouldn't give me that.

As she pulled out of the driveway, he moved closer and said, "I'll put these in your fridge."

I turned my face to his, trying hard not to trace my gaze over his skin. The man was far too good-looking, though. Or maybe it was those eyes of his that did me in. They revealed the depth to him I knew was there. The things I'd desperately wanted to know about him, but hadn't had the time to learn.

He remained quiet while I examined his face and then his neck. I lost myself for a beat, remembering how his mouth had felt on me, how his lips had grazed my skin, how his eyes had tracked my movements making me feel more desired than I ever had. Making me feel like the woman I'd always wanted to be.

Oh God.

No.

I could not go there with him again.

"Lily," he rumbled at the same time my mother joined us.

"Lily, I want to call the priest," she said, her words as disjointed as her actions had been since Brynn was shot.

I frowned at her. "Why?"

She looked at me like I'd asked a silly question. "I want him to give Brynn the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick."

Her words winded me. I struggled to breathe as they worked their way through me. I understood what she said, and I understood the significance of asking for that, but my world spun at the thought of my sister being close enough to death to call on a priest.

She isn't going to die.

We do not need that sacrament.

"Lily," Mum said again, cutting through my fog. "Can you please get me his number?"

"No, we don't need him," I snapped. "Brynn's not dying, Mum."

My outburst caught her by surprise, and her eyes widened. But she came back with, "You don't know that, and I want to make sure —"

"No! Don't you dare say that!"

I was wild.

Livid.

I would not entertain the thought my sister was at death's door.

Mum stared at me and then without another word, she turned and walked back inside. This conversation wasn't finished, though.

Not by a long shot. I stalked after her, ranting as I went. "Do not walk away from me when we're in the middle of a conversation!"

She ignored me and continued moving towards her bedroom.

I followed. "Mum! Stop. We need to discuss this."

Finally, she spun around to look at me. The agony lining her face killed me, quieting me long enough for her to get a word in. "Lily, shhh. You will wake the children."

That was what she was worried about? I knew I should have thought about that, but the only thought in my mind was that I was nowhere near ready to give up on Brynn.

"Brynn isn't going to die, Mum. You can't call the priest. The doctor said they are weaning her off the ventilator. That has to be a good thing."

Her beautiful face crumpled into the kind of sadness that tore at my heart. I hated watching her struggle for the past few days. No mother should have to go through this. "We don't know what will happen when they do that. Brynn needs this."

Pain cut straight through me as I allowed her words in.

I didn't want to think about my sister not being around anymore. Not being my person.

I need a person.

And I don't want anyone but Brynn.

I had never experienced pain like this. It was an ache that sat sharply and deeply in my body. It felt like a knife had sliced a line from my heart down to my toes. I wanted to cry every second of the day. I wanted my anguish to be ripped from me so I didn't have to feel it ever again, because surely one jagged tear like that would never hurt as badly as this.

This pain was merciless.

It felt like it could literally kill me.

"Lily," Mum said, her voice softer, "you must understand I'm doing this to help her heal."

I swallowed hard, trying to find my voice. "Yes," I choked out, "but I can't get behind it, because to me, it feels like you're saying you agree she might die. I never want to agree with that."

The silence consumed us as we each stayed rooted to the spot, unable to talk, and unable to move. At a time when we desperately needed the other, we had nothing to offer. I wondered how long it

would take for my sister to wake up. I prayed it would be soon, because I wasn't sure how we would survive this otherwise.

Mum turned away from me and walked the few feet to her bedroom. I stood alone in the hallway as she closed the door, shutting me out. I wished I had it in me to reach out and provide her some comfort, but I didn't. Instead, I had to carry on with life. Had to get through the day, so I made my way back outside to where I'd left King. He wasn't there, though, so I went in search of him.

I found him in the kitchen, rifling through the fridge.

He straightened, his gaze roaming over me before settling on my face. "I made room for them in here and pulled out some shit that looked like it had gone off."

I eyed the bench where he'd placed two containers. "Thank you." Such a simple gesture, but it meant something to me. At a time when life was so messed up, it was the little daily tasks that helped me focus. That helped me breathe.

Closing the fridge door, he came to me, eyes searching mine. I willed him to stop, but he didn't. He did what King always did—he forced his way into my space and then some. By the time he was finished, he had me backed against the kitchen bench, his hand on my hip. "Talk to me," he bossed. "How's your sister?"

He had been right this morning—I did still want him. God, how I wanted him. The pull I felt toward King wasn't something I'd ever experienced before. It scared me because he'd already cut and run once, had already hurt me, and that was after only a few weeks of knowing him. How could I trust he wouldn't do it again? How could I trust him with my heart?

"Lily," he ordered, "Talk."

I looked up into his eyes and shook my head. Placing both hands to his chest, I pushed him away. It surprised me that he allowed that, but he did. "I told you this morning that I wouldn't do this with you again, and I meant it. I appreciate you bringing food over, but—"

Something I said or did triggered a shift in his mood, and a dangerous glint flashed in his eyes. There was heat there, too, and that caused desire to pool in my belly. Before I had time to process that, he came at me again, this time a ferocious energy blazing from him.

Crushing his body to mine, his hand came to my throat as he growled, "Tell me you don't want this." He ran his other hand down my body, over my breast, to the button of my jeans. Mouth against

my ear, he said, "Tell me you don't want my hand in your pants, or my fingers deep inside your cunt."

I moaned. It fell from my mouth before I could stop it. And God, if my pussy wasn't throbbing with the need for everything he'd just said. I was wet for him, and he hadn't even moved past the button on my jeans.

He ground himself against me and popped the button. His hand tightened around my throat as a grunt sounded from deep within him. Cutting some of my air supply off, he rasped, "I'm wound so fucking tight for you I can hardly think straight, and while I didn't come here to fuck you, just laying eyes on you is enough to snap any restraint I have." He lowered the zip on my jeans. "Tell me you fucking want me as much as I want you."

He practically had me panting. Everything he said and did turned me on to the point where I wasn't sure I could say no to whatever he wanted. All he had to do was slip his hand in my pants and I would cross the line of no return. I had to stop him from doing that.

I gripped his hand that held my zip. "I don't want you."

He gripped my throat harder, and when he spoke, his tone had turned harder. Edgier. "You're lying to me." Before I knew what he was doing, he lifted me onto the bench, took hold of my hand, and guided it into my panties. With his hand over mine, he pressed my finger to my clit and rubbed it.

It was too much. Felt too good. A whimper escaped my lips as my head fell back. I was his to do what he wanted with, and there was no denying it.

His mouth claimed mine in the kind of kiss I craved. Brutal in his intensity, King reached deep into my soul, arousing the side of me I'd never known until he came along. He was savage and demanding, and I gave him what he wanted.

I kissed him back with everything I had.

My moans matched his growls, and when he directed our fingers inside my pussy, I grasped his bicep with my free hand and dug my fingers in hard.

Oh God.

Fuck.

He'd lit me on fire, and I would burn from his heat.

He tore his mouth from mine and found my eyes. The ferocity in his should have scared me, but it didn't. I may have been scared he would walk away from me again, but I was never scared *of him*.

Working our fingers inside me, he commanded, "Tell me, Lily. Tell me you want this." His voice deepened. Grew more forceful. "That you want me."

I bit my lip, not wanting to give him that. Admitting it gave him all the power. And yet, we both knew the answer. I was dripping for him. Would have been begging for him if he pulled his finger from me. It was clear just how much I wanted him.

"I want you."

Approval flashed in his eyes and his mouth crashed down onto mine again. He was like a crazed man, kissing me and stroking our fingers deeper and harder inside me. The pleasure became almost too much. I was so close to coming. It was divine and urgent and amazing and *too fucking much*.

"Oh my God... oh... *fuck...*" As I came, and as the words tumbled from my lips, he covered my mouth with his hand to muffle it.

I swore I stopped breathing. It was like I was floating, not breathing, unable to think. And as my orgasm shattered through me, I found King watching me with a level of heat I hadn't seen from him before. It was like his eyes hid a storm of need and fury.

He pulled our hands from my pants, and with his gaze firmly on mine, he sucked my fingers into his mouth. Licking them clean, he grunted his pleasure and said, "You can lie to me as much as you want, but the truth is plain to see in your eyes. I'm not going anywhere. You will be mine."

He then let me go, stepped away, and with one last look, he walked out of the kitchen and out of the house. He left me in a state of need like no other I'd ever been in. And I knew he would get what he wanted. Because if I stopped lying to myself for even a second, the truth was right there to see and feel.

I wanted King just as much as he wanted me.

CHAPTER TEN

Lily

I'd never spent much time thinking about death. Having never lost anyone close to me, grief wasn't something I'd ever experienced. Brynn being shot brought up a lot of new emotions I had to work through, but up until last night when my mother talked about calling a priest, I'd pushed away thoughts of death every time they came at me. Today, that was proving difficult. Today, my mother was hell-bent on getting the priest.

As she made plans for him to come this morning, I dialled Adelaide and put the phone to my ear waiting for her to pick up. Sitting on the chair in the far corner of the intensive care waiting room, I bounced my leg up and down, mentally begging Addy to answer. I didn't understand my response to all of this. All I knew was I had to get out of here. And I didn't want to be alone with my thoughts.

The call went to messages. I ripped the phone from my ear, muttering, "Shit," as I searched for Quinn's number. I shot her a text to see if she was working this morning. Georgia definitely was, so there was no point asking her to come rescue me. She worked with brides. No way would they understand if she cancelled on them so she could help a friend out in her hour of need.

Quinn rang. "I'm so sorry, babe, but I can't get out of my shift today."

My heart sank. "It's okay. It was a long shot."

"Shit. Is Addy working, too?"

"Yeah."

She didn't bother mentioning Georgia. We both knew she was a workaholic. "Okay, I'm gonna try to find someone to do my shift. I'll let you know how I go."

"I love you, girl, but honestly, I'm just being dramatic. I'll be fine." Even I didn't buy that as the lie fell from my mouth.

"Yeah, no. Hang up so I can go look for someone."

We ended the call and I scrolled my phone. Skylar's name appeared, and my mind went straight to King. It wasn't the first time I'd thought of him today. He'd been on my mind from the minute I woke up. And as soon as Mum had brought up the priest again this morning, I'd thought of calling both him and Adelaide at the same time.

I gripped the phone harder.

Do not call King.

That would send the absolute wrong message to him.

Just like I had last night.

My legs squeezed together as the memory of him finger-fucking me filled my mind.

Of him bringing food for my family.

Of him cleaning out my fridge.

King didn't say a lot and he certainly didn't make apologies, but his actions meant more than words.

Yeah, like that time he walked away right when you needed him.

I closed my eyes and slowly exhaled in an effort to calm myself. Sometimes people made mistakes. God knew, I'd made many. If I was really honest with myself, I knew the feelings of confusion and hesitation that went along with the early days of a new relationship. Maybe King felt that way. Maybe that was why he did what he did. I just had to answer one question now that he was back and making it clear what he wanted—could I understand and give him another chance?

I could hold onto my hurt and keep my heart closed to something I wanted, or I could choose to let that hurt go and embrace the possibility of a relationship that may grow into something I cherished. That's what life ultimately came down to—the choices we

made. I'd always believed clinging to hurt and suffering wasn't productive. And had always chosen forgiveness over holding onto stuff.

That I was being stubborn about this only told me just how much King meant to me already. It told me I'd found someone who had the power to hurt me, and that spoke to how much I wanted this relationship.

I opened my eyes and looked down at my phone.

I took a deep breath and called King.

He answered almost immediately. "Lily." His voice rumbled through the phone, gravel and grit. It was the trace of concern it held, though, that affected me the most.

My heart raced. "What are you doing right now?"

He didn't hesitate for even a split second. "What do you need?"

"You."

"You're at the hospital?"

"Yes."

"I'm on my way."

He didn't give or wait for a goodbye; he simply disconnected the call. And got on with business. He did exactly what I needed him to do. And for the first time in days, a hush fell over the chaos of thoughts in my head.



King arrived at the hospital twenty minutes later. That told me he'd hustled to get here. He found me sitting alone in the intensive care waiting room. His eyes held the same concern I'd heard in his voice on the phone. Taking the seat next to me, he said, "Talk to me."

I gave him a small smile as I placed my hand on his leg. "For a man who doesn't talk much, you seem to want to do a lot of talking lately."

His serious expression didn't change. "Your mum called the priest."

With those five words, my heart opened.

I nodded and gripped his leg. "I need you to take me away from here. I can't be here when he comes."

He searched my eyes before nodding. When he stood and held his hand out for me, I knew I'd made the right choice calling him.

I'd already told Mum I was leaving, so I followed King out to his bike. He handed me a helmet and waited for me to put it on before settling himself on the bike. Motioning for me to get on behind him, I extended my leg over the seat and slid onto it. King grabbed hold of my legs and showed me where to place my feet. He then took my hands and placed them on his hips.

He turned his head to the side, half facing me. "Grip me with your knees, soles on the foot pegs rather than your heels. Keep your weight centred and watch for turns. If I'm turning right, look over my right shoulder and keep your body in line with mine. Do not lean out of a turn. Keep your front pressed to my back and do not wiggle around at a stop."

I heard every word he said and took it all in. This was my first time on a bike, so I was a little nervous. If I hadn't been in a state over Brynn and the priest, I would have been a whole lot more nervous. And a whole lot more turned on. Because, holy fuck, sitting on the back of King's bike with my body pressed against his and my hands on his hips was hot.

He fastened his helmet in place and took off. I clung to him, my hands sliding around from his hips to circle his waist. I wasn't sure if that was okay, but he didn't respond in any way to let me know it wasn't, so I kept them there. I wasn't scared of the ride or lack trust in King, but I did feel a little unsure of what to expect. Holding onto him for dear life eased some of my jitters.

We rode for a long time. Well, it felt like hours, but when we finally stopped, I discovered it had only been just over an hour. It didn't take me long to settle into the rhythm of the ride. The steady vibration of the engine calmed me. It was almost hypnotic.

King took us out on the highway, along the Old Road to Cowan where he pulled into the Pie In The Sky café. The scenery along the way soothed me just as much as the bike did. By the time I hopped off, I felt a thousand times better than I had before the ride.

I removed my helmet and passed it to King with a smile. "Thank you," I said softly. Being so close to him on the bike, legs and arms around his body, combined with the way he watched me now, had my tummy in a flutter. I wasn't nervous with him, but my feelings were definitely heightened.

He jerked his chin towards the café. "You want a drink?"

I nodded and followed him inside. My eyes were firmly on his ass, because no one filled out jeans quite the way King did. They fit snugly against the hard muscle he'd packed onto his body, and I found it difficult to drag my gaze away. I was so engrossed that when he came to a stop at the café counter and turned to face me, I ran into him.

My hands went straight to him as we collided, grasping his leather jacket. His arm came up and around me, and he pulled me close to steady me. His scent hit me, stirring the butterflies in my belly. King smelt like leather and sandalwood and something else I couldn't quite put my finger on. It wasn't overpowering, but it was completely him, and it aroused my memories of the times he'd made me come.

I gripped his jacket harder and attempted to push those thoughts from my head. I mean, they were good thoughts, amazing thoughts, but right now was not the time for them.

He looked down at me, still holding me close. "You good?"

I nodded and let him go. Moving out of his embrace, I said, "Yeah, I just wasn't watching where I was walking." Heat stained my cheeks as I thought about what I *had* been watching.

Good God, why did he make me so flustered?

It wasn't like I was a freaking virgin who'd never had sex before or who'd never seen an ass before. And yet, here I was, my cheeks turning red just thinking about having sex with the man.

I was sure he noticed, but full points to him, he didn't mention it. Instead, he asked, "What do you want to drink?"

Happy for an excuse to concentrate on anything but him, I turned my attention to the menu board. "Ooh, I'll have that chocolate milkshake with extra ice-cream and Oreos. And I'm gonna want extra chocolate syrup on top, too, please."

His eyes flared with what looked like heat, but he didn't say anything.

"What?" I asked. King was so damn guarded with his thoughts, and I wanted to know them all. I knew he'd never share everything, because that seemed like the man he was, but I was going to push to get to know what I could.

Bending his face to speak against my ear, he said, "I was just filing away that chocolate obsession for later use."

My core clenched with need, and not just because of what he said. With King, it was so much more than that. It was the way his voice always seemed to have that growly tone, and how he exuded masculinity like no other man I knew, and how he just said what he wanted, regardless of how bossy or filthy it was.

King blazed with sex and a wild, untamed side I was helpless to say no to. It wasn't just a glimmer or a flash here and there; he walked and talked it every second of the day. To me, it was magnetic and irresistible.

Being with him distracted me from Brynn. Every time he came near, my focus shifted, and for the time we were together, I was able to put the worry aside for a while. I couldn't decide if I felt guilty about that or if I welcomed the distraction.

He ordered our drinks and guided me to a table in the back where we had some privacy. It was still early in the day, so there weren't many people here yet.

Once we were sitting, he eyed me with that intense gaze of his. "How's your sister today?"

Not wanting to have this conversation, I glanced down and fiddled with the salt and pepper shakers on the table.

King rested his arms on the table and leaned forward. "Lily." He uttered just one word, but delivered it with his signature bossiness. I wondered if he ever stopped being bossy, but quickly dismissed that thought. King only knew one way in life.

Looking up, I found his eyes again. "The doctors are weaning her off the ventilator." I wrapped my arms around my body, suddenly chilled. "That's why Mum was so intent on calling the priest. She's scared that won't go to plan, but she fully believes God will make everything okay." My tone made it clear where I stood on that, but he asked me anyway.

"You don't?"

I swallowed my Catholic guilt. "No, I don't. I stopped believing in God a long time ago." I paused. "Well, that's not true. I didn't stop believing in God. I just don't think he makes everything okay, and when people like my mum rely on him to do something he can't do, I get a little cranky." I cocked my head to the side. "Do you believe in God?"

He slowly shook his head. "Fuck no."

I didn't know what compelled me to ask, but the question popped out without thought. "Did you ever?"

He shifted, resting his back against the chair, contemplating that. "If I did, it would have been at an age I have no memories of."

"That makes me sad." Because it told me he hadn't been told not to believe, but rather, someone had stolen that from him.

A dark look crossed his face. "Yeah," he said gruffly.

I studied him silently for a few moments, curious as to the things he'd lived through, but not ready to quiz him on it yet. Finally, I said, "Thank you for today. I needed to get out of there, and it turns out I love being on the back of a bike. It was exactly what I needed."

The waitress brought our drinks out, cutting into our conversation, but I did notice the hint of a smile on his lips at what I said.

After the waitress left us, I watched King sugar his black coffee. "You don't drink milk?"

"Yeah, but not in my coffee." At my questioning look, he added, "Skye had to give up dairy for a while when she was a kid, so I didn't have it in the house. Got a taste for black coffee from that."

"Skylar lived with you when she was growing up?"

He drank some of his coffee before answering my question. "Our foster mother died when she was eight. She came to live with me after that."

This gave me an insight into their relationship that had been missing before. It was a piece of the puzzle that made up King. And goodness, it revealed so much about the man sitting across from me. "How old were you?" My guess was he couldn't have been much past twenty, which if true, amazed me even further.

"Twenty-three."

"So you were her father figure," I murmured, my mind spinning at this new information about King. He'd done for his foster sister what my own father hadn't done for me, and I had so much respect for him for that.

He glanced around the café, seemingly uncomfortable with this conversation. "You could say that."

I drank some of my milkshake, a smile dancing across my face.

At my smile, he said, "What?"

I picked up the Oreo biscuit from my drink. "I don't think I've ever seen you like this, where you don't wanna discuss something. I kinda like it, because it shows me a different side to you."

His intense expression returned. "What kind of side?"

"You're always so in control and demanding and directing the conversation and what we do. But here, just now, you let your guard down for a bit and you allowed me to run the conversation." I leant forward, my gaze pinned to his. "And even though you didn't seem completely comfortable talking about that time in your life, you still answered my question and shared something personal with me. You showed me a little bit of vulnerability, and I liked that."

He remained guarded for a couple of moments longer before giving me something unexpected. "Our foster mother was the only mother we each had worth a damn. There was no fucking way I was putting Skye back into the foster system when Margreet died, so I raised her like she was my own child. She gave me far more than I ever gave her."

I reached my hand across the table and covered his. "That's the blessing of children, and if parents are too fucking stupid to cherish that or their children, they don't deserve them."

He glanced down at my hand over his before meeting my gaze again and nodding. "That's the fucking truth."

We stayed like that for a beat before I pulled my hand away. To me, we'd shared something meaningful, and I hoped it meant something to King, too.

"So," I said, "changing the subject, how often do you get out for a ride?" It was the lightest thing I could think of asking him. I had so many other subjects to broach with him, but I didn't want to throw them all at him today. I figured with a man like King, who didn't like to talk a hell of a lot, I had only a small window of opportunity to get him to open up here, so I ran with the option I felt he'd be most willing to discuss.

He drank some more of his coffee. "Not fucking often enough lately. Used to be weekly, but not these days."

"Well, just so you know, I'm up for a ride again whenever you want to get out. I loved it."

Heat flickered in his eyes. "I plan on getting you on that bike soon."

Lust whooshed through me, because I was fairly sure King wasn't referring to a long bike ride. "That sounds like fun."

He arched a brow. "Fun?" It was a growl. A sexy-as-fuck growl.

I grinned and changed the subject again. Otherwise, this was about to go down a path that would get both of us worked up in ways we didn't have time to take care. "So who introduced you to your first bike?"

He moved from subject to subject with ease. Something else I liked about him. "The father of one of my schoolmates had a Harley and taught us how to ride. I was seventeen and fucking obsessed with bikes after that. He had his own business fixing bikes and taught us how to fix them and rebuild them." His eyes lit up as he continued. "There's nothing like getting your hands dirty and losing your time to a bike. I worked for him for years, learning from him and saving cash so I could buy parts. Built my first bike when I was nineteen."

"And your second?"

The smile in his eyes couldn't be mistaken. "Six months after that."

"How many have you built since then?"

His eyes dulled a little. "Two." He drank some coffee. "Life got in the way."

My phone rang, and I pulled it out to see it was Mum calling. And just like that, I was thrown back into real life. My distraction from worry ended.

"Hey, Ma," I answered.

"Lily! Brynn is awake! Hurry and come back!"

A huge wave of emotion engulfed me and tears streamed down my face. "She is?" I managed to get out in between sobs.

"Yes!"

"I'm on my way."

King had already stood. "She's awake?"

I smiled through my tears, an emotional wreck of happiness, relief, and adrenaline. "Yes."

He took two steps toward me, reached for my hand, and strode out to his bike with me in tow. Within a few minutes, he had us both on the bike and on our way back to the hospital. This was King back in charge, and I couldn't deny that I liked him like this. After years of me having to take on most of the responsibility for my family, it felt good to have a man help me in this way.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

King

I eyed the clock as I scrubbed a hand over my face. It was just past 8:00 p.m. and I still had a few loose ends to tie up here before I could check on Lily. After her sister had woken up this morning, I'd stayed at the hospital with her for a couple of hours before she'd kicked me out and told me to get back to work. I fucking appreciated a woman who had the sense to ask for help when she needed it and then the strength to deal with shit on her own later. She'd called me just after six to let me know she was heading home for the night and that I should drop by when I was done with work. That she'd put some dinner away for me in case I was hungry. My gut had tightened at that. It had been years since a woman had put dinner away for me.

"Johnny called," Axe said, entering the office. "He's agreed to your terms."

"Good. Keep on him for that info. We can't afford to drop the ball on this."

Axe's contact in the feds, Johnny, was now Storm's contact. We'd put him on our payroll in exchange for names of any witnesses the feds had in relation to the case against us. I'd pay those motherfuckers off to keep them quiet, or if warranted, something a little more permanent.

"Also, Zane and Griff have started pulling more surveillance of the area from the day of Jen's murder like you wanted." *To see if Romano had been bullshitting me about not having a hand in that.*

"And Brant?"

"Still looking, but nothing yet. He's an evasive motherfucker."

"Yeah." I narrowed my eyes at my brother. "You look like hell."

He nodded. "We both do."

"Justine giving you grief at the moment?"

He rubbed the back of his neck and stretched it. "When isn't she?"

"Fuck," I muttered. "That bitch has a lot to fucking answer for, brother."

"She also has my child in her belly, King, so I can't just fucking walk away."

This was an old, recurring argument of ours. Me telling him to leave; him telling me he loved her. Except he was right—he now had his child to consider, and my brother had the same convictions I did, so he would never walk away from that responsibility.

I jerked my chin at the door. "Try to get some sleep tonight. Or find someone to take the edge off." At his scowl, I said, "Fuck, she screwed around on you and fucking walked out. You don't owe her any loyalty."

I knew his stance on this, though. If I considered myself a loyal bastard, Axe was a motherfucking nun when it came to this shit. Women threw themselves at him, fucking begging him to let them suck his dick. Not once had I ever seen him so much as look at them if he was with someone.

"I'll see you in the morning. And I'll check in with Johnny first thing. Hurry him along."

After he'd gone, I thought about Justine. She'd had her claws in my brother for five long years, and just when I'd thought he was finally rid of her, she'd announced her fucking pregnancy. Axe had wanted a child for as long as I could remember, so he'd been over the fucking moon. And then he'd discovered her infidelity. I hadn't thought I'd ever see my brother lose his shit, because Axe was the guy who held himself together when everyone around him couldn't. Fuck, if there was an apocalypse, Axe was the one I'd want in my corner. But he had lost it for a while there and had only recently pulled through that.

A text came through, distracting me from my thoughts.

Lily: If you're coming over, I need milk please.

Me: On my way soon

Lily: Thanks.

I stared at the messages, at the simple and uncomplicated way with which Lily acted. She'd put up a fight when I'd told her we weren't done, but I'd expected that. I'd anticipated that would continue longer than it did, but something had shifted in her since last night, and she appeared to have let it go. I'd fucking make shit up to her for what I did, but that she didn't play games or screw me around meant a fuck of a lot.



I left the clubhouse an hour after she'd messaged me about the milk, grabbed some on the way over, and arrived just after she'd had a screaming match with Zara. I knew this because she yanked the front door open with the force of a crazed woman, eyes wild, stepped outside, and dragged me onto the front lawn before producing a cigarette and begging me, "Do you have a lighter on you? Zara may be fucking pregnant, which may mean I'm about to kill some fucking teenage boy who should not have chosen my daughter to mess around with. And I need a fucking smoke to deal with this, which means I will have to kill that little fucker twice, because I'm supposed to be quitting cigarettes, and if he got my kid pregnant, I am most definitely not quitting cigarettes."

I eyed her, trying like hell not to smile. Lily had a way of lighting my fucking world, just by being her. She didn't have to do shit for me or work any special magic. All she had to do was look at me or smile at me or go on about the shit she was dealing with, and I felt better than before I saw her.

Pulling out my lighter, I said, "That's a fuckload of fucks, woman." It was unlike Lily to swear so much, which only told me

how worked up she was over this.

She ripped the lighter from my hand, still crazed as fuck. "Yeah, because they are *necessary*!" Lighting the smoke, she sucked nicotine deep into her lungs.

"What's going on with Zara? You know for sure she had sex?"

"No, she won't confirm it, but I read some texts on her phone from that little shit, and I'm almost completely certain she has."

Lily was fucking hot when she was worked up like this. I had to work harder than usual to drag my mind from thinking about the shit I wanted to do to her. "Right, so you get through tonight, and then tomorrow you force a pregnancy test on her."

She pulled a face as she took another drag of her smoke. "You have to wait a little while before those tests will work accurately. God, unless she had sex weeks ago, and I didn't know. Fuck."

In an effort to take her mind off her daughter, I said, "How's Brynn?"

Her shoulders lifted and then dropped as she let out a long breath, almost like she'd been holding it forever. "She's confused and not really with it." She gave me a small smile. "But she's awake and that's all that matters."

"Yeah," I agreed, because that really was all that fucking mattered.

She reached for the milk after she finished her smoke. "Are you hungry? I put some steak and veges in the oven for you."

I closed the space between us and grabbed her around the waist. I needed my hands on her. Hell, I needed a lot more than that, but it was what I had to settle for. "I'm fucking starving."

She stared up at me, aware I wasn't referring to food. Her eyes flared with the same heat running through me. She surprised me when she said softly, almost hesitantly, "Are you sure this is what you want?"

I tightened my hold on her. "Never been more sure of anything in my life."

Continuing to watch me with uncertainty, she said, "I've only ever dated a handful of guys in my life, and have mostly been with Linc, so I'm not experienced in this whole relationship thing, but I will tell you one thing—I don't do games. I'm not saying that's what you're doing, at all, but I *am* saying, the idea of you walking away

again hurts. It hurt the first time you did it, and I don't wanna go through that again. So if you're—"

I put my finger to her mouth. "I don't like games either, and I don't engage in them. I'm not going anywhere, Lily. And if you ever mention those motherfuckers you dated again, I'll put you over my fucking knee and spank that out of you." Bending my head, my lips grazed her ear as I growled, "You're mine now, and I don't fucking share."

Her hands found my face and she took hold of it so she could direct my mouth to hers. Her grip was hard, determined, and when our lips met, she kissed me with an urgency and passion she hadn't yet. This kiss was hot as hell, and all I wanted to do was rip her clothes off, lay her the fuck down, and slam my dick inside her.

I gave her a minute longer with my lips than I should have before tearing myself away. Jesus, it had been hard enough not having her last night—I had no fucking idea how I'd make it through tonight without getting my fill of her.

"Fuck, woman, don't kiss me like that when I can't do anything with it," I rasped as I took a step away from her.

She watched me, breathless and just as aroused as I was. "Well don't tell me I'm yours and that you don't fucking share. That shit is hot and makes me wanna climb you."

Jesus fuck.

"We need to move this inside," I muttered as I put my hands to her hips and spun her around.

"You do realise that manhandling me only gets me hotter, right?" she threw over her shoulder as we walked inside.

I ignored that and focused on getting us inside so I could eat my dinner and take my mind off screwing the hell out of her. There was only so much a man could take when he was as hard as I was, and I'd reached my limit. At this point, I was calling on divine fucking intervention, and that was saying something, because like I'd told Lily today, I didn't believe in that shit.

Robbie came screaming into the kitchen as we entered, irritation plastered across his face. After a quick glance at me, he grumbled, "Mum! Zara won't get out of the bathroom, and I want to have a shower."

Lily looked at her son. "She only just hopped in the shower. You need to give her some time."

His eyes widened. "But I need a shower *now*!" He'd worked himself up into a state over this and looked like he was about to completely lose his shit.

Lily wrapped her hands around his biceps and bent so she could look him in the eyes. "Baby, take a deep breath." When he refused and simply stared at her, she said, "Robbie, we've talked about this. Being part of a family means we have to make allowances for each other, and learn to compromise and share. Just because you're ready to have a shower right now, doesn't mean you can. Sometimes our plans don't fit with each other's, so we have to rework them. You understand that, right?"

His lips flattened as he stared at her. He seemed caught in that place where kids know they're wrong but don't want to admit it. Finally he nodded. "I do, but I don't like it."

I fought back a smile. I liked his style. I also liked her patience with him.

Lily stood and pressed a kiss to his forehead. "Yeah, buddy, I get that. There's a lot of things I don't like, too, but that's life and we just have to learn to work with it."

He grumbled something I couldn't figure out as he stomped out of the kitchen.

Lily sighed as she watched him go. She then turned to me and said, "You want a beer with your steak?"

"You drink beer?"

"No. I picked some up on the way home. I figured you probably drank it and might want some. I mean, I have no idea if you do or what you'd prefer, but the guy in the shop told me which ones were his bestsellers so I ran with one of them." She paused for a moment, thinking, before adding, "Mum probably has some whisky in the house if you want that instead."

Fucking hell, this woman.

I jerked my chin. "I'll have a beer."

"You don't want me to look for some whisky?"

I shook my head. "I'm good with beer."

Something I said, or my tone, caused her to slow down and hit me with a smile that shot warmth to my gut. "Okay."

She then busied herself heating my dinner, grabbed a beer from the fridge, and brought it all to the table for me. I sat on my ass and watched her every movement, paying special attention to her ass

and legs that were painted with those tight-as-fuck jeans she liked to wear. As hard as I tried, I failed at not allowing my mind to wander back to last night when I'd had my hand in her pants. She hadn't wanted to admit how much she wanted me. I'd known it wouldn't take long to break her down though, because it was clear as fucking day that she wanted my hands on her.

"What are you thinking?" she asked as she placed my meal in front of me.

I hooked my arm around her and pulled her onto my lap. She came easily, sliding into place like she was made to be there, arm around my neck, tits pressed against me, smile blazing just for me. Moving my free hand to her throat, I ran my fingers over her collarbone and said, "I was thinking about our fingers deep inside you and about how much I need to taste you again."

She bit her lip, and fuck if that didn't hit my veins with a craving I knew wouldn't be satisfied tonight. "I've never been with a man who has a filthy mouth like yours."

My grip around her neck tightened. "Pretty fucking sure I told you never to mention another man to me again," I growled, shocked as shit at the possessiveness sitting deep in my gut.

Heat radiated from every inch of her and she brought her mouth close to mine. "It needs to be said that you're hot when you're jealous." As the last word fell from her lips, she kissed me, her tongue tangling with mine in ways that made me think of it on my dick.

Fuck.

Lily had me all worked up to the point I could hardly fucking think straight. Dragging my mouth from hers, I smacked her ass and ordered, "Off. I need a moment without you wiggling that pretty ass of yours all over my dick."

She raised her brows, her lips twitching with a smile. "If I'm not mistaken, it was you who pulled my ass onto your lap, so stop your whining and bitching."

She did as I said, though, and sat next to me, watching me with amusement, and heat, and care all rolled into one. I'd never met a woman like her, and maybe that was half of my attraction to her, but the way she nurtured had a lot to do with it as well. Lily might have been gentle, with a softness I didn't often see in my world, but she was also solid, and there for those she loved, and *that* was something that called deeply to me.

I took a swig of beer before asking, "When are you moving back home?"

"Oh God, I've hardly thought about that. Soon. The kids need to get back into a routine, and I do too."

"It'll be a mess, Lily. I can organise for the boys to clean it up for you."

"Linc already cleaned it. Well, he said he did. I haven't been over yet to inspect."

"I'll go over and make sure. Fingerprint dust is a bitch to fucking clean and there may be some shit that needs to be repaired or thrown out, depending on..." I pulled myself up—she didn't need to hear or think about her sister's blood splatter. "I'll check it out and clean up anything that still needs it."

"Thank you," she said softly.

I eyed her mother who had entered the dining room, and Lily turned to greet her. "Hey, Ma. You okay?"

Hannah sat next to her and threw me a smile before answering her daughter. "I'm just tired, that's all. I think I might go to bed now."

Exhaustion lined her face. Hell, it lived and breathed all over her. She was far from the woman I'd met who talked my ear off.

Lily reached out to hug her. "Do you want a sleeping pill or do you think you'll be okay without one?"

Tears pooled in Hannah's eyes as she nodded. "Yes, I think I need one, darling."

Lily jumped up. Glancing at me, she said, "I won't be long."

I jerked my chin. "Don't worry about me."

She ushered her mother out, speaking soothingly to her as they went, leaving me in silence. I sat and ate the best damn meal I'd eaten since the last time I'd had Lily's cooking. The peace and quiet in this house was fucking music to my ears. And yet, it wasn't completely quiet because I could hear the kids arguing over something. But without the tension I was used to being surrounded by daily, this was peaceful. Calm.

I finished my dinner and beer, and had just finished washing the dirty plate and cutlery when Lily walked into the kitchen. She moved next to me, placing her hand on my hip. "Thanks for doing that."

I didn't know if it was the need I had for her, or the gratitude I heard in her voice, or the softness in her eyes, or what the fuck it was, but one of those things drove me to reach for her waist, lift her onto the kitchen counter, and crush my lips to hers.

She moaned into my mouth as her legs and arms circled me. By the time we finished with the kiss, we were both a mess of frantic desire. Problem was, we couldn't do anything with it. Not with her family in the house.

Gripping my hair, she panted, "God, I want to fuck you."

"Jesus," I rasped, "I need to get out of here."

She pulled her head back to look me in the eyes. "You're not staying the night?" Her disappointment couldn't be mistaken. It was written all over her and bled from her voice.

My fingers dug into her hips. "There's no fucking way I can sleep next to you tonight without having my hands all over you and my dick inside you."

"So do that."

She didn't know what she was saying. "Lily, your mother and your kids are in the house. You do not want me—"

She pressed her lips to mine and claimed another kiss from me. "Maybe I do."

"Fucking hell." I slid my hands around her ass and yanked her hard against me. "The level of need I have for you isn't the kind that can be satisfied with a quick fuck, and it sure as hell won't be quiet. There is no way I'm fucking you tonight."

She squeezed her arms and legs around me even tighter, like she couldn't get close enough to me. Bending her face to my neck, she kissed me there and murmured, "I'm sorry I'm being needy. I just really want you to stay and cuddle me tonight."

"I don't fucking cuddle, Lily."

Her mouth moved along my collarbone as she continued kissing me. "Yeah, you do. It's nice."

Hell, no one had ever called the shit I did nice. And just like that, I changed my fucking mind. I let her go and took a step back. "Get your ass in the bedroom."

Her eyes lit up. "You're staying?"

"Yeah, I'm fucking staying."

CHAPTER TWELVE

King

“See, you do cuddle,” Lily said early the next morning when she woke. “You’re like a big bear, all arms and legs around me.”

I tightened my embrace and ground my dick against her ass. The night had been hell sleeping next to her. I put my mouth to her ear. “What time do your kids wake up?” I’d stuck to my word last night and hadn’t fucked her, but I wasn’t a fucking saint—I couldn’t restrain myself any longer.

She wiggled and twisted until she faced me. Reaching for my dick, she said, “We’ve got at least an hour, I’d say.”

Before she knew what was happening, I had her under me, naked. Raising her arms over her head against the headboard, I pressed firmly on her wrists and ordered, “Keep them there.”

The change in my tone caught her attention and her eyes flared with the same excitement they did every time I had her. That always increased my desire, and today was no different. But fuck, after the past couple of days, the need I had for Lily had stirred some dark shit in me, so what I felt now had me on the edge of danger. I was fighting with myself not to take her too far, not to fucking break her. And that in itself was a whole other mindfuck, because caring whether I forced a woman past that edge wasn’t something I’d experienced for a long time.

I ran my gaze down the curves of her body, taking my time with this because it helped focus the erratic thoughts in my head. When I was this wired for sex, my mind ran in a million different directions, imagining every last fucking thing I wanted to do. Some fucked-up shit drew me down dark alleys in my brain, demanding release. Driving my actions. Sometimes I acted on these thoughts, other times, I managed to control myself. Today, I was working like fuck to get a handle on my shit. It seemed that wanting a woman as much as I wanted Lily, heightened my dark desires.

Fuck.

"King."

Her voice snapped me back to attention, and I reacted with a hand around her neck. "Don't talk," I rasped, my gaze pinned to her throat. I'd come back to her neck, but first I needed to taste her.

I bent my face to suck one of her nipples into my mouth as I cupped a hand around her tit. Lily's breasts were a perfect fucking handful, and if we weren't on a time limit today, I'd dedicate some serious time to them. Since we were low on time, I made do with a few minutes sucking and biting before continuing down to her pussy.

She arched her back as I let go of her neck and gripped her hips. And when my fingers dug into her soft skin, a moan fell from her lips. Before I buried my face in her cunt, I glanced up to find her head turned to the side, eyes closed, mouth parted while she took shallow breaths.

Fucking hell, she was beautiful.

My need raged through me at the sight, and I forced her legs wide, slid my body down the bed, flat to the mattress, and finally took the taste of her I'd been craving for days.

She was wet for me, and within a few moments of running my tongue through her, my beard was fucking coated in her. Gliding my hands under her ass, I lifted her slightly so her pussy was in line with my mouth. And then I ate her out, my rhythm rough and hard.

It was all lips and tongue and teeth, a little brutal, completely possessive. This was me stamping my fucking ownership of her cunt. And she fucking loved it. Lily writhed and moaned and pulled my hair while I made her come. As her orgasm took hold, our eyes met and I licked slowly along her pussy, lapping her cum up.

“Oh fuck, King... Fucking hell...” Her head fell back as she arched up off the bed again and shuddered through the orgasm. Her body was a quivering mess, and seeing her lose herself like that got me harder than I already was.

I moved off the bed, stripped out of my boxers, and grabbed a condom before coming back to her. Dropping it on the mattress, I reached for her legs and yanked her down to where I stood at the end of the bed. She'd barely recovered from her orgasm and my rough movements appeared to bewilder her as she attempted to bring her complete attention around to what I was doing. She was fucking hot with her flushed skin, messy hair all over the place, and those lips of hers slightly parted while she watched me to see what would come next.

When I had her sitting on the end of the bed, I grasped her cheeks with one hand while slowly wiping her cum from my beard with my other hand. She stared silently up at me, just like I'd told her. Taking hold of my dick, I ran the tip of it along her mouth. “Open up and suck me in. I wanna feel your throat,” I growled.

Keeping our eyes locked, she placed one hand over mine, wrapped her lips around my cock and took it into her mouth. She did as I said and sucked me back to her throat. As I shifted my hand away, her fingers laced through mine and she gripped me firmly keeping our hands together, eyes still holding mine. She worked my dick with long and slow sucks. Her rhythm wasn't my usual preference, but fuck if I didn't want anything but what she gave. Her tongue slid over me with the same slow style her lips did, and a low moan came from deep within her, signalling how fucking turned on she was. It vibrated along my dick, and her lips pulled up a little as the hint of a smile touched them, revealing her pleasure.

Everything she did quieted the frenzy in my mind. It was as if by her slowing this down, she slowed my brain down. She pulled all my thoughts into a straight line, helping me focus on the one thing I wanted rather than allowing those thoughts to shoot out in a thousand different directions. It was clarity like I'd never experienced, and fuck, the pleasure was intense.

I needed to be inside her cunt.

Needed her heat.

Her wet tightness around me.

Now.

And while I'd intended to have her from behind, the need to fuck her while looking into her eyes overwhelmed me. I had to fucking watch as she took my dick. As she took everything I had to give her.

I pulled out of her mouth and reached for the condom. After I tore it open, she grabbed it from me and said, "I want you to fuck me bare. I'm on the pill."

I always made a point not to fuck without a condom. I didn't wanna put kids out there on the street without a father if the woman fell pregnant and didn't fucking tell me. I also didn't wanna have kids with the whores I'd fucked. Lily was different. It was fucking beyond my understanding, but I trusted her. I didn't hesitate for a second when she asked me for this.

Jerking my chin at her, I directed, "Move back up the bed."

She did what I said, lying with her head on the pillow, watching and waiting. So fucking ready for me.

I put my knee to the mattress and made my way to her. Placing my hands on her thighs, I spread her legs and bent my face to take another taste of her. I licked her clit before pushing my tongue inside. Fuck, I needed hours with her cunt. With my mouth to it. My tongue inside it. But that would have to be another time. We had that fucking time limit hanging over us, and even more than that, I needed my dick deep inside her.

Kneeling with my legs spread and my ass to my feet, I gripped her and pulled her to me. I positioned her legs over mine, her feet flat to the bed behind me, and without wasting another second, I slammed inside her.

"Oh God," she cried out, arching her neck while her eyes fluttered closed.

I put my hands to the bed either side of her and bent for a mouthful of tit. As I sucked and bit her, she took hold of my shoulders and gripped me hard. I grunted as her nails dug sharply into my skin, and bit her harder. Lily loved it rough and returned it to me. She reached her hands around to my back and clawed my skin there. That shit hit my veins and my mind at the same time, drawing a savage response from me.

I tore my mouth from her breast and found her eyes as I curled my hand around her throat. Applying enough pressure to steal some of her breath, I thrust hard inside her and growled, "You like that?"

She nodded, her need for me unmistakable, her nails digging into me again.

Her answer stirred my animal side further, and I finally succumbed to it. I allowed my needs to take over fully and pounded into her with unrelenting force. With both hands around her neck, I watched her take everything from me. Nothing escaped my notice. Not the way she bit the inside of her lips, or the way her breathing sped up, or the way her mouth parted and her tongue curled as the pleasure consumed her. I saw it all, and I fucking stored that shit in my mind. I didn't want to forget any of it.

She came, eyes closed, hands gripping my biceps, squeezing hard enough to leave bruises. I followed her over the edge a moment later, burying my face against her neck to muffle my roar. I stayed there until she let go of my arms and reached her hands up to the back of my neck and threaded her fingers through my hair.

Something about that caused my gut to tighten, and a feeling so violently demanding and unexplainable filled me. It rushed at me, claiming my attention unlike it had been in a long time. It wasn't just one feeling; it was many intertwined, but together they equalled one.

Mine.

Lily was mine, and I would do whatever the fuck it took to keep her.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

King

I eyed Zane. "So, you're telling me it *was* one of Romano's guys who killed Jen?"

"No, I'm telling you we've traced a car caught on the surveillance the day of the murder, to him. On top of that, we can't trace any of the other vehicles in the area to anyone of significance to you. There are a couple we can't track at all, but if I had to give you an opinion, I'd put it at around 95 percent certainty it was Romano."

I leaned back in my office chair and exhaled the breath that had been trapped inside me for weeks. It had to have been Romano.

Zane didn't wait for a response before continuing. "As for Brant, he's left Sydney, and as best we can make out, he's back in Melbourne. We had a hit on his credit card there last night. Still can't confirm if Ivy is with him or not."

"Keep tracking him. Winter was supposed to head down there tomorrow. I'll move that up, and he can go today."

"Will do."

After he left, I sat for a moment thinking about all the shit we'd been through over the last few weeks thanks to Romano. While we still had stuff to work through, a weight had lifted off my shoulders. Now we could direct all our efforts to dealing with the feds and then Gambarro. That motherfucker still had to be taken care of.

I exited the office and headed out to search for Hyde. He'd arrived back at the clubhouse about half an hour ago after helping Nitro take care of a cleaning job that had been called in early this morning. Business was almost back to normal on all fronts. We just had one thing left to deal with before club life could go back to normal.

I found Hyde in the kitchen with Scott. Glancing up at me, he said, "Just got a call about that meet with Black Deeds scheduled for Monday. They wanna push it to Thursday. You good with that?"

"Yeah, but let Zero know we won't push it again." Looking at Scott, I asked, "You boys pulling out tonight?"

He nodded. "We'll leave around eight. You sure you don't need us anymore?"

"Zane's just advised me he believes Romano was behind the shit that went down, so yeah, I'm sure." To Hyde, I said, "Let everyone know they can move their families home."

"It's about fucking time," he said, echoing my thoughts. It really fucking was.

Leaving them, I made my way to Annika's room. I figured she'd be in there trying to get the kids to have an afternoon nap. I was right. She looked at me as I pushed the half-open door all the way open, and put her finger to her lips in a silencing motion.

I jerked my chin at the hallway and she nodded, holding up a finger to let me know she needed a minute.

While I waited for her outside the room, a text came through.

Lily: It's official, I'm going to prison.

Me: Why?

Lily: Zara's boyfriend just gave me lip. I really am going to kill the little shit.

Me: I could have a word with him

Lily: To save me from prison?

Me: Yeah

Lily: You really like fucking me, huh?

Me: I like a lot fucking more than that

She didn't come back straight away, and I took a moment allowing it to sink in just how fucking much I liked hearing from her in the middle of the day.

Lily: You like roast chicken?

Me: Yeah

Lily: I'm cooking it for dinner. You should come. 6pm.

Me: I'll be there. Don't commit murder before I see you

Annika stepped out into the hallway as I sent the last message. Closing the door softly behind her, she said, "What's up? And why do you look all smiley?"

"What the fuck does all smiley mean?"

She pulled her head back, inspecting my face. Waving her finger at me, she said, "That look in your eyes. You might not actually be smiling with your mouth, but your eyes are."

Another text sounded and I glanced down at my phone.

Lily: You should sleep over more often. I'm liking this side of you.

Lily: I mean, I know there would have to be some hot sex to go with that sleeping over, but just sayin' I'm down.

Lily: BTW you give good head. I'm always down for that.

Fuck.

Me: Stop texting me. I'm busy

Lily: I wish you were busy with me.

Lily: OK, OK, I'm stopping now. I'll get you some more beer on the way home. Just let me know if you prefer something different to last night.

I shoved the phone back in my pocket and met Annika's gaze.

She lifted her brows at me and crossed her arms. "Okay, brother, what gives? Who is this woman and when do I get to meet her?" When I didn't answer her, she said, "It's clearly a woman. The only other time in your life that I've seen you smile like this was when you were first dating Ivy. You may as well tell me before Skye figures it out. You know what she's like when someone in the family is dating. I can save you from her if I'm prepared."

She was right—Skylar had a way of forcing herself on the people we dated. I hadn't been subjected to it for a long time, but I'd watched as she'd done it to Axe and Nik over the years. Skye was too much for some of the people they dated, but I had a feeling Lily would be okay with her.

"It's Lily, Skye's physio, so I think we're good, Nik."

Her eyes widened. "Oh my God, I never saw that coming." She grinned. "I like it."

Shifting the conversation back to what I came for, I said, "I came to let you know you can take the kids home."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really. I can take you when they wake up if you want."

A smile spread out across her face. "This is the best news you could have given me. The department called me offering me some days, so I'll be able to say yes."

Annika was a primary school relief teacher. She'd taken time off when her dickhead ex-boyfriend had talked her into letting him support her. I'd argued with her over the wisdom of that, but she'd been so infatuated with him she hadn't been able to see straight. That, and she had a burning desire to be at home for her kids, which I understood. In the end, he'd shown his abusive side and I'd gotten her out of that shit. What I couldn't get her out of was her inability to find a job that worked in with her kids. I was fucking over the moon to hear the education department had called her.

"Let me know when you're ready to go," I said. "I'll be around the clubhouse all afternoon."

"Thank you," she said, like I'd given her the world.

I shook my head. "Don't thank me, Nik. I put you and the kids in this position, and I fucking hate that I had to."

Her smile lingered. "You really need to stop giving yourself a hard time over stuff. It's not like you intentionally cause bad things

to happen.”

“No, but I’ve made my choices in life and now I have to live with them. And unfortunately, they affect you guys.”

She placed her hand on my arm. “We might bitch and grumble at you, but deep down we don’t mean it. You have *always* been there for us, and the shit you’ve done to help won’t ever be forgotten. That’s family, right? We get each other through the crap, regardless of any bad decisions we might make along the way. God knows you’ve stood by me through *all* the bad choices I’ve ever made. I love you, big brother.”

I took all that, letting it sit in me. She was right—that *was* what family did.

Reaching for her, I curved my hand around the back of her head and pulled her to me so I could press a kiss to her forehead. Letting her go, I said, “Yeah, Nik, that’s family.”

She shooed me away after that and I headed towards Skylar’s room to give her the good news. After that was Kree, but I knew I was in for an argument there, so I chose to visit her last.

Right before I made it to Skylar, another text hit my phone.

Lily: You didn’t let me know about the beer.

Me: There’s plenty still there. You don’t need to get more

She took a moment to reply.

Lily: Oh ok. I just thought I’d keep the fridge stocked for you, but that’s fine if you don’t want more.

In my experience, women only used the word *fine* when they were shitty about something.

Me: Are you pissed at me?

Lily: I'm fine.

Something was off here, so I called. Fucking texts did my head in.

"Hi," she said, short with me.

"Have we got a problem?"

Silence for a beat. "No."

"Lily, don't fuck me around. What's wrong?"

"I'm not fucking you around," she said sharply. "There's nothing wrong."

I scrubbed my hand over my face. This was the shit I didn't deal well with when it came to women. The not fucking understanding them or the bullshit that came out of their mouths. "You asked me if I wanted more beer. I didn't. And then fuck me, you're shitty about something. What gives?"

"I got the wrong impression, that's all. Can we just drop this?"

"What fucking impression did you get that was wrong?"

She huffed out a breath. "God, King, why are you being so difficult? Just let it go. It doesn't matter."

"Something you need to learn about me right now is that I don't ever let shit go. Start fucking talking so we can fix this."

Silence again, and then she finally started talking. "Fine. I thought that you coming over last night and again tonight meant you'd be around more. That made me think you might like some beer in the fridge. And I know there are a few bottles still in there, but I wanted to stock up for you so you don't run out."

"Jesus, woman, I'm not seeing the fucking problem here."

"Well clearly you don't plan on coming over as often as I thought if you think there's enough beer in the fridge, so now I feel like an idiot for even mentioning it, okay?"

Fucking hell, this woman.

"First, let's get something very clear between us—I do plan on coming over a fucking lot. Do not read between lines or twist shit I say in your head or do any of that overthinking bullshit women do. I plan on being at your dinner table and on your couch and in your bed as often as possible. Second, I'll bring my own fucking beer. I appreciate the fuck out of the shit you do for me, but *I* take care of *you*.

You don't take care of me. We clear?" When all I got was the sound of her breathing, I growled, "Lily, are we clear?"

"Yes, we're clear, but just so you know, if I wanna buy you some beer, I'm gonna buy you some fucking beer."

Jesus fuck.

"I'll be over at six."

"Okay." This came out a lot fucking softer than everything else she'd said, and it hit me in the gut. Lily's brand of sweet was everything I'd never had, but exactly what I fucking wanted.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Lily

It was funny how, in the blink of an eye, life changed, and then in another blink of an eye, it changed again, and although some bad stuff had happened in there, I was running around with a huge smile on my face. Even while ranting at my kids on a crazy Saturday morning. Only one week had passed since Brynn was shot, and yet, so much had happened.

“Why can’t you just let me make my own choices for once?” Zara yelled at me as we stood in my bedroom arguing over her spending the day with her boyfriend.

I was half-naked, wearing only my bra and panties since she’d barged in while I dressed. Story of my life. “Zara, you are fourteen and lately you haven’t been showing me you’re capable of making good decisions. On top of that, how do you expect me to handle the messages I read on your phone from Sam when you refuse to enter into a conversation with me about them? They don’t encourage me to allow you anywhere near him.”

She scowled. “I told you those were private. You shouldn’t have snooped.”

“Yeah well, I’m your mother, so expect me to snoop. And I don’t care what everyone else’s mother does, I’m not changing. I take par-

enting very seriously and will do whatever it takes to keep you safe."

"Ugh," she groaned, "you are so annoying! I just wish you could remember what it's like to be my age." With that, she stomped out of my bedroom, her shoes thudding all the way to her room before the sound of her door slamming rang in my ears.

Frustration and anger ran through me. Why were teenagers so damn difficult to deal with? I wasn't convinced I would make it through to see her become an adult. I would probably drink myself into an early grave before then at the rate we were going.

I rummaged in my suitcase for something to wear. Thank God we were going home today. Living out of a suitcase at your mother's home was only good for a very short time.

The bedroom door closed, causing me to jump. I'd been lost in my own little world, and the sound snapped me out of it. Turning, I found King standing at the door, watching me with that intense stare of his I loved. It stirred butterflies in my tummy and made me go weak at the knees.

He'd come for dinner last night, charmed my mother, and engaged my kids, all before fucking me for the second time that day and exhausting me completely. I'd woken this morning wrapped in his arms and legs again. King could swear all he liked that he didn't cuddle, but the man freaking cuddled.

"I fixed the light in your mum's bathroom, so you don't need to worry about her falling over in there anymore. No fucking clue how she hasn't fallen yet. That light was too dim for that room," he said, making my heart speed up a little. He had no idea what it meant to me when he did little things like this for my family. Mum had made a casual remark over breakfast about the light and he'd taken it upon himself to go out and get a new bulb and change it.

I turned the T-shirt I held so it was the right way out to put on. As I lifted it to put it over my head, King closed the distance between us and stopped me. His nostrils flared as he dropped his eyes and ran them down my body. Holding my shirt in one hand, he placed his other one on my breast, sliding his thumb under the material of my bra, and stroking my skin. "You got the kids this afternoon?"

Staring down at his thumb, it struck me that King had never been this gentle with me. I liked his rough ways, but I really freaking

liked his gentle.

When I took my time answering him, he growled, "Lily," as his touch turned a whole lot less gentle. He then gave me his signature style of rough when he reached further into my bra and squeezed my nipple while adding, "I need your cunt again, and I want a plan for when that's gonna happen."

King was the crudest man I'd ever met, and I couldn't get enough of his filthy ways. I wasn't a fan of the c word, but coming from him? I was going to hell because of how much I liked it on his lips.

Putting my hands to his chest, I tried to push him away, because I needed a moment and the space to think. He got me all flustered when he bossed me while talking dirty. When he refused to move, I said, "King," with the kind of tone that told him I wanted him to move.

As per usual, he took no notice, and instead, took it as a signal to move further into my personal space. His hand snaked around my waist and he forced our bodies together. "I've got some club shit to take care of this morning, and then I'm heading over to your place to clean it. I know you're taking your mum to the hospital and Robbie to karate, but what else have you got on?"

"Well, for one, I'm trying to keep my daughter from getting pregnant. But in answer to your question about the kids, Linc is picking them up from here at three. I've got the night to myself."

The way his eyes flashed with heat told me he liked that answer. And when he bent to kiss me, as roughly as he usually did, I knew he really liked that answer. Letting me go, he moved out of my space and said, "Lock this afternoon in."

I took my T-shirt when he passed it, and put it on. I then found a pair of jeans to wear, and my boots. King stood silently and watched me as I dressed and brushed my hair, his eyes greedy for my every movement. By the time I was ready to walk out of the bedroom, I was actually more ready to lock the door, strip, and beg him to fuck me. Good God, this man only had to look at me and I was a mess. I wasn't sure how I would get through life now he was in it. And yet, I did know, because having him by my side was a whole lot better than not having him there.



King called me at one and told me my place was clean and ready for me and the kids to move back in, so I bundled them up and moved us back home, arranging for Linc to pick the kids up from there instead of Mum's. I'd spent the morning at the hospital with Mum and Brynn. She was starting on her road to recovery, much less confused than two days ago, but still not completely herself. I knew it would take time. I was just relieved and happy she was still with us.

Robbie wasn't feeling well, so he hadn't gone to karate, and I was concerned about sending him to his father's while sick. Linc wasn't the best at coping with the kids when they were like this. Zara was still mad at me, refusing to talk to me. Holly had thankfully moved past the stress she'd felt earlier in the week and had given me no hell today. She'd tried to talk her sister around, but had no luck. I was resigned to the situation with Zara getting worse before it got better. I based that on the way I'd acted at her age. Turned out karma was a bitch.

By the time King showed back up at my place, it was almost three. That concerned me. It meant he was around for Linc's imminent arrival. I was already stressed about seeing Linc for the first time since our fight the other day; King being here only added to my worry.

He entered the house, beer in hand, and dropped a kiss to my mouth as his hand slid down and around my waist. It was a quick kiss and then he continued on his way to the kitchen. I smiled as warmth filled my belly. This felt good. And right. Like it was meant to be.

I listened while he and Holly had a conversation about motorbikes. She'd taken to him in a way I'd never imagined she would, and loved hearing about the rides he'd been on. They'd talked over dinner last night for a good twenty minutes about his trip across Australia to Perth. I'd found her later, searching the Internet for the places he'd mentioned. When I'd jokingly said, "You gonna get a bike, Hols?" she'd shrugged and said, "Maybe." That had completely surprised me, but when I'd mentioned it to King, he'd shrugged, too and said, "Better prepare yourself now. When bikes get in your blood, there's no getting them out."

I lingered, listening to them for a while before going in search of Robbie. I found him lying on his bed staring up at the ceiling. Entering the room, I sat next to him and asked, "You okay, baby?"

Turning to face me, he said, "I don't know."

I frowned. "What's going on? Is your tummy still not feeling well?"

"It's okay." He paused for a moment, and when he spoke again, his eyes shimmered with tears. "I miss Dad."

With those words, my heart cracked a little more than it already had every other time we went through this. Robbie had been five when Linc and I split, and he'd struggled a great deal with the break-up. He'd been okay for the last six months, though, so I thought things were better for him. But as I sat watching him, I knew deep in my gut where these emotions were coming from.

King.

I'd dated since Linc, but not one of the men had meant as much to me as King did. Robbie was a sensitive soul; I figured he'd picked up on my feelings for King. And while he appeared to like King, I understood how confused he must be about everything.

Running my hand over his forehead, I said, "I know you do."

I felt out of my depth with this, but that was a recurring feeling in my life. Marriage and parenting didn't come with a how-to manual, and it sure as heck wasn't easy to navigate a family break-up. I'd stumbled and fumbled my way through it all. Some days I felt invincible, like I could take on the world. Most days, I felt how I felt right now—completely lost and desperate for the answers that told me how to not screw my kids up any more than I already had.

"I want him to move back home."

Oh man.

I should never have allowed Linc to stay with us at Mum's this week. I could see that it had confused Robbie, and now we'd have to go through another round of him coming to terms with the fact his parents would never be together again.

"Robbie, we've talked about this before. You know that Dad has his own home."

His face crumpled. "Why does he have to? Why can't he live with us?"

"Sometimes mummies and daddies can't live together anymore, buddy. Do you know how Dad and I fight a lot?" At his nod, I con-

tinued, "Well, we just aren't very good at living in the same house. It makes us just as sad as it makes you, but at the same time, we are happier when Dad lives at his house. That doesn't mean we don't love you. We love you very much, and will always make sure you get lots of time with both of us."

He listened to everything I said, and then he rolled over and faced the wall. That was his sign he was done with the conversation, and previous experience told me it was best not to push him to talk more. Robbie was a deep thinker; he just needed time to process it all.

With a heavy heart, I left him and made my way to the kitchen looking for King. I had the overwhelming need for his arms crushed around me in a hug. When I didn't find him there, I kept searching until I found him on the couch in the lounge room watching television.

His eyes came to mine the second I stepped foot in the room, and his shoulders tensed as he watched me walk to him. He reached out his arm, grabbed my shirt at the waist, and pulled me onto the couch next to him. As his lips brushed my cheek, he asked, "What's wrong?"

I curled my legs up under me and snuggled against his warm body. God, he felt good. Like home. Wrapping one arm across his chest, I looked up at him and said, "Robbie's all confused over his father again."

"Over what?"

I sighed. "He doesn't understand why Linc doesn't live with us. He goes through these phases, but it's been a good six months since the last one. I guess having his dad stay with us for a couple of nights this week messed him up."

King was silent for a few moments while he thought about what I said. "And having me around would be confusing to him, too."

"Yeah," I said softly, not wanting to admit that, but having to.

"You want me to go? Give you guys the night?"

That he put himself last and did so without hesitation meant the world to me. I moved my hand to his face, placing it against his cheek. Shaking my head, I said, "No. Don't you dare leave. I need you."

Heat flared in his eyes, and with a growl, he bent his face to mine and kissed me. When he was done, he said, "Fuck, there's nothing

like a woman telling you she needs you.”

My tummy practically somersaulted out of my body at his honesty and the way he willingly shared it with me. Gripping his face hard, I said, “And there’s nothing like a man who speaks the truth.”

His eyes searched mine for a good few moments before he tightened his hold on me while simultaneously shifting his hand to rest on my ass. He then turned his attention back to the television and continued watching the sport.

My man wasn’t one for a lot of words, but the ones he did give were worth every breath he took to say them.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

King

"The fucking feds are back on us," Kick said as he took the barstool next to me late Monday afternoon. "Devil and I were just tailed by two of the assholes on our way back from Brian's."

I threw some beer down my throat and scowled. "Yeah, I had a tail today, too." The motherfuckers hadn't let me out of their sight for the three hours I was out on club business. It had made it fucking difficult to get shit done.

Kick eyed me, concern etched into his face. "They aren't the least of our problems, though, are they?"

I shook my head. "No."

"Fucking hell," he muttered, shoving his fingers through his hair. "You want me to do anything? Start putting some precautions in place?"

"Get eyes on him, but don't do anything yet. We'll see how this plays out first. Hell, if we weren't able to find Moses, I'd like to fucking see the feds find him. And the link to D'Amato isn't obvious so they may not have even connected it." The fact the link between Storm and D'Amato existed pissed me off. He had his fingers in a lot of shit in Sydney, and we didn't need a problem with him. This fucking Moses bullshit meant that was possible, so all we could do at this

point was watch and wait. Because if he didn't know anything about Moses, I sure as fuck wasn't gonna bring it to his attention.

A cheer erupted from the back corner of the bar, drawing Kick's attention. "They're celebrating hard."

I glanced over at them. "Yeah, brother. You gonna stick around?"

The club had been celebrating since Friday—since they'd been told they could move their families home. Devil had organised a get together for tonight to bring everyone together, and members had started rolling in an hour ago. It was getting rowdy in here.

He nodded. "Evie's mum is having Elizabeth for the night so she can come."

Hyde cut in as he joined us. "Just got word from Winter. He's checking out a lead on Brant. Will let us know what he finds. And he's found some premises to operate out of down there."

Sending Winter had been a good decision. He was an attention-to-details guy and would get shit done efficiently. His military background made sure of that. "You got any ideas of who we should send down there to work with him?"

"I've got a few names on my list."

"We'll go over it tomorrow."

His gaze turned serious in the way it did when he had shit to tell me that he knew I wouldn't like. "Also, Ghost's release is scheduled for this week. We gonna find him a place to stay?"

That was the last fucking thing I wanted to do for that cunt. "No."

"You might wanna reconsider, brother. We've got a lot riding on Ghost keeping his mouth shut."

I motioned for Kree to get me another beer before turning back to Hyde. "We think we need to keep him happy to keep him from talking to the feds, we may as well put a bullet in his head and call it a fucking day. If Ghost has forgotten the meaning of loyalty, he can learn the fucking meaning of dead." Fucking hell, just thinking about the motherfucker caused my head to stir with the beginning of a headache.

"Yeah, I get that, King, but Ghost disappears right after he gets out, the feds are gonna be looking in our direction."

Kree placed a beer in front of me, a blank expression on her face. She'd made it pretty fucking clear all day what she thought of our

new arrangement, and I was fucking over her attitude. I made a mental note to bring that shit up with her before she went home.

I took a long swig of my drink before looking back at Hyde. "I couldn't fucking care less, Hyde. We start running on fear, we may as well surrender to those assholes now."

"Fuck," he muttered. "I hope you fucking know what you're doing."

I was back running on gut instinct after allowing outside forces to interfere with decisions, and my gut was telling me to trust very few and eliminate all threats I couldn't control.

Kree placed a Coke in front of Hyde, eyes on me as she did so. "King's flying by the seat of his fucking pants, Hyde." Without waiting for a response from either of us, she stalked to the other end of the counter to serve Mace.

"What the fuck's going on there?" Hyde asked.

I moved off my stool, shoulders rock hard with tension, gaze pinned to Kree. "She's pissed I've put eyes on her and added some security to her place."

He frowned. "The cameras?"

"Yeah. She gave me some bullshit about an intrusion of her privacy."

"Jesus, she gets the threat her ex is, right?"

I stretched my neck trying to loosen my muscles and shake the headache building. "I don't fucking know. She says she does, but I think she's under some illusion he won't ever hurt her." She looked up and I caught her eye. Jerking my chin at her, I barked, "Kree. A word."

"Go easy on her, brother. She's probably confused as fuck," Hyde said.

She glared at me but walked my way. I turned and headed toward the office so we could have this chat in private.

When I had her in there, door closed, I said, "Wanna tell me what the fuck is running through your head?"

Her brows lifted. "You know, I don't really care at this point that you're my boss or that you think you're helping me, King. I really don't like the way you've taken over my life and have started controlling everything I do."

"I don't give a fuck if you don't like it, I'm doing it for a good reason." I narrowed my eyes at her. "Do you have any idea what

men like your ex do to the women they can't have? Because I can fucking tell you some stories if you don't."

"Of course I know what men like Don are capable of, but Zane has told me he's got a handle on the situation, and I'm choosing to put my faith in my cousin. Having said that, I told you I'm okay with the men you've got watching me. Thankful, too. But those cameras in my home? No fucking way. I want them gone."

"The cameras are staying."

She stared at me for a long few moments, her anger growing. "I'll pull them out."

"You fucking won't."

She straightened, pulling her shoulders back defiantly. "I fucking will."

"Fuck, Kree." I rubbed my temple. "I've got enough other shit to deal with—"

"So deal with it, and I'll deal with mine." She exited the office after that, leaving me angrier than I was before we talked.

Yanking my phone from my pocket, I called Griff. "You dug up anything on Don yet?"

"Only that he's a fucking asshole when it comes to his kids and ex. I'm still going through everything trying to connect dots. I'm getting the sense, though, that he's tied up with the Vinzani family somehow, and if that's the case, shit ain't good for anyone."

"Let me know when you have something," I said and disconnected the call.

Stalking out of the office, I found Kree and pulled her aside. "There's shit going on that you don't know about, so the cameras stay," I said with force. "Am I clear?"

Her silence roared between us, and I figured I'd have to be harder on her to get what I wanted, but in the end, she said, "You fucking exhaust me," before walking away.

"Kree, answer the fucking question."

She stopped and faced me again. "Yes, we're clear."

Thank fuck.

I reached for my phone again and called Zane. The call went to messages. "Zane, where the fuck are you? I haven't seen you for days. We need to talk."

If Kree's ex was tied up with the Vinzanis, and if he fucked shit up with them, it wouldn't matter what Don had planned for her, be-

cause what they'd do would be far worse, and they'd get to her first. The time had come for me to take charge of this situation, because Zane's refusal to use whatever force necessary wasn't going to cut it anymore.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Lily

“Lily! I’m so glad you came,” Skylar said when I arrived at her place after work Monday afternoon. She’d texted me during the day to ask if I could drop by and check on her progress. I’d said yes, because Linc had the kids at his place tonight, and after I’d checked in on Brynn, I drove to Skylar’s.

I followed her inside, taking note of how well she used her crutches. “You’re doing great with those.” She was clearly doing her exercises, which made me happy. Some patients became a little complacent with their recovery, which slowed it down, but if Skylar kept this up, she’d go from strength to strength fast.

She led me into her lounge room and we settled on her long couch. I instantly felt at home here. That probably had more to do with the fact I genuinely liked her, but her home was so cosy and inviting with the colour she had splashed here and there, and the plants scattered around. Not to mention, the framed prints on the wall that held a mixture of positive quotes and gorgeous artwork.

“I knew I liked you,” I said with a smile as I read one of the framed quotes. “I need to get some of these for my place.”

“They’re from a market. When I’m walking better, I’ll take you.”

“Thanks, babe.” I nodded at her hip. “How’s it all going?”

She rattled off the work she'd been doing on her rehab and the challenges she'd faced. She also detailed for me the concerns she had now she was back home and living alone. Her list wasn't too long, though, and it contained challenges I could easily help her address.

We spent about twenty minutes going over everything, and when we were done, she exhaled a long breath and smiled. "I'm so glad I called you. I was kinda worked up over all this, but you've put my mind at ease that I can manage this on my own with just a little help. Thank you."

I reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze. "I'm just a call away, okay? Don't hesitate to reach out."

"I know, but I don't want to intrude on your time when your sister is in hospital. And I know you're busy with the kids and work."

"Skye, it's all good. Brynn is doing really well. I just visited her before I came here. They've moved her to a ward, and the doctors think she'll likely be home by the end of the week. And even though my ex is being a dick because of King, he's being more hands-on with the kids, so I have some free time. Also, besides all that, and besides the fact King paid me a lot of money to manage your rehab, I want you to know I'm here for you because I feel like we're friends now."

"Wait, go back. What do you mean your ex is being a dick because of King? Have I missed something there?"

"Oh," I said, my mouth forming an O.

"Oh what?"

I suddenly felt a little nervous about having this conversation. I wasn't sure if King would be down with me discussing our relationship with his sister.

She nudged me with her hand. "Spill, Lily, and don't leave anything out."

I made myself comfy, and as I crossed my legs, I said, "King and I are seeing each other."

Her eyes widened as a huge smile landed on her face. "Oh my God! This is the best news! Tell me everything."

I laughed. "Ah no. That would just be weird. He's your brother. And honestly, I'm not sure he'd be happy to know we're having this conversation."

She frowned. "Why wouldn't he be?"

"He might have preferred to tell you himself."

"Look, I think we both know my brother isn't a big talker. He wouldn't give a shit that we're having this conversation, because it saves him having it with me. But on top of that, let me just tell you one thing—King hasn't dated for years. I think it's probably been like seven years since he was in a relationship. You must mean something to him if he's, umm, how do I put this without sounding crude... If he's been back for more." She cringed. "Sorry, that sounds awful, but that's King."

"Don't be sorry. We are who we are, right?"

What she told me caused a rush of fluttery goodness in my belly. King and I hadn't discussed past histories except for him laying down the law about me never mentioning another man to him again. I figured it wasn't something he wanted to get into, and honestly, I wasn't the type of woman who wanted to think about his past either. But I couldn't deny that this new information Skylar had shared made me feel all kinds of happy.

I stayed chatting with her for another half hour before she said, "You should go. It's not often you get a night to yourself. You need to make the most of it."

"Yeah, I'm looking forward to a long bath with a couple of glasses of wine and no kids harassing me."

Her brow lifted. "Are you shitting me? Wouldn't this be the perfect night to spend with King?"

I tried not to laugh. "Is this weird for you? I mean, discussing your brother's sex life has to be weird."

She shook her head. "No." Shrugging, she added, "Sex isn't something we've kept secret or never talked about. Hell, King was the one who had to give me the birds and bees talk when I was twelve. Annika was too busy with her boyfriends to do it. I remember him sitting me down and shoving me that *What's Happening To Me* book before giving me the rundown on penises and vaginas and periods. He also took me shopping for my first bra, but Nik did come for that, too. He drew the line at talking me through my first period, though. He made Annika handle that. And let's just say that he wanted nothing to do with discussing the loss of my virginity. I think he was ready to take a gun to the guy I was dating in year twelve."

It was both funny and touching hearing how King had manoeuvred his way through that time in Skylar's life. Funny because I

knew the difficulties a parent faced when explaining puberty to their child, and from what she'd said, I imagined King had felt a little out of his depth, and that wasn't something you often saw with him. But I was far more touched than entertained by her story. It peeled back more layers to the man I couldn't stop thinking about. Layers I really, really liked.

By the time I made it to my car, I'd decided to call him. We hadn't made plans for tonight because he'd said he had club stuff on, but I just wanted to hear his voice.

"Lily," he answered the call in the way he always did when I rang. God, how I loved the sound of my name from his lips.

"Hey you," I said, feeling all fluttery again. "I just wanted to call and say hi. See how your day has been." It struck me that he never called me during the day to check in with me, but it didn't bother me. I knew he was busy. And I was busy, too. King definitely wasn't a man who was about needless interruptions.

He blew out a long breath. "It's been long. Busy. Yours?"

I frowned at the exhaustion I heard in his voice. "Are you okay? You sound tired. And stressed."

"I'm good. Tell me how you are."

"Liar," I murmured before answering him, "I'm really good. My first day back at work went well. Brynn's doing great, and I just stopped by to see Skylar, and she's doing well, too. And the best part of my day is that I now get to go home and enjoy the peace and quiet of no freaking children. Just me, a bath, and some wine. The only thing that would make it better was if you were in that bath with me."

"Fucking hell," he muttered. He didn't say anything else, but he didn't need to. I may not have known a great deal about King yet, but I'd worked out the inflections in his tone and his body language. And while I couldn't see him, I could hear the desire in his voice.

"You busy right now? I could stop by for a few minutes if you aren't. I won't stay long." My tummy knotted a little as the words fell out of my mouth. I didn't want him to think I was trying to force my way in and steal his time when he was busy with the club. And I certainly didn't want to come across as a needy woman who always had to be with her man, but damn, I really wanted to see him.

"I'm never too busy for you. Get your ass over here."

And holy shit just like that, he caused an almighty whoosh of lust deep in me. He might have said a lot of filthy stuff to me, but he also had a way of saying exactly what I needed to hear sometimes.

"Okay," I agreed softly and hung up.

He's never too busy for me.

Oh God.

This man.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Lily

The club was partying tonight. It was unlike anything I'd ever seen. There had to be at least twenty guys and just as many women here, drinking and laughing as they celebrated something. I wondered if it was someone's birthday, and then my mind jumped to the fact I didn't know when King's birthday was. There were a lot of things I didn't know about him yet, and suddenly I wanted to know every last one of them.

A couple stumbled out the front door as I entered. His hands were all over her; they barely noticed me there. That was the kind of passion I'd always wanted in my life, and I smiled as I thought about King and how he'd given me that.

"Lily."

I glanced up to find Devil standing in front of me, watching me with a smile that lit his face. "Hey, Devil, is King around?"

"You mean you don't wanna hang out with me?" He winked as he said that. I also didn't miss the slur in his words.

I grinned, liking this fun side to him. "I'm sure you've got someone willing to do that."

His smile grew and his eyes flashed with happiness. "I do," he said, turning to point towards a group of women. "She's right over there." I struggled to hear him over the beat of the music, but I

didn't miss the happiness in his voice that matched what I'd seen in his eyes.

I also didn't miss seeing King who sat at the table next to the one the women were at. He was with two other guys, leaning back in his chair, beer in hand, legs stretched out in front of him, causal in a way that wasn't normal for King. His eyes were firmly on me, watching with an intensity that was anything but casual.

Without another word to Devil, I drifted across to King, my mind and body completely focused on him and him alone. Being here in his clubhouse with all his people around him, and none of mine, nerves fluttered in my chest. Or maybe that was simply because of the way he watched me. I wasn't sure. But I needn't have been, because he put me at ease the moment he snaked an arm around my waist and pulled me onto his lap. The kiss he claimed eased any remaining nerves.

I shifted a little in his embrace to make myself more comfortable before grasping his face and saying a little breathlessly, "I like it when you do that."

His hold on me tightened and he took a swig of his beer as his eyes dropped to my chest. "You wore that to work?"

I looked down at the V-neck blouse I'd worn today and then frowned at him. "What's wrong with it?"

"It's fucking see-through for one. And for two, it's hanging so fucking low every asshole can get eyes on your tits."

I arched a brow as I pulled away from him a little. "Whoa there, it's not hanging low. And no one has had their eyes on my tits, thank you very much."

It was his turn to lift a brow. "Of course they fucking have." He ran the bottom of his beer bottle over the swell of one of my breasts, pushing the blouse to the side. The cool, wet glass left drops of water on my skin. It did little to cool the heat between us, though. "Your top falls to the side like a fucking hooker's legs fall open. You bend over with a patient like you did with Skylar, and he cops a fucking eyeful."

"I can assure you that does not happen."

"Bullshit, Lily. Only a fucking gay man wouldn't take an opportunity like that."

"So you're telling me this is what you did while I worked with Skylar in the hospital?"

"I didn't get the chance. You didn't wear this top."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "I can't tell if you're shitty about this and trying to lay down the law about what I wear—which, for the record, if you are, don't—or whether you're just telling me how you feel about this, or whether you've had a few drinks and are simply sharing your thoughts as they come to you. I mean, I don't think you're shitty. You don't really seem it, but help me out—tell me what's going on here."

"I'm not telling you what to wear. I'm just telling you your top is see-through and hanging low."

"Seriously? That's all that was?" I couldn't work out if I was disappointed there wasn't more to it, or if I was relieved he hadn't tried to boss me about my clothes. And that made me feel like a crazy freaking woman. I mean, what woman wants to go to battle with their man over the clothes they choose to wear?

He shifted positions swiftly, catching me off guard. Sitting up straight with his body to mine, he reached his hand into my blouse and cupped my breast as he growled, "I don't like anyone's eyes on your tits but mine. Wear whatever the fuck you want, but I catch a motherfucker copping a look, he'll wish he didn't."

I gripped his biceps, heat rushing through me. King's possessiveness turned me on so damn much, and that was completely unexpected. On top of that, his public display of sticking his hand down my top also freaking turned me on. I'd never been with a man who did that kind of thing, and I decided then and there, I was all for it.

"King!" Someone called out to him, and he slowly turned to see who it was. It was like he didn't want to take his eyes off me for even a second.

I dropped my gaze to his neck, inspecting the tattoos there. King's body was covered in them, and each time I looked at them, I saw something extra. Today I realised the eagle tattoo on one side of his neck was layered with a skull and dream catcher underneath. I traced my fingers over it, admiring the beauty in the design.

King lifted his chin at the guy speaking to him before smacking my leg and saying, "I need to go have a conversation. I'll be back soon."

I moved off his lap so he could stand, and he strode purposefully out of the bar without another glance my way. I decided a drink was a good idea. I wasn't an extrovert, and being surrounded by all these

people I didn't know was a little intimidating, so I made my way to the bar and waited a few minutes for the woman behind it to serve me.

The dark-haired woman met me with a smile. "What can I get you?"

"A Jack and Coke, please."

Her smile grew as she pulled a glass out. "I'm impressed."

I frowned. "With what?"

She slowed her movements and met my gaze with a serious expression. "The woman King's dating has manners."

I wasn't sure what to make of that or of her. "What does that mean? Why wouldn't I? And what makes you think we're together?"

She grinned again and made my drink. Sliding it to me, she leant across the bar a little and said, "I've never seen King like that with a woman. Never seen him give his complete attention to one the way he just did with you. Everyone noticed, babe, because none of us have seen that. And let's just say, King's manners leave a lot to be desired, so I'm fucking impressed he managed to score someone who knows her pleases and thank-yous."

Deciding I liked her style of honesty, I returned her smile. Lifting the drink, I said, "How much do I owe you?"

She shook her head and shooed me away with a flick of her hand. "Nothing. I'm pretty sure my boss would want your drinks on the house."

A red-headed woman arrived at the bar, moving in between me and the man to my right. "Hey, Kree, two Jägerbombs please, honey." Then turning to me, she hit me with a huge smile and said, "One of those is for you by the way, so don't go anywhere."

"For me?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I wanna have a drink with the woman who made King smile." Before I could say anything to that, she reached for my hair and pulled a few strands to the side, and said, "Goodness, you need to tell me what products you use on your hair. It's so silky. I do so much shit to mine that I swear it's gonna start falling out."

And just like that, this woman made me feel welcome and put me at ease. "Thanks for the drink. I'm Lily by the way, and I'm not sure I actually saw King smile today so you may be wrong there."

She laughed. "Oh honey, you are gonna fit right in here. And yeah, your man totally smiled. You just missed it because you were too busy being all flustered by his hand down your top."

I took the Jägerbomb Kree placed in front of me and lifted it up with a questioning look at the woman. "Two questions. What the hell is in this? And what is your name? I mean, by the time I'm finished with this drink, I may not remember it, but I'm gonna give it a good shot."

She lifted her drink, too. "It's Jäger and Red Bull, and just drink it down in one go, okay? Like, trust me on this. And I'm Monroe, but you can call me Roe."

I eyed the drink. "Am I gonna make it to work in the morning?"

Another laugh escaped her lips. "Honestly, what's one day in the whole year with a hangover?"

A blonde woman joined us and said, "Not that my cousin only ever has one day a year with a hangover."

Monroe glanced at her. "Oh shush, Tatum. I've almost found a Jäger buddy. Don't ruin this for me when none of you bitches will drink it with me."

"Wait," I said, looking at Tatum, "is this gonna taste bad?" God, the woman was beautiful with her long, blonde hair, stunning features, and gorgeous tattoos. I decided I wanted to be Tatum when I grew up.

She pulled a face and nodded. "Yeah, it's fucking awful."

"Shit," I muttered. And then to Monroe, I said, "Okay, let's do this." And with that, I took her advice and downed the drink in one go. She did the same, and when she hit me with a questioning look afterwards, I pulled a face and said, "I agree with Tatum—it's fucking bad—but I'm willing to go another round to see if it improves."

"Fuck, yes!" Monroe said as she looked at Tatum and wrinkled her nose while grinning at her. She then called out to Kree, "We need another round, Kree. Before Lily changes her mind."

Being with these two reminded me of being with Adelaide and the girls. By the time Kree had served up two more rounds of Jägerbombs and I'd drunk them, as well as the Jack and Coke I'd originally ordered, I was a little tipsy and unsteady on my feet. Monroe was in the same state, and between us, we'd become a little loud. Hailee, the woman Devil had referred to earlier as his woman had also joined us, along with another old lady, Evie. I knew nothing about

club life, so I hadn't even known what an old lady was, but they started my education, filling me in on a few things, all while getting drunk.

King was gone for ages, but I hardly had time to miss him. The girls had me laughing over stories of the funny stuff they'd done together, and I realised they must have spent a fair bit of time with each other to have all these stories. I liked the sisterhood that it felt like they had. I'd always been drawn to having friends who liked to get together often, and I hoped this might be the beginning of some new friendships.

"When are you and Nitro getting married?" Evie asked Tatum.

Tatum sighed. "We've put it off for now, while everything has been so up in the air. Honestly, at this point, I'm just glad to have him home again."

"But you guys are still getting married, right?" Hailee asked.

"Yeah. We'll just wait for the dust to settle."

I wasn't sure what they referred to, but it sounded like she and Nitro had been through something recently. I wasn't the kind of person to pry, so I didn't ask any questions.

A dark-haired man who was built like an I-don't-know-what-except-he-was-freaking-huge joined us at the table where we'd relocated. With his gaze glued to Tatum, he said, "Vegas. You ready to go?"

Her eyes snapped to his and her body reacted to him. She nodded and stood. Glancing at me, she said, "It was great to meet you. I'm sure Roe will organise drinks or something soon, so I'll see you at that." She then moved into the man's embrace, their bodies connecting like they were made for each other. He had to be Nitro. I wasn't sure I'd ever seen a couple so in sync before.

As they left, King entered the bar and caught my attention. He made his way over to us, and I stood to meet him. Something had happened in between him leaving me and now returning. Gone was the relaxed King, and in his place was the wired King. His face was a mask of intensity and determination as he placed his hand on my hip and said, "I have to head out to take care of some shit."

"Okay. I've had a few drinks, so I'm gonna call an Uber. It's okay if I leave my car here, right?"

"Yeah," he said, looking around the room. "I'll get one of the boys to run you home." He called Mace over and organised him to

do that before turning back to me. "Depending on whether I get shit done tonight, I might be over later."

With that, he left. No goodbye kiss, no other words exchanged. But I didn't care, because each passing day with King in my life showed me that sometimes those things weren't what mattered. The backbone of a relationship came down to more than displays of affection and fancy promises; it came down to actions that showed respect and care. Sometimes those actions consisted of words as well as deeds, but sometimes it was mostly the things we actually followed through on and did that meant the most.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Lily

"How much have you had to drink?" Adelaide asked me on the phone later that night when I told her about something weird that had happened to me during the day.

"I swear to you this happened. I'm not saying it because I've been drinking. And besides, most of the buzz I had is gone now. The guy looked like a younger version of John Travolta, and he watched me leave the hospital and then followed me to my car. I thought he was going to stop me and tell me something, but he didn't. He just kept walking."

"And he was there yesterday, too?"

"Yes! I remember him because he was sitting outside the ward Brynn is on, and as I walked past him, I thought about how much he looked like John Travolta. You know how much I love *Grease*. Anyone who even kinda looks like John catches my attention."

She laughed. "Was he wearing tight black jeans and a leather jacket?"

"Ugh. If you were here right now, I would poke my freaking tongue out at you."

"Lil, he was probably visiting someone at the hospital, too," she said, her voice softer, less amused at me. "I think you need about a

week's worth of sleep at the moment. Go to bed now and get an early night."

"Well, King might be coming over, so I might wait up in case he does."

"Text him and tell him not to come."

Adelaide still wasn't on Team King. I knew she was just being a good friend and waiting for him to prove himself after he hurt me, and I didn't blame her, but I also didn't pay any attention to the cooler tone she took when she mentioned him. I had confidence he'd prove himself over time and that she'd come around. And I was glad to have a friend who looked out for me.

"I'm going to take a bath. If I fall asleep before he comes, I fall asleep." I didn't tell her King still had a key to my place from when he'd cleaned it for me.

"Good. And what about Linc? Is he still being a dick?"

I headed out of the kitchen to walk into my bathroom and get the bath started. "Yeah. I figure he's gonna be a dick until old age and then some. I've decided to ignore his bullshit. Especially since I'm trying to quit smoking again. That's hard enough to do without having to also be thinking about Linc."

She chuckled. "How many times are you up to now?"

Sitting on the edge of the bath, I flicked the taps on. "Shut up and don't be mean to me."

This was an old argument between us, and Addy never let up about it. She knew I was way into double digits on this. She also knew my attempts were only half-assed, because smoking was something I really didn't want to give up. I knew I had to, and the smart side of my brain knew I was a freaking idiot for not having made more of an effort, but what was hard to explain to someone like Adelaide, who'd never smoked, was the enjoyment I got from it. That first drag of a cigarette was like the first hit of caffeine in the morning or the first bite into a warm, fresh doughnut. It made me smile and it helped take the edge off from all the stress and pressure I felt being pulled in a hundred directions between work and family. I liked smoking. And who wants to stop doing something they love? That was the switch in my brain I had to flip, but I knew that would only happen when I was ready and wanted to. I also knew that until then, I'd have to put up with Addy giving me a hard time.

"You know I'm never gonna shut up about this, Lily. I want you by my side in the nursing home, and I worry you won't be around for that if you keep smoking."

"I know, babe."

"Okay, enough of that tonight. Go have your bath. Get your meditation on. I'll call you tomorrow to see how you're going. Love you, girl."

"I love you, too. Talk to you tomorrow."

After the call ended, I lit the candles in my bathroom, set my phone up with my guided meditation open on my Spotify app, and stripped. Five minutes later, I was immersed in the warm water, hair up in a messy bun, eyes closed, meditating.

Perfect.

I chose a forty-minute meditation, and it was almost finished when a text came through from King.

King: I'm letting myself in.

I smiled. Mostly because he was here, but also because it appeared he realised I would freak out if I heard a sound I wasn't expecting. Closing my eyes again, I listened to the last few minutes of the meditation. When I opened my eyes again, King stood resting against the doorjamb, arms crossed, watching me.

"Hey, you," I said, not shifting from under the water. It was warm and cosy in the bath, and I wasn't ready to get out yet. Not even for King.

He didn't speak, but rather moved to the bath and sat on the side of it. As he watched me, I took in the fierce energy blaring from him. From the hard set of his shoulders to his tight jaw, to his eyes that flashed with a storm of emotion, King was wound up. On edge. And from previous experience, I knew that when he turned up like this, he wanted the kind of sex that would wear me out in the very best ways.

Shifting his attention to my body, he dipped his hand into the water and found my stomach. As he reached down to my pussy, a low growl came from him, and when he pushed two fingers inside

me, he met my gaze again and held it steady while finger-fucking me.

Arching my back, I bit my lip and closed my eyes. His touch relaxed me in ways no meditation could, but at the same time, it excited me to the point where I couldn't get enough from him. With King, I wanted him to hurry the hell up and make me come already while also wanting him to take his sweet time and send me over the edge in a complete and utter mess of bewilderment and frantic need.

"Lily," he rasped, "Give me your eyes."

They fluttered open, and I gave him what he wanted, which he liked, because it caused him to reach deeper inside me and work me harder. His strokes were demanding, and with each one, the heat between us intensified.

He bent forward and curled his free hand around my neck. Fingers digging in hard, he pulled me to him and kissed me. It was savage, and while mostly it pushed me into a desperate state of need, I wondered at the back of my mind, what caused him to become so fiercely aroused.

He ended the kiss, but he didn't let my mouth go fully. His teeth nipped at my bottom lip while his fingers continued fucking me, and he growled, "It doesn't fucking matter how often I have you, I can't fucking get enough. Your cunt, your body"—he bit my lip harder—"this mouth... You're in my head twenty-four-fucking-seven."

I couldn't stop myself. I moved without thought, just feeling. Pure need. It was like a frenzy of arms, legs, and water as I scrambled to my knees so I could take hold of his face and kiss him. I didn't even care how uncomfortable it was to be in this position; I needed King's mouth on mine, his face to mine, his breath in me. I needed to get closer to the core of him, to his soul, and right now the only way I knew how to do that was to kiss the hell out of him.

I may have started this kiss, but he took charge of it. His tongue became as demanding as his fingers had been inside me. I wasn't sure I'd ever kissed anyone the way I kissed King. It was like we were forcing each other to go deeper, to give more. It was hard and rough and violent. Neither of us wanted it to end; we just kept pushing for every last piece the other had to give. When he finally tore his mouth from mine, his eyes flashed with a level of desire I'd never seen in a man. And when he scooped me into his arms and carried

me into my bedroom, I craved him in ways I'd never imagined possible.

Dropping me on the bed, he yanked his clothes off before gripping my ankle and pulling me to the end of the mattress and off the bed. A shiver ran over my skin as I watched the muscles in his arms flex. I didn't care that I was still wet from the bath; I didn't want anything slowing this down.

Positioning me in front of him with my back to him, he placed one arm around me, his hand splayed across my stomach, fingers so hard against my skin it felt like he might gouge holes in me. His other hand slid around my hips and he took hold of my pussy, his whole hand covering me, his fingers curling under. He held me so tightly against him I felt like we were fused skin-to-skin.

He then did something unexpected. He swept my hair to the side, bent his head, and pressed his mouth to my shoulder, kissing me. The pressure was the complete opposite to that applied to the lower half of my body. He moved along my shoulder slowly, trailing kisses as he went. His beard tickled me, and his tongue licked me, and holy hell if the slow, steady way he moved didn't turn my legs to jelly.

He covered both my shoulders with kisses and then began making his way down my back. Letting go of me, he glided his hands around to take hold of my hips, grasping me there until his mouth found the dip of my body right above my ass.

His kisses turned rougher, and his teeth joined in. The slow moves disappeared as he found the rough rhythm he favoured. Straightening, he ran his hand up my back to my neck. Taking hold of me there, he forced me to bend forward, placing my hands on the bed. At the same time he nudged my feet wide apart.

"Do you want my mouth on your cunt?" The gravel in his hard tone hit my core. God, how I wanted his mouth there.

"Yes."

He squeezed my neck, his body to mine, his mouth against my ear. "Say the words, Lily—I want your mouth on my cunt."

With that order, King stripped another layer between us away.

I had never uttered words so dirty to a man before.

"I want your mouth on my cunt."

He grunted. It was such a deeply masculine response, and it drew an equally feminine one from me.

I moaned. It was long and loud, and a sound unlike any that had ever escaped my lips.

Everything he said and did felt so good.

"Fuck," he rasped. "Say it again."

I spread my fingers out and clutched the sheet as I arched my back and pushed my ass higher in the air. When I gave him the words he wanted, they practically purred out of me. "I want your mouth on my cunt."

His restraint snapped.

He crouched behind me, taking hold of my ass, and buried his face in my pussy. It seemed to be one of his favourite places to be, and I wasn't complaining, because King knew what the hell he was doing. He knew his way around that part of a woman. Hell, he knew his way around a woman, full stop. But he had skills when it came to using his tongue. And his beard only heightened the pleasure. I couldn't get enough of it.

I lost track of time while he brought me to orgasm. It was one of his specialties. Being with King, I shut off all my thoughts and feelings, and simply clung to him for the ride.

As my release shattered through me, I lost the ability to hold myself up, and my arms gave way. King moved swiftly, standing and catching me. He then flipped me over and pushed me onto the bed. Without giving me a moment to get my bearings, he spun me so I was almost parallel to the end of the bed with my ass at the corner. He positioned himself with his feet planted wide either side of the corner, a hand around my throat, the other hand on the top of my head gripping it, my legs up in the air hooked over his while he bent over my body and slammed his dick inside me.

He fucked me with brute force, his hands firmly holding me, not letting go. There was no slow and steady to his pace at all; he thrust in and out with increasing speed and force. His face was near mine, his mouth and beard grazing my skin, his grunts filling the air around me. Everything about it overwhelmed me. All my senses were in overdrive. I tried to take hold of him, but his arms had mine pinned down with such strength I could hardly move. In the end, I held my hands against his biceps and tumbled down into the dark abyss of pleasure he created.

As he inched closer to orgasm, his grip around my throat tightened, cutting off most of my airflow. It intensified every sensation

coursing through me, and I madly tried to grasp his arms. My nails scratched him as I did so, and he lifted his head to look at me. Our eyes locked until his were drawn to my mouth when I gasped for air. That pushed him over the edge, and he thrust into me one last time and came with a roar. His grip loosened on my neck and he let go of me as he moved his arms to rest on the bed beside me. I wrapped my arms around his body and searched for that one last bit of friction that would make me come. As the orgasm hit, I squeezed my arms around him hard and arched my body up off the bed.

"Fuck," he growled, his body almost squashing me, his face buried in my neck.

I didn't care that his body was crushed to mine. I liked it there. I felt close to him there. Keeping my arms around him, I tried to catch my breath. When he started to pull away from me, I pushed my hands down onto his back, keeping him in place. "Gimme a minute," I said. I wasn't ready for the loss of contact yet.

He settled there and lifted his face to look at me. "You good?" I didn't miss the trace of concern in his eyes or his voice.

I smiled and nodded. "Yeah. I just like you there."

He watched me silently for a few moments before bending to kiss my collarbone. After another few moments, he murmured, "I fucking like me here, too."

It was these unguarded moments with King that meant so much to me. He didn't give them to me often, which only made them more special. But when he *did* give them to me, the whole world opened up with bright light. I was the happiest I had ever been in my entire life.

After we had a shower, where King fucked me again, I was too exhausted to go on. He'd been ready for another round, but I just didn't have it in me, so he'd bundled me into bed and wrapped his arms around me while we lay facing each other.

I reached up and ran a finger down the scar on his face. "How did you get this?" I asked softly. It was so jagged that I knew it had to have hurt him, and that caused my heart to hurt. It was crazy, because King was so strong and capable, and seemed unbreakable, but that scar reminded me that even the toughest men could be hurt.

His features darkened. "My father."

It felt like he didn't want to give me more than that, but I was at the point where I wanted more. I hadn't pushed him for anything

yet. This, I would push for. "How old were you?"

His jaw clenched. "This is old shit that doesn't need to be rehashed."

"It's not old to me, King. I hardly know a thing about you. I know you're bossy and moody and demanding and giving, and that you love your family and your club." I put my hand to his chest, to his heart. "I want to know what's in here, too."

He stayed silent for a beat, and then after exhaling hard, he said, "I was eight and I pissed him off one Saturday afternoon when I didn't steal the right tins of spaghetti for him from the supermarket. He took a knife to me, letting me know how badly I'd screwed up."

I stared at him with my heart in my throat and tears at the backs of my eyes, unable to comprehend a parent doing that to their child.

When I didn't say anything, because I was lost for words, he said, "My parents were the fucking scum of the earth, Lily, and I don't wanna get into a conversation about them, but for what it's worth, they both went to prison for kidnapping, raping and murdering teenage girls. She lured the girls, he did everything else. I fucking had to listen to and watch some of that shit. And yeah, he slashed my face and beat me up and burnt his fucking cigarettes into my body, but I refuse to give that cunt another fucking thought, so don't mention him to me again."

I wiggled closer to him and placed my hand on his cheek. "He's responsible for the scars on your back, too?"

He nodded once but didn't say anything.

I wasn't the kind of person who hated people. It was such an extreme emotion, and I didn't feel it was a useful one. But I hated King's parents. And I hated what they'd done to him physically and emotionally.

I pressed my lips to his and kissed him. It wasn't one of our usual kisses, more of a softer, quick kiss. He didn't push for more, and I didn't give more. When I ended it, I said, "Thank you for sharing that part of yourself with me. I won't bring them up again, but if you ever wanna talk about stuff, I'm always here. I just want you to know that."

His eyes searched mine for the longest time. He didn't respond to that, but I knew he took it in. Finally, he said, "Roll over and go to sleep. You're tired, and I have plans for this body in the morning."

I rolled over.

I also wiggled my ass against him, loving the grunt that came from him when I did that.

He tightened his embrace and hooked a leg over mine, pinning me in place.

I loved every second of being in this bed with him.

And I was already ready for his plans for the morning.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

King

“Kree still giving you hell?” Hyde asked late the next afternoon when he got back to the clubhouse after taking care of some club business.

I placed my phone down on the office desk after just having finished a call I’d rather have avoided with Eric Bones about some bullshit I’d have to take care of tomorrow, and stretched my legs out in front of me. “Yeah. I’ve got Havoc taking care of her ex. Just waiting to hear back from him when it’s done, and for Griff to then confirm she’s safe before I rip those fucking cameras from her house.” I jerked my chin at him. “You heading home?”

“No, I’m on my way over to Monroe’s shop. She’s got some renovations for me to take care of.”

I stood and met him at the door. It was time for me to leave, too. Lily’s oven was playing up, so I’d told her I’d take a look at it. I’d just opened my mouth to reply to Hyde after stepping out into the hallway when a fist came flying at me. Having not seen it coming, I stumbled backwards, hitting the wall hard.

Zane came at me with another punch, but I was ready for him this time and blocked him. Grabbing hold of his fist, I shoved him back and bellowed, “What the fuck, Zane?” In all the years we’d known each other, we’d never had a problem between us.

He yanked his hand from mine, fury rolling off him in waves. "I fucking told you I had the Don situation under control, and you went ahead and stuck your fucking nose in it anyway. And caused Kree a major fucking problem in the process."

Anger surged from deep inside me, and every inch of my body tensed. "What the fuck did you just say to me?"

"You should have stayed the fuck out of it, King. I was handling it."

"No, you fucking weren't. You were fucking tiptoeing around trying not to fucking upset anyone. Fuck that shit when your cousin is at risk."

"You wanna know what you managed to do by sticking your nose in? You alerted the Vinzanis to the connection between Don and Storm. They did a little digging and discovered Kree works for you, discovering, in the fucking process, that she now lives in Sydney. They didn't fucking know that before, King." He jabbed his finger at me. "That shit is on you."

His words became a jumbled mess as they each made their way into my brain.

What the hell had I done? I'd been so fucking sure of what we needed to do to fix this shit.

"What's Don's tie to them?" I asked as I tried to shake the anger out of my system. Problem was, the anger was now directed at myself for fucking this up. And that was a whole lot fucking harder to shake than any anger I ever felt towards someone else.

He continued glaring at me, his chest pumping furiously with his own anger. "He got tied up running a dog fighting ring for them when he was trying to make some cash to pay off his gambling debts. I paid off his debts in exchange for him leaving Kree alone, but it turned out he had information about those dogfights stashed on a hard drive somewhere that the Vinzanis want. He took off after I covered the debts, and they couldn't find him, so they've been threatening his family and friends in an effort to draw him out."

"So you have no idea where he is?"

"I said *they* couldn't find him; I found the asshole yesterday and put a fucking bullet in his head like you wanted me to do. I then delivered the hard drive to the Vinzanis and told them to leave Kree out of this shit." He paused for a moment before adding with another jab of his finger, "But you put her at risk for a while there, King,

and you need to learn to take a fucking step back when I tell you I have shit handled. Or else you and I are gonna have some big fucking problems going forward."

I scowled at him. "Perhaps in fucking future you could give me the whole fucking story."

He shook his head at me. "Don't twist this to suit your-fucking-self, King."

We stood glaring at each other, neither wanting to back down, when Hyde stepped into the argument. "Let's call this shit a day," he said, glancing between us. "No one's in the wrong, it's just a fucked-up mess. However, we're all on the same fucking side, so let's walk away and mark it as handled."

Neither Zane nor I budged until eventually he blew out a long breath and ground out, "Yeah," before stalking away from us.

As he left, Devil came striding down the hallway towards us, a look of determination on his face. When he reached us, he said, "You know how I spoke to Lily's neighbours and none of them had seen anyone suspicious the day her sister was shot?"

I nodded, not liking where this was going. "Yeah."

"Well, turns out one of the neighbour's sons has been away and just returned home, so she asked him if he'd seen anything. He did, and the description he gave me matches Brant."

The anger Zane had stirred exploded like a fucking volcano spewing lava. I turned to Hyde. "We heard anything more from Winter today?"

"Nothing yet."

"Fuck," I roared, my chest tight with fury. "We need to get down there." I looked at Devil again. "And I want two guys at Lily's place within the next half hour. Keep eyes on her and the kids until we have Brant."

He nodded his agreement and left us.

"Fucking hell," Hyde said. "How the hell did we fuck shit up so badly with Brant?"

"At this point, I don't fucking care how. All I care is that you and I find him and rip him the fuck apart so he can't get at anyone else."

"Yeah, brother. Agreed."

"I'm gonna head over to Lily's and give her a rundown of what's going on. I'll be back so we can leave at ten. I need you and Axe to

figure out how the fuck we can shake these feds so we don't have a fucking fan club follow us to Melbourne."

"Will do."



"Zara! Have you seen my necklace?"

I rested my ass against the kitchen counter in Lily's kitchen and watched silently as she tried to make dinner while she also attempted to load the dishwasher, clear old shit out of the fridge, and search in weird fucking places for the necklace. I'd arrived fifteen minutes ago, and she'd been going on about it from the moment I stepped foot inside the house. She was worked up over losing it, and Zara was ignoring her each time she called out about it. Those two had a fucking fiery relationship, completely different to the one she had with Holly. Some days I thought Lily would completely lose her mind over the shit Zara did.

"Fucking hell," she muttered, rifling through her handbag. "I could have sworn I put it in here."

I pushed off from the counter and moved to her. Attempting to take the bag from her, I said, "I'll look for it. You finish the casserole."

She clutched the bag, refusing to let it go. "You don't know what it looks like."

"Fuck, Lily, it's a fucking necklace. I know what they look like."

Her eyes widened. "Don't you take that tone with me."

Jesus fuck. I'd had a headache before I got here, and it was only getting worse. "Pass the fucking bag."

She scowled and pushed past me so she could dump the entire contents of the bag on the counter. After a quick inspection, she shook her head. "It's not there." A moment passed before she said, "Oh shit, maybe it's in the laundry." She then bolted out of the kitchen, presumably to head into the laundry.

"Just ignore Mum," Holly said, joining me in the kitchen. "This happens all the time with that necklace. She always finds it."

I couldn't recall ever seeing Lily wear a necklace. "What's the importance of it?"

Her eyes met mine, a sad expression in them. "It was her grandmother's necklace. They were close, and she freaks out in times of stress if she can't find it." She shrugged. "I don't know why. It makes no sense to me, but that's Mum for you. She can be a little crazy sometimes, you know?"

I nodded. I was getting a feel for that side of Lily.

I followed her into the laundry and found her madly going through a jewellery box. Seemed like the oddest fucking place for one of them, but what the fuck did I know? Moving behind her, I placed my hand over hers and halted her progress. I brought my other hand to her neck, wrapping it around her throat. Meeting her questioning gaze in the mirror on the wall, I said, "What's going on? Why are you stressed?"

She jerked her hand out from under mine and snapped, "You're slowing me down. I've got a million things to do tonight, so please just let me find this necklace so I can get back to my freaking to-do list."

"Stop," I growled, turning her to face me.

She winced, tensing under my grip of her neck. It drew my attention there, and being the bastard I was, her pain turned me on.

Without easing my grasp of her, I demanded, "What the fuck is going on? When I left here this morning, you weren't like this."

"Yeah well, when you left here this morning, I hadn't had a shitty day at work, or a son who isn't really talking to me, a daughter who skipped school to hang out with her boyfriend, or a missing necklace. On top of that, I just discovered I have to bake ten freaking cakes by Thursday for a bake sale I didn't even know was on because not one of my children told me about it. And I am no freaking expert when it comes to baking cakes. I would have preferred time to practice the cakes they want me to cook." She reached for my hand around her throat. "And can you please let me go. I'm all for your hands on my neck when you're fucking me, but right now, not so much. Right now I just need to be able to breathe a full freaking breath so I can get my shit together."

I stepped closer to her, forcing my body hard against hers. She had me fucking hard for her with the bullshit she just threw at me. The urge to spin her around, bend her over and hold her down while I slammed inside of her overwhelmed me, so I was hanging on by a fucking thread here. Gripping her neck harder, I said, "None of that

shit is the real reason why you're in a fucking panic, so stop bullshitting both of us and start fucking giving it to me straight."

She drew in a ragged breath as she curled her fingers around mine at her neck and tried to prise them off. I gave that to her because I wanted her to talk. When I let go, she said, "I'm not bullshitting you, King. That stuff stresses me out. Some days it feels like I'm drowning. Like I literally can't breathe under all the stuff I have to deal with." She glanced down for a moment, turning silent, before meeting my gaze again and placing her hand to my chest. "I'm also feeling a little overwhelmed by you, I think. Like, not in a bad way. It's just a lot so soon, you know? A month ago, I didn't even know you, and look at us now."

"So you bring that to me when you're feeling like this. You don't ever shut that shit down and hide it from me. I'm not a fucking mind reader, Lily."

Her brows shot up. "Are you fucking kidding me, right now? I just laid my feelings out for you, was as honest as I could be, and you give me that? And for the record, I wasn't trying to hide it from you. I was trying to process it all myself so I didn't have to worry you with it. I know these feelings are just because this is so new and so fast."

I gripped her waist. "My job is to worry. Your job is *not* to fucking worry. I don't care if what you've got to tell me will rip shit apart, because I will put that shit back to-fucking-gether. So in future, you bring me your feelings and anything else you've got, and hand them to me." I bent to growl into her ear. "My job is to take care of you, and I don't give a flying fuck how long I've known you, you are mine now, and I will go to the fucking ends of the earth for you."

When I pulled my head back, I found her staring at me. This lasted for a good few moments, and then it was like a switch had been tripped. Her hands landed on my cheeks, and with the kind of force that caused my gut to tighten, she dug her fingers in and pulled my face to hers. Our lips smashed together, and she kissed me with wild fucking recklessness. She wrapped one leg around my body and used it to fucking climb me, adding her other leg until she'd positioned herself where she wanted to be, arms and legs encircling me, mouth still kissing the fuck out of me.

I dragged my lips from hers. "You wanna kiss me like that, you need to be prepared for me to fuck you," I rasped. This was not the

fucking time for sex. Nor the place. But hell if I would be able to stop myself if she continued down this path.

She squeezed her legs around me. She was fucking panting with lust. "Lock the door. You can be quick, but fuck, I need you inside me right now."

I ground my teeth together. "Your kids are right the fuck out there, Lily. You really want them to hear me fuck you?"

"King, for the love of all things good, just fuck me already. I guarantee you they all have their headphones on. Most of the time that pisses me off, but I'm starting to think it might not be such a bad thing."

I was no fucking saint. With her clinging to me, I took the few steps to lock the door before sitting her on the washing machine that was shaking its way through the spin cycle. She reached for my jeans and madly pulled my cock out, like a fucking starved woman. That shit only got me harder. Pulling her off the machine, I spun her around, forced her down over it, shoved her dress up, and yanked her panties down. And as the machine vibrated and shook, I grabbed her hair and pulled her head back while pounding into her so fucking violently that she would feel me for days.

It didn't take either of us long to come. I couldn't recall any time in my life that I'd orgasmed so fast. That was the effect Lily fucking had on me.

As she pulled her panties up, her eyes met mine. "When I said I was overwhelmed by you, I just meant that I wasn't looking for a relationship when you came along. And you aren't like other guys. You're intense and fast. It's not a bad thing, though. I like that you're always here and that it feels like I've known you forever even when I know hardly anything about you. I mean, I can't even explain it—I just feel like this is so right, this thing between us. Like it was meant to be. God, and now I'm rambling and—"

I put my finger to her mouth to quiet her. "I have to go away, and I'm not sure when I'll be back. Might be a day, might be a few. While I'm gone, I'm gonna have some of my guys watching you and the kids. And before you give me hell over that, there's some shit going on with my club that has put you in danger. I don't want to scare you, but you need to know why I'm doing this."

Concern flickered in her eyes. "How bad is this? Like, how worried do I have to be for the kids? You're freaking me out here."

"Remember when I said it's my job to worry?" At her nod, I continued, "Let me do my job. All you need to do is go about your business like normal. I'll handle the situation, and then I'll come home and shit will go back to normal."

"You're not going to tell me what's going on, are you?"

I shook my head. "No. You need to learn to trust me when shit like this comes up."

She watched me silently, processing that. I waited for an argument, like all the females in my life liked to give me, but in the end, she nodded and said, "Okay."

Fuck.

Some of the tension in my shoulders eased.

How the hell had I been blessed with a woman like Lily?

She finished straightening her clothes as I zipped myself up. When she was done, she asked, "Are you staying for dinner, or do you have to leave straight away?"

"I'm not leaving until ten tonight. I'm here till then."

A smile settled across her face. "Good. I've got some jobs for you. And also, prepare yourself to watch re-runs of the royal wedding." At the arch of my brow, she lifted hers too and said, "Trust me, Harry gets me hot. You're gonna want me to watch those re-runs."

Fucking hell, this woman.

I jerked my chin towards the door. "Go. Get your list of jobs for me." After she hit me with one last smile and turned towards the door, I said, "And Lily?" She looked at me. "I will never be like other men. When I know what I want, I don't fuck around. I make sure I get it. And while I may have fucked up with you once, that shit won't happen again. You take whatever time you need to wrap your head around this relationship. I'm not going anywhere."

CHAPTER TWENTY

King

I eyed the house Hyde, Winter, and I stood outside as the cold Melbourne wind whipped around us. Motherfucking winter had come a few months early. Not only were we dealing with wind, but rain had poured down on us at least once every hour since we'd arrived in this fucking city about six hours ago.

Melbourne and I were not friends. Never had been. I'd tried to avoid coming here after a crazy African motherfucker had attempted to cut my head off years ago. The assholes down here pulled some shit I wasn't a fan of. However, now that I'd decided to set up shop here, I figured I needed to get over my shit and find some fucking joy in the place. Today didn't look like it would be the day for that.

"You ready, King?" Hyde asked.

I pulled out my gun. "Yeah, brother. Let's shake some fucking shit up." With that, I drove my foot into the back door of the joint and kicked it in.

The heavy metal blasting through the house assaulted every one of my senses. That and the smell of weed filling the place. Winter had come through with this address after digging through all of Brant's known associates and visiting them one by one. Hyde and I had tagged along to two other places so far today, and I was really fucking hoping this would be our last stop. I was always down for

some fun, but this fucking weather did my head in. I wanted to deal with Brant, get Ivy out of this shithole town if she was with him, and get back to the woman who had settled herself deep in my soul.

We made our way towards the voices we could hear, and when we entered the dining room where a guy and a girl sat smoking pot, I pointed my gun at them and said, "You're having a fucking party and forgot to invite us."

The guy shoved his chair back, stood, and pointed his gun at us. "And who the fuck are you motherfuckers?"

Before he had a chance to pull the trigger, Winter had him in a chokehold. "Put the gun down, asshole. We just wanna chat."

As the asshole attempted to fight Winter off, the girl made a grab for my gun. I saw her coming and reached my hand out to push her back down into her chair. "Stay the fuck down unless you want a bullet through your fucking head," I snarled.

She spat at me. "Fuck you!"

Jesus, I didn't need her shit today. We'd come for one reason today and it didn't concern her. Aiming my gun at the wall behind her, I shot at it, over her shoulder. The intent was to frighten the fuck out of her so she'd sit down and stay quiet. I didn't achieve my goal. The dumb bitch lunged at me instead, so I found myself in a fucking wrestling match with her.

"Fucking hell," I roared as I wrapped my arms around her and barrelled her backwards into the wall. When I had her there, I grabbed her around the neck while pressing my gun to her temple. "You want this?" I demanded. "Because I'm not fucking above killing a woman if she gets in my way."

"Carly!" the guy yelled out. "Stop!"

Her eyes flicked to the guy, and whatever she saw there did the trick. Her body went limp and she stopped fighting me.

I kept my gaze trained on her. "You done?"

Her lips flattened, anger surrounding her, but she nodded and said, "Yes."

Dragging her back to the chair, I shoved her down before turning back to the guy. "Now, can we agree to have a chat or do you need some further encouragement?"

Winter eased the pressure around the asshole's neck when he nodded, but didn't let him go completely.

"You had a visit from a guy called Brant this morning. Presumably, you sold him a gun. And after doing a little digging, we've worked out that you two have done business together before and have spent some time getting shitfaced with your favourite strippers. So what I want from you is every-fucking-thing you know about him and an address for where I will find him today."

He stared at me. "You're joking, right? Like I fucking know where he's gone today."

I stretched my neck to one shoulder and then the other. I also inhaled deeply and then exhaled while I contemplated how best to deal with him. Wasting time wasn't high on my priority list for the day, but the idea of drawing this out had woken my monster, and now I wanted to dedicate some time to getting blood on my hands.

"I never joke," I said, moving closer. Putting my gun away, I flexed my hands before making a fist and jamming it in his face. As he grunted and lifted his eyes back to mine, I said, "You wanna try answering my question again?"

His lip pulled up angrily. "Nah."

"Fuck," Hyde muttered as I took another swing at him.

Adrenaline coursed through me as my body hummed with the dark thrill the sight of blood gave me. I jerked my chin at Winter, indicating he could step away.

"Last opportunity, motherfucker. After that, I'll beat the information out of you, and you'll wish you just started speaking a whole lot sooner."

"Go to fucking hell," he spat.

I grinned, the beast deep inside me screaming to life for this shit. Torture and pain were my beast's vices, and for the next ten minutes, I gave him what he craved. The asshole took blow after blow. He lasted longer than I figured him for. The crazy fucker. He was a skinny bastard with not a lot of meat on his bones, and he didn't look like he'd stand up to much of a fight, but he surprised the fuck out of me.

Ten minutes and a whole lot of blood and broken bones, though, and he was done. Lying in a crumpled heap on the floor, he begged me to stop. "He's probably at his place on Rutherford Street. He was raving on about setting up base there and that he figured his woman would like it there."

Ivy.

Thank fuck she was okay.

That knowledge released some of the tension from my shoulders and neck.

Hyde stepped in and got everything he knew about Brant from him.

I was already focused on what was to come next.

The fucking end of all this bullshit.

We still had the feds to deal with, but once Brant was taken care of, I would breathe a whole lot fucking easier.



It was almost too easy to get into Brant's place. For a guy who'd pulled off some intricate fucking shit, he sure as shit didn't have his house well secured. It concerned me that this was perhaps a setup, but once we were inside and had spoken to Ivy, I came to the realisation we were simply dealing with someone who'd achieved his goals by sheer fucking luck.

Brant was out when we arrived. We found Ivy watching television, not a hair out of place on her head, completely surprised to see us. And pissed off that we'd forced our way into the place.

"Was it really fucking necessary to break the door down and scare the absolute shit out of me?" she demanded, glaring at me. "You could have just knocked."

"Not if Brant was in here we couldn't."

She frowned. "Huh?"

"He's not a good guy, Ivy. He shot a woman tied to the club and left her for dead. Where is he now?"

Her eyes widened. "Umm, I don't know. He said he had some stuff to take care of."

I glanced at Hyde. "You and I will wait until he gets back. Winter can take her now."

"What? Take me where? You can't just come here and boss me around again," she said, her shoulders pushed back like she was ready for a fight.

"You're not fucking safe here, Ivy."

"I don't—"

I cut her off. "You need to get your shit together and leave with Winter. We don't have time to fucking stand around arguing over this."

Before she could respond to that, the sound of the front door opening and closing filtered through to the lounge room, and Brant called out, "I'm home, Ivy. Where are you?"

I put my finger to her mouth to silence her and jerked my chin at Hyde. He took the few steps to position himself behind the wall near the entry to the lounge. Winter also moved out of sight. When Brant stepped through the entryway, his eyes came directly to me, darkening with displeasure as they did.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" he asked, glancing between Ivy and me. "If you've come to get her, she's with me now."

I pushed Ivy behind me. "No, asshole, she's with me."

He advanced our way, his face a storm of hatred. "You're a smug fucker, King, but this time you're wrong. This time, Ivy chose me, not you. She finally woke up to the fact you treated her like shit all those years you were together. And she realised I would never treat her that way."

"Until the day she changes her mind," I snarled, "And then you'll just stalk and murder her, you sick fuck." At the surprise on his face, I said, "Yeah, we know who you really are, Brant, and we know your history with women. I haven't had a chance to tell Ivy yet, but once I do, you really think she's gonna choose you?"

Ivy inhaled sharply and stepped from behind me to face Brant. "Is that true?"

His face twisted into an ugly canvas of malice. "They're lying to you, Ivy. He always lies to you."

I grabbed her bicep and tried to pull her back behind me, but she refused to budge. Instead, she took a step toward him. At the same time, he pulled a gun out and aimed it at her.

Motherfucker.

No fucking way was he getting a round off.

I lunged for her as he pulled the trigger.

The gun fired, the sound deafening as I lurched toward Ivy.

A second gunshot rang out, and Hyde bellowed something out I couldn't understand. I was too focused on getting to Ivy that I could barely make out what he was doing, but I did see him charging toward Brant.

I collided with Ivy, covering her body with mine, and we went down.

A moment later, a thud echoed on the floor next to me.

I looked up to find Winter rolling Brant over before Hyde stood over him and shot him. Moving off Ivy, I stood and eyed Brant who lay dead at my feet.

Looking at Hyde and Winter, I said, "We need to get the fuck out of here now.

Hyde nodded. "Yeah, brother. You good?"

"Yeah." The shot Brant fired at Ivy missed both of us, thank fuck.

"King."

I turned to Ivy who stood staring at me in horror. "Was that stuff true about Brant?"

"Yeah." When she didn't say anything to that and just kept staring at me in shock, I reached for her. "You need to pack a bag, and we need to leave. And if you try to fucking argue with me, I'll put you over my shoulder and carry you the fuck out of here."

She blinked and then nodded. "Okay."

Ten minutes later, we were on our way to the premises Winter had found for Storm to operate out of. Romano was out of the picture, Brant was out of the picture, and Ivy was safe. We would finalise some plans with Winter for what he had to do going forward, and then we'd go the fuck home. And once we'd taken care of the feds, life could get back to fucking normal.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

King

I stood in the doorway and watched Ivy at the kitchen table talking with Brian. I'd brought her to the women's shelter that he ran for us yesterday and she hadn't been happy with that decision. She'd argued with me for a good half hour over it until I'd had enough and told her to pull her head in. I'd left not long after that, hoping like fuck she stayed. It had been a long night of little sleep while my thoughts thrashed about in my head.

I'd come to the decision I couldn't force her to do something she didn't want to do. Fuck knew, I'd forced enough upon her in the years I'd known her. And not all good things. It was up to her what she did now. I would help her in whatever way she asked, but I had to take a step back and let Ivy live her life to her own plan.

Brian glanced my way and stood. "King, we were just wondering what time you'd come by."

I entered the kitchen, my eyes meeting Ivy's. There was still resentment there, but it had eased a little. To Brian, I said, "Can you give us a minute?"

He nodded. "Sure."

After he exited the room, I pulled out the chair next to Ivy and sat. Resting my arm on the table, I turned my body to face her. Tak-

ing in the tired lines on her face, I said, "You didn't get much sleep either?"

She shook her head and reached for the mug in front of her. After she took a sip, she said, "I think I managed two, maybe three hours. I was thinking about you all night."

"Me?"

"Yeah. What a prick you can be."

"Because a prick would fucking rescue you from the motherfucker you put your trust in, and find you a bed to sleep in while you get your shit together." Fuck, even when I didn't wanna argue with her, she managed to get under my skin and rile me up to the point where I fucking found myself arguing over stuff I gave zero shits about.

"Fuck you, King."

I scrubbed a hand over my face while I forced myself to take a moment and think about what came out of my mouth next. We could sit here and argue our way to lunchtime or I could lead the conversation in a better direction. Blowing out a harsh breath, I said, "Why did you say no yesterday when I suggested I drop you over to Bethany's?"

She averted her gaze, refusing to look at me while she turned silent.

"Ivy," I pushed. "What's going on?"

Another few moments passed between us in silence before finally she looked back up at me. "I haven't spoken to her in five years. We had a falling out, and she refuses to talk to me now."

"What happened?" I didn't like the woman; I didn't like that she turned her back on family.

She fiddled with the tablecloth as a tear slid down her face. "She didn't like Tony. We'd argued over him for a long time, and after one of my miscarriages, she told me to choose between them. I chose my husband."

"So she did the same thing to you over him that she did over me?"

"Yes."

I hated that a mother could do that to her child. But as much as I disliked the woman, the fact remained she was Ivy's mother, and I could see Ivy's pain over losing her. "You should call her, tell her what's happened. She might surprise you with her response."

"And she might not." She looked at me through her tears. "I don't know if I could handle that." Her voice cracked, slicing through my heart. This conversation threw me back to the past, to the time in our lives when so much shit was going down and bad decisions were being made. It fucking dredged up old hurts and a fuckload of anger that I still carried with me. I'd tried to let that shit go, but because it was all tied together in my mind with Margreet's death, I'd failed.

I chose not to push her on it yet. Instead, I said, "You heard about Tony?"

"Yes." Her voice held relief. "The lawyers are helping me sort through everything, but there won't be much left over when all is said and done, so I just need to pick myself up and start over."

"Brian can help you with that. He's got contacts everywhere. He'll help you find a job, and you can stay here for as long as you need."

"Does he owe you for something? Is that why he's okay with me staying?"

"No. We manage this place together. I front the cash, he runs it."

She wiped her tears away while she studied me for a beat. "For an asshole, you do good things sometimes."

"Just trying to help the people who need it. That's all."

She slowly shook her head. "No, that's not all, King. I may have hated you for a long time, and been angrier with you than with anyone else in my entire life, but even I can acknowledge when you do something nice. I've met the two women staying here at the moment. Their lives were unimaginable, worse than mine with Tony, and what you've given them is hope."

My chest squeezed with heaviness. This place may have helped numerous women, but the one woman I should never have turned my back on sat in front of me broken because of my actions. "I should have kept an eye on you after you married Tony."

"No, that wasn't your burden to carry."

"Fuck, Ivy, if I hadn't—"

Her shoulders slumped and she sagged in her chair as she cut me off. "Don't blame yourself for the choices I made in my life once you were no longer part of it. Sure, while we were together we both made some shitty decisions, but after that"—she shrugged—"my choices were all mine. And some days, like today, when I'm honest

with myself, I can see I'm a fucked-up mess. Maybe if you stop by tomorrow, I'll be back to thinking you're an asshole and hating you for the part you played in it. But today, I just think you're an asshole who tries to help people and sometimes gets it right."

As I listened to her, a rolling movie of memories filled my head. All the years we'd spent loving each other and fucking each other up. We'd never had a chance. Not with the shit we'd each been through before we even met.

When a puzzle was missing pieces, it would never be complete. It would always be lacking. Ivy and I never had a shot at making that damn puzzle come together because we were missing pieces all over the place and the pieces we did have didn't slot together in the right ways.

Sometimes two people just weren't meant to be together.

Sometimes there was more hate than love, more war than peace.

Sometimes love wasn't enough.

I stood. "You've got my number. Use it if you need something."

There was one more thing I could do to help her, and as much as doing it would put me back in front of someone I wanted to forget, I would do it. Because even though Ivy and I would never be together again, I would never stop wanting the best for her.



"You shouldn't have come here, King," Bethany said to me through her screen door an hour later.

I'd left Ivy and taken my sweet fucking time coming here. It was unlike me to hesitate to do the shit I needed to do, but just thinking about this woman threw up all kinds of red flags.

I squared my shoulders. "We need to talk about Ivy."

"What about her?"

"Fuck, Bethany, what the fuck do you mean, *what about her*? You say that like you don't even fucking care about her—"

Her lips pursed. "I'm not interested in standing here listening to you swear. If you have something to say, say it, but do not use that language with me."

If her appearance was anything to go by, the years hadn't been kind. She stood hunched over, her frail hand gripping the door to

steady her. Lines wrinkled her face, grey hair sat in a mess of a bun on her head, and breaths wheezed out of her. Mostly, though, she looked defeated by life. And the way her face pinched, she appeared to be full of resentment and bitterness.

"Open the door and let me in," I demanded. "Your daughter needs you, so you need to hear me out."

She debated about allowing me in for another good minute before finally unlocking the door and swinging it open.

I entered the house and walked into the kitchen, doing my best to ignore the onslaught of memories. Fuck, they were like a hundred motherfuckers coming at me all at once. Fucking stabbing me all over.

"Tony Romano is dead," I said, facing her.

I would have expected a reaction to that statement, but all she gave me was an arch of her eyebrows.

Fucking stunned, I said, "That's all you have to say when I tell you your daughter's husband is dead? You're a fucking piece of work, Bethany."

"Watch your mouth," she snapped.

"You care more about a fuck coming out of my mouth than the fact your daughter is alone in this world?" This woman made my fucking blood boil, and I regretted coming here. Ivy was better off without her.

"I care more about being subjected to your presence than the words out of your mouth. As for Ivy, she made her bed years ago. In fact, she made it the first time with you, and I should have known she was incapable of making better decisions, but I fell under her spell again for a while there."

"You fell under her spell? What the hell does that mean? She's your *child* for fuck's sake. What kind of parent talks about their children like that?" *Fucking hell.*

Her displeasure plastered itself over her face, but I ignored it. I didn't give a flying fuck if I upset her. "She's not my blood. I tried to help her, and look what I got in return—nothing but heartache."

My breaths came harder. Heavier. They carried my fury as I let loose on her. "There's a reason you weren't blessed with children of your own. Heartache is part of love, and when you choose to bring a child into your life, you choose all the things that go with love. You can't fucking have love without pain. As a parent, it's your job to

teach your child how to deal with both so that they can go out into the world and stand on their own two feet and weather the fucking storm of love. If you weren't ready for that job or to accept that sometimes those you love will tear pieces of your heart out, you should never have taken Ivy in. Because the very word mother means unconditional fucking love. It means protection. It means safety. And while you knew how to make cookies and decorate a house so it looked like you were a mother, you never had a fucking clue how to give any of those things."

My tirade angered her to the point where she finally gave me the kind of emotional response I felt this conversation deserved, but it wasn't the response I'd hoped for. Pointing at the front door, she snarled, "You've said what you came for and now you can leave. And don't ever come back here. You are never welcome here again."

I had no intention of ever coming back here. I wasn't sure why I thought this had been a good idea to begin with.

Anger and disappointment punched through me as I stalked out to my bike. Thank fuck I hadn't told Ivy I was coming here. Bethany's rejection would have killed her.



Thoughts of Bethany filled my mind for the rest of the day. As much as I tried, I couldn't get her out of there. A headache settled in at lunchtime and intensified to the point where I wanted to rip my fucking head off by 6:00 p.m. I called Lily to let her know I wouldn't be over tonight. Fuck knew I was in a mood, and she didn't need to be subjected to it.

"Hey you," she answered with a smile I could hear all the way over here. "I've just put dinner in the oven, and the best news of the day is that Linc took the kids, so we have the place to ourselves."

Fuck.

"I can't make it tonight." I was a fucking bastard, but the choice was made for her, and as far as I was concerned, it was the right one.

She went silent for a beat. "What's wrong, King? You sound off."

I rubbed my temple. "It's been a shit of a fucking day, and trust me, you do not need me there tonight."

Silence again, and then softly—"Okay so while I get that, here's something for you to consider. Maybe when you have a shit of a fucking day, coming to see me is exactly what *you* need. That's what relationships are about, right? Sometimes you give, sometimes you take. Let me give tonight. And if all you want is to sit in front of the TV in silence, I'm good with that. We can just *be* tonight. We don't have to *do*."

Somehow I knew that when Lily made an offer or promise like this, she meant it and would make good on her word. I also knew this was her telling me she wanted to be the one to help me. And while I had never been big on people helping me, because mostly they just fucking let me down, I also knew I'd finally found someone I wanted to allow in to help. Lily wouldn't let me down.

"I'm leaving now," I said gruffly. "You got beer?"

"Yes," she said around another smile I figured they could fucking see from Mars, "I have beer."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Lily

Monday night, I sat outside on my back patio, grabbing as many quiet moments to myself as I could while my kids and mother fussed over Brynn inside. I leaned back in my seat and stared up at the dark sky while trying not to think about the fact I wasn't smoking. I'd given it up again this morning. I was sure I was already nearly dead from that. Everyone told me smoking would kill me; I figured *not* smoking might be more dangerous to my health. My mental health at least.

I shifted my thoughts to King and the weekend we'd just had together. He'd shown up Friday night all screwed up by something that had happened that day. I hadn't asked him what. He hadn't offered. I'd learnt that King didn't like to discuss shit, and I was okay with that. I mean, I wanted to know everything about him, but I refused to try to change him to be someone he wasn't. King had a lot of baggage, but he didn't want or need someone to carry it for him. He just needed someone to take the trip with him, and I liked the views his journey offered, so I was all on board.

He'd worked my body so hard that night that there hadn't been any more sex for us on the weekend. I'd taken care of him, but he hadn't tried to fuck me again, and I hadn't asked for it. Jesus, the man was brutal in bed, but I couldn't get enough of him. King put a

smile on my face simply by breathing. All it took was a thought of him, and I was smiling like a loon.

Adelaide had asked me on Friday why I wasn't fearful of getting involved with a man like King, a man who ran an MC. I'd told her she didn't know his heart, which meant she didn't know anything. When I met King, I saw two things—that he had the kind of looks I was attracted to, and that he was a bit of an asshole. Then I saw how he cared for and looked after his sister. Then I saw a moody bastard who liked to boss people around, but who also helped people when they needed it. Through all of that, I saw a man trying to handle his business and look after those he cared for. I didn't see the biker or club president with a dark streak that Adelaide would have run a mile from. By the time I saw King's club and all that entailed, I'd already fallen for his heart. And for me, everything in life was about the heart.

I had been worried when he'd told me the kids and I may have been in danger. I'd definitely spent some time running through scenarios in my mind of what he could possibly have been referring to. I had also thought long and hard about what this meant for my life going forward. In the end, I'd decided to put my faith in him and his men to protect us. At the core of the matter was my heart. I couldn't change who it led me to. And King had mine. Now he had my complete trust, too.

"Lily."

I turned my face to find King walking towards me. Standing, I met him halfway and looped my hands around his neck. That was after I took the time to run my gaze over his body, appreciating the way his muscles filled out his clothes. My belly fluttered as I thought about those muscles. His powerful thighs straddling me, his strong arms holding me, his firm ass that I couldn't get enough of.

After I caught his lips in a kiss, I said, "I was just thinking about you."

He snaked his hands around my waist and settled them on my butt. "Your mother told me you've been sitting out here for a while now. You good?"

I liked how he always had a way of taking in the stuff I said to him without feeling the need to comment on it or engage in conversation about it. Because honestly, sometimes I rambled. King let me do that without complaint.

"I'm good. I'm taking advantage of the kids being occupied by Brynn and Mum." I leaned in close and inhaled his scent. "Oh God, you smell so good." At his frown, I said, "I quit smoking again today. I can smell the cigarettes on you, so you should expect me to be smelling you a lot going forward."

His lips twitched and he brought his mouth back to mine. He then kissed me so thoroughly and for so long that I got lost in it and missed him as soon as he pulled away. "Maybe I'll smoke more and kiss you more, just so you can get the taste," he rumbled.

I tightened my hold on his neck as I cocked my head to the side. "Is that you being playful?"

His eyes flashed with heat. "That's me figuring how to get my hands and mouth on you as often as I fucking can."

I let go of his neck and slowly dragged my hands over his shoulder and down his chest and stomach. Stopping when I reached his jeans, I said, "Baby, you don't have to engineer ways to do that. I'm down with you getting those hands and that mouth on me whenever and however you can."

He seemed to like that, because the heat in his eyes flashed in ways that wouldn't leave anyone confused as to what he wanted. We were interrupted by my mother, though, so the moment was broken.

"Lily, I really hate to barge in on you two, because, well, we all know that King is doing wonders for your dry spell, and I never want to do anything to stop that, but we really need to think about dinner. Brynn suggested we could order pizza. I think she's desperate for some junk after all that hospital food, but I'm not sure I can stomach it. I was thinking more along the lines of Thai if we're going to order, but that requires someone to go out and pick it up, and I wasn't sure if you would want to do that, and I certainly can't drive at the moment." She eyed me with expectation, wanting me to say yes.

"Mum, you really need to let my dry spell go. I mean, I didn't see the need to talk about it in the first place, because women are allowed to take time off sex, you know? But—"

"Oh, Lily, why do you always say that? And what woman in her right mind would want time off sex? I mean, *really*."

King positioned me in front of him with his arm around my chest, and I didn't miss the way his body shook gently with laughter.

"Maybe a woman who's taking some time to be with herself for a while," I threw out, exasperated with her.

Her forehead wrinkled as she thought about that for a moment. The idea seemed foreign to her, and in the end, she simply ignored it and carried on. "So about dinner. What do you want to do?"

"You order it. I'll go out and pick it up," King said.

Mum met his gaze and smiled. "Thank you." She then glanced at me again, still seemingly trying to wrap her mind around what I'd said. With a quick shake of her head, she turned and left us alone again.

King let me go, and I faced him, smacking him lightly on the chest. At the questioning arch of his brow, I said, "That was for laughing at me and my dry spell."

His mouth spread out in a smile. "I was laughing at your mother, not at you. She comes out with some fucking funny shit." He shrugged. "And if it's about you, I like it even more."

My mouth almost dropped open. I had never seen him like this. And I really freaking liked it. "You just like the fact I was almost a virgin again by the time you got to me."

And just like that, his sense of humour vanished and his heat returned. Yanking me to him, his mouth brushed my ear as he growled, "As far as I'm fucking concerned, you *were* a virgin when I got to you because you had never been fucked properly."

I put my hands on his chest as his possessiveness rolled through me. It hit me in all the right places and had me desperate for him. God, but now was definitely not the time for that. Pushing against him, I stepped out of his hold. "You need to stop talking, and I need to go inside and get Brynn's room set up for her."

"You need a hand with that?"

I held my hand up at him and shook my head. "God no. I need you as far away from me as possible right now, otherwise, I might start climbing you."

"Fuck," he muttered.

"Yes, exactly," I agreed. "You get to go sort dinner out with my mother."

With that, I quickly headed inside to Zara's bedroom where I was setting my sister up. I'd brought her home from the hospital this afternoon, telling her she would be staying with me until she'd recovered fully. She'd told me that King had rubbed off on me, because I

was far too bossy for my own good now. I'd told her to shut up and just do what I said, to which she'd just looked at me and said, "Case in point."

The doorbell sounded, so I made a detour to answer it.

"Hi," I said to the dark-haired guy standing on the other side holding a bunch of flowers. I'd be lying if I said I didn't take a little peek at his body. Dude was built. And had the face of a god.

He smiled, and I knew by the way it was almost a smirk that he'd seen me checking him out. But full points to him for not getting all cocky about it. "I'm looking for Brynn."

"And you are?" As the words came out, though, it hit me. "Oh God, you're the fishing dude, aren't you?"

His smile turned into a grin. "I like the reference to me being the fishing dude rather than the other kind of dude. Classy. You must be Lily."

I reached for his arm and pulled him inside. Turning my face towards the lounge room where Brynn was, I called out, "Brynn! Fishing dude is here!"

He leant in close and said, "Fishing dude's name is Jamie."

I returned his grin. "Oh, I like you! You should stay for dinner. We're having Thai."

"I love Thai."

I dragged him into the lounge room and didn't miss the way Brynn's eyes lit up when she laid eyes on him. My sister liked more than just fishing with this guy.

Taking the flowers from him, I said, "I'll find a vase for these while you two catch up."

Jamie's eyes didn't leave Brynn. "We've been catching up for days over the phone."

The way he said that, and the way he watched her told me that he also liked more than just fishing.

"Okay kids, it's time to leave Auntie Brynn in peace." When they grumbled about that, I said, "Anyone still in here in one minute will be on dishes duty all weekend." With that, they all scrambled out of the room faster than I'd seen them move in weeks.

Brynn met my gaze with a smile and mouthed, "I love you."

I could be a good sister sometimes.



Jamie stayed for dinner. He also convinced Mum and Zara to play a game of Scrabble with him and Brynn. King and Holly ended up in front of the television watching some sport while she grilled him some more about bikes. Robbie helped me with the dishes while my heart did a little dance over all the happiness in my house.

"Dad said he'd take me to karate on Saturday if you're busy," Robbie said as he wiped the last plate clean.

"Do you want him to take you, baby? I'm good either way." I held my breath a little. This was the first conversation he'd initiated all week, and I hoped he'd spend some time opening up to me.

He shrugged. "I don't know. I just thought you might be busy with King."

I stopped wiping the counter so I could give him my full attention. "Does it feel like I'm busy with King all the time lately?"

He met my gaze, and I saw the hesitation in his eyes. "Maybe."

"I'm sorry if it feels that way, but I want you to know that I am never too busy for you. I have Saturday blocked off for karate and ice cream. I really want to take you, but it's up to you, and I promise I won't get upset if you want Dad to take you."

"If you take me, will King go, too?"

"I haven't asked him to go. I figured it would just be you and me."

"Okay. I want you to take me, unless we spend the weekend at Dad's."

Shit.

Now I was confused about his feelings over King.

"Robbie, do you like King?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"No, really, you can be honest with me. If he's done something to upset you, I want to know so we can fix it."

"I like him."

"But you don't want him to go to karate with us?"

He glanced down for a moment before giving me back his eyes. "I think Dad would be upset if he went there with us. But he can hang out here with us. I asked him about hiring *Thor* to watch again, and he said if it was okay with you, he'd hire it again for us."

Well fuck. My kid just broke my heart with his thoughtfulness and King patched it back up with his.

I nodded. "Okay, I understand what you're saying, and I think you're so thoughtful to consider your father's feelings. And I am 100 percent on board with you guys watching *Thor* again."

He grinned. "You're gonna have a bath again while we watch it, aren't you?"

I laughed. "You know me too well."

"Mum!" Zara yelled out. "We need you!"

Robbie and I exchanged looks. "When does Zara ever need me?" I whispered.

He gave me a look that said he wondered the same thing, and then we headed out of the kitchen to look for her.

We found her in the lounge room with everyone. King sat on the end of the couch with Holly next to him and Mum next to her. His arm lay extended across the top of the lounge, and his long legs were stretched out in front of him, crossed at the ankles. I wasn't sure I'd ever seen him so relaxed. Brynn and Jamie sat on the other couch, while Zara knelt in front of the coffee table. A cake sat on the coffee table. And not just any cake. It was my very favourite six-layer chocolate cake with toasted marshmallow filling and chocolate frosting.

I looked at Mum to find her watching me with love, and it almost made me burst into tears. I held my shit together, though, and asked, "You organised this? And why? It's not my birthday."

She smiled, but it was Brynn who answered. "I asked her to organise it as a thank you for everything you've done for me. It means the world to have you for a sister."

"Oh God, now I really am gonna cry," I muttered.

"I organised it," Mum piped up, "and King picked it up for me while he was out getting dinner."

My gaze went straight to him, and I found him watching me with that intense look of his I loved. While we shared a moment, the kids scrambled up off the couch and the floor, and Mum cut the cake. When the space next to King became free, I curled up next to him, wrapped an arm around him, and said, "Thank you."

He looked down at me, still with the intensity that told me he was going to fuck me just the way I liked it tonight. "I didn't do anything. This was all your mum and sister."

I smiled. "I know, but I'm still thankful you picked it up." I dropped my voice. "Maybe I'll save some of it for you to lick off me later."

His hand moved to my neck, and he swept my hair out of the way so he could run his fingers along my collarbone. "That dirty mouth of yours will get you in trouble one day," he murmured softly enough so that only I heard.

I snuggled in closer to him. "I hope so."

He threaded his finger under my necklace that I'd finally located. "You found your grandmother's necklace."

"Yeah."

"Good." With that one word, he'd given me a taste of his soft again, and butterflies filled my tummy. I would never have enough of his kind of soft.

"Do you want me to cut you some cake, Lily?" Mum asked.

I nodded and sat up straight, still pressed against King's side, with one leg folded so it rested on his thigh. "Yes, please."

Brynn caught my eye as she, Jamie, and the kids traipsed back out to the dining room to play more scrabble. "I love you," she said.

"I love you, too, Brynny. You and me are gonna have a big long D&M before bed tonight, okay?"

She grinned, knowing exactly what I was referring to. "Yup, but I got shit to get back to now if you catch my drift."

"Oh, I catch your drift, fishing girl," I said with a laugh.

The doctors had told her she was making good progress with her recovery, and while I knew she was in pain and still had a long way to go, my sister was tough. She'd speed through her recovery and be back out there fishing in no time.

King's phone rang, and he leaned forward a little to grab it from his pocket. As he did that, he settled his other arm over my shoulders, slipping his hand under the material of my shirt so he could rest it skin-to-skin just above my breast.

"What's up?" he answered the phone.

Mum brought cake over for King and me. I noticed how she didn't ask if he wanted any; she just assumed he would. She placed his on the coffee table and handed me mine.

"Thanks," I said softly so King could still hear the person on the other end of the call.

He'd listened silently for a few moments, and I'd just taken my first amazing bite of cake when he said, "Ivy, stop. You're working yourself into a state when you don't need to be. Ask—"

Ivy.

The woman I'd met in King's office.

An ex of his.

I wasn't usually a jealous woman, and I trusted King completely, but I couldn't deny a streak of jealousy shot through me when he said her name. She must have cut him off, because he'd been about to say something before stopping abruptly.

"No," he said.

His tone had turned a little harsh, and I decided I didn't want to hear any more of the conversation, so I attempted to stand. However, King had other ideas. He quickly moved his hand to grip my shoulder and held me tightly to him.

I turned my face to his and found him watching me closely. He gave one quick shake of his head, signalling that he didn't want me to leave.

"I'll call you tomorrow. Brian will be able to help you with this, so stop fucking worrying about nothing." With that, he ended the call in the way only King did—abruptly with no goodbye.

I shifted to sit cross-legged sideways on the couch, looking at him. I was going to broach the subject of Ivy, because if I didn't, it might just send me crazy. And too bad if he didn't want to discuss this; I needed to. "I know you told me Ivy is in the past, but I kinda need to know how far in the past. Like, is she recent and you guys are still—"

He cut me off. "I've had three relationships that mean something to me. Ivy was the first. I hadn't seen her for over a decade until recently, and now I'm helping her get back on her feet after her husband died. That's all there is to this."

"And the other two?"

"Jen was my second one. She isn't alive anymore." His eyes searched mine for a long, silent moment. "You are my third."

My heart beat a little faster and a little louder. I smiled at him and threaded my fingers through his. "You are my second."

I decided I liked King's way of discussing stuff—straight to the point with no bullshit and no dragging it out. He simply shared

what he felt was important and then moved on. And he didn't ask for anything more than the same from me.

I squeezed his hand before letting it go.

I then reached for our cake and passed his to him.

We then ate in silence except for when I put my fork down halfway through my piece and said, "I'm leaving the rest for you for later," to which he muttered, "Fucking hell."

It was the best night I'd had in a long time, and my heart swelled with happiness at the thought of so many more to come.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

King

I sat listening to what Axe was telling me, trying not to lose my shit. It had been a hell of a morning already, and now it was shaping up to be the day I'd have to take care of something I'd been putting off for too long. It seemed the feds were closing in on the club, and because of the level of secrecy surrounding their latest witness, we would have no way of silencing them. Detective Stark was proving a worthy adversary, but she was one I didn't want.

Stretching my neck, I tried to shake the tension there. Knowing we had a lot of business to take care of today, I'd woken with it. Lily had bossed me into allowing her hands on my back and neck, and while the massage had eased some of that tension, it had stirred a fuckload of other tension I'd needed to take care of.

I looked at Axe. "So confirm for me so I know I've got a handle on what you're saying. Stark has a witness that they're locking down tight. Johnny can't get at the information to find out who it is. But whoever it is will likely jam more than their dick up our ass."

"That about covers it."

I clenched my jaw as the decision I had to make worked its way through my head. "I'll take care of this today."

Axe's expression turned thoughtful. "They'll keep coming at you even if you eliminate her."

"Let them. I'll just keep coming right back. I refuse to allow them to take the club down."

"Fuck, King, do you ever think life would be a whole lot fucking easier if you turned clean instead? I don't know how you live like this, always chasing your fucking tail, putting out fires and waiting for the next one to hit."

This was an argument we'd had for years. I had no fucking clue why he kept bringing it up. This would never change for me, and he had to know that. "Maybe life would be easier, maybe it wouldn't. We'll never fucking know, because I'm not gonna step out there and try it. I'll take my chances getting shit done the only way I've ever known—kicking and fucking screaming. And at the end of the fucking day, when I lay my head down, I'll breathe easy knowing it doesn't matter what fires I have to put out tomorrow, because my club will be right there by my side putting out the same damn fire. I will never do life without my brothers."

He leant forward. "You could still do it cleaner than you are."

"No, we couldn't. This is what we know, Axe. And the world sure as fuck isn't interested in helping me today any more than it was interested in helping me when I was a kid. I won't put my life in anyone's hands but my own."

Hyde stepped into the office and glanced between us. "Hate to interrupt, but we've got a problem."

"What?" I asked.

"I still haven't confirmed what the fuck's going on, but it seems Black Deeds wanna pick a fight with us. They just undercut us on a cleaning job."

I shoved my chair back, anger forcing hard, furious breaths from me. "You and me are gonna pay Zero a visit right fucking now. And if we need to make a fucking statement to get this shit sorted, that's exactly what we'll fucking do."

Hyde nodded. "Agreed, brother."

The Black Deeds president and I had a long, hard history that I was more than ready to end if he was intent on pursuing this agenda. I hadn't forced myself and my club on Sydney only to shit myself at the first sign of trouble. Storm's reign would be enforced with this visit to Zero.



The Black Deed's clubhouse was tiny compared to Storm's, but that didn't mean it didn't house a formidable club. Zero was known for his ruthlessness, and while at times we'd been at war with each other, I gave him credit for the way he held his club together.

Hyde and I took Devil, Kick, Nitro, and Mace with us. We met some resistance at their front gate, but Zero approved our entry, and five minutes later, we stood in front of him, his VP, and a handful of his men.

He glanced between us, narrowing his eyes at me. "It's been a while since you've turned up looking like you're planning a fucking war, King. What gives?"

My muscles tensed. Every single last fucking one of them. I did another quick sweep of the weapons I could see, and made some rough calculations of each man's likely move if I shot their president. Meeting his gaze, I said, "That's because you've handled your shit, we've handled ours, and I had some fucking peace. Today, you shat all over that peace, and I'll happily begin a fucking war to get it back."

His face clouded with anger and he took a step forward, getting in my fucking face. Snarling, he demanded, "Care to fucking say that again."

I closed the tiny distance between us, adrenaline spiking in my veins. My hands fisted by my side as I threw back, "You heard it the first time."

"Yeah, I did, but whoever you got your information from doesn't know shit."

"He got his information from me, asshole," Hyde said, "And it's solid. Your club cut us out of a deal by going in at 30% less than our price. That tells me you mean business."

Zero didn't take his eyes off me. Smart motherfucker. "I don't know what the fuck he's talking about. The last fucking thing I need on my plate is to be dealing with the fallout from something like this. So fucking stand down, tell your men to stand down, and let's get to the fucking bottom of this together."

I searched his eyes. I'd always had a good feel for Zero. And he'd never fed me shit. Not once. So I was inclined to believe what he

said.

Raising my hand, signalling for my men to pull back, I moved away from Zero. "Hyde, give us all the information you know," I said, eyes still pinned to Zero's. I also kept his men in my peripheral, staying aware of their every move. While we'd worked our way to this point, I trusted no fucker. Tension sat thick in the air, and I had no intention of easing it until I had what I came for.

Hyde rattled off the job details and Zero listened closely before making a call to his VP. They had a heated discussion, and from the way Zero's face twisted with anger, I figured he'd been given the information he was after.

Ending the call, he shoved his phone back into his pocket and pulled his gun out. I'd seen that coming and had my hand on mine before he even reached for his. Within a matter of seconds, we all stood pointing our weapons at each other, the tension in the room at a whole new fucking level.

"Royce!" Zero barked, gun trained on me. "Get your ass here." To me, he said, "Steady with that gun, King. We don't want to start something here that we can't stop."

I ground my teeth together, gripping my gun harder. "In case you missed it, I'm good with starting something we can't stop. Hell, with the way I'm feeling today, I'm fucking itching to start something."

"Fuck," Zero muttered, "You're a fucking madman."

I grinned, that wave of crazy I fucking loved taking over. "That I am, my friend. That I fucking am."

He scowled. "We're not fucking friends."

"We could be if you'd stop trying to tickle my fucking balls."

"Jesus, the shit you come out with. If I was after you, I'd be doing a whole lot fucking more than tickling them."

"Yeah, I've figured that by now. You'd be clamping your fucking teeth down on them. So give me whoever the fuck did this shit and let me deal with them."

"You're not dealing with anything. I'll take care of this." He paused for a beat before barking out again, "Where the fuck is Royce?"

No one had the chance to answer him, because a gun sounded from behind him. I ducked just in time to miss the bullets coming straight at me. Hyde went into action, lunging at the asshole who'd

fired it. One of Zero's men joined in, and soon we had a fucking shit-show of a brawl on our hands.

"Fucking hell," Zero bellowed, wading into the fight and reefing the guy who'd shot at me out of the fight.

When he had him, he restrained him by gripping both his wrists together and locking an arm around his neck. Almost choking the breath out of him, he roared, "What the fuck have you done?"

The guy, who I presumed to be Royce, struggled in his president's hold, rage pouring from him. When Zero eased the pressure on his neck a little, he spat out, "This is for what Storm did to Gibson!"

"Fuck. I told you to forget that shit," Zero said.

"Yeah well, he was my cousin. No fucking way was I letting his death just sit like that. We had allegiance to him, and I don't ever forget who my loyalties lie with."

Zero spun him around and punched him, knocking him flat to the ground. Shoving his boot down on him, he roared, "Your fucking loyalty is to this club, brother. You just pissed all over that by pulling this shit."

Yeah, he had. He'd also loaded a gun and aimed it at himself.

I crouched down beside him and pressed my gun to his temple. "Gibson was a piece of shit, so it makes sense to me that you are, too. I don't play well with men like you."

"King, he's mine," Zero said.

I shook my head. "No, he's mine."

I pulled the trigger, and without a second glance, I reared up and pointed my gun between Zero's eyes. "Are we gonna have a problem, Zero?" I demanded, my body buzzing with the need to drive home the fact that Storm had control of this city. When he didn't answer, I pressed the gun firmly to his head. "Answer me! Do you understand that if you step on our fucking toes, we won't hesitate to retaliate? And when we do, we won't care whose blood flows."

He worked his jaw, his shoulders rock hard with anger. Finally, he spat out, "Yeah, I fucking understand."

I watched him for another few moments before taking my gun off him and signalling to my guys that we were done here. As I took a step away from Zero, I said, "Keep your men in check, and we won't have a problem."

He jerked his chin at me. "Fucking remove yourself from my property or else we *will* have a problem."

Axe was right—every day brought a new fire to extinguish. What he didn't grasp was that I lived for this shit. It fed my fucked-up soul. It kept me dancing with the devil rather than becoming the devil. If I didn't have my club to go to battle for, I would go out there and seek the shit out myself. And that was something I swore I would never do.



Sometimes not everything was as it seemed.

Sometimes you discovered something about a person that contradicted what you previously assumed to know, and it slanted shit in another light. And then you had to fucking reassess everything you thought you knew and make a new plan.

As I watched Detective Stark arguing with her husband on her front lawn, I got a feel for the woman and what her life consisted of. She'd presented herself as a ballbuster, and while I didn't doubt she was at work, she was far from that in her own home.

Her husband was abusive, and her fear of him bled from every one of her veins.

"You will never fucking leave me, bitch!" he yelled, gripping her face so hard I could feel her pain. "I will find ways to stop you, and if you continue to battle me, I will take Marie from you, and you will never see her again."

Motherfucker.

She tried to fight him off, furiously slapping him and pushing him, but she was no match for his strength. Finally, he let her go, shoving her to the ground. After spitting on her, he stalked to the Mercedes in the driveway and screeched out of there.

I left my bike and crossed the street. When I reached her, I jerked my chin towards her front door. "We have shit to discuss. Inside." My tone left no room for a discussion on this; we would be talking, and we would be doing it inside.

She picked herself up off the ground and hurried inside. Fear still consumed her. I suspected that had more to do with her husband than me, but I would make use of it.

I followed her and closed the door behind us. She led me into a living room, and I took note of the warmth in her home. Family photos lined walls, and flowers and art filled other spaces. Leaning in close to look at some of the photos, I saw the couple with their daughter in most of them. An outsider who had no idea of what went on in this family would assume they were a happy one.

"What do you want, Mr. King?" she asked, wrapping her arms around herself. "I'm busy and have work to do."

I drew my gaze from the photos to look at her. "How long has your husband been abusing you?"

She flinched. "I'm not about to discuss my—"

I clenched my jaw. "How fucking long?"

She flinched again, and I realised she was shaking. When she answered me, I had to work hard to hear her. "A while."

"I'm taking that to mean this has been going on for as long as you've been together. And from what I know of you after reading the notes I have on your family, that means he's been abusing you for ten fucking years." The motherfucking cunt.

Straightening, she attempted to get herself under control. My anger appeared to trigger her defensiveness. When she spoke again, she was more like the woman I'd met. "It's really none of your business, but no this hasn't been going on for ten years. He wasn't like this in the beginning. He went through some personal stuff five years ago, and that's when it started. We're working through it."

I wasn't one to judge. My anger was directed squarely at her husband, but it frustrated me that a smart woman like her couldn't hear the shit coming out of her mouth. "Isabel, I would imagine if you took a long hard look at the beginning of your relationship, you would find signs of this side of him." I glanced down at a photo of their daughter. This was where my frustration with women like Isabel came into play. Children needed to be protected at all costs. "Does he hit your child?"

When I looked back up at her, I didn't need to hear her answer; I already knew it. "Fucking hell," I muttered.

"I'm leaving him," she blurted out.

"Are you?" I demanded. "Do you have a fucking plan in place or are you just fucking thinking about it until the next time he hits you?" When she started crying, I raked my fingers through my hair and muttered, "Fuck."

She dropped down onto the couch and buried her face in her hands, sobbing. "He has power I don't have. You don't understand. He will find me wherever I go."

She was right; he did have power. The asshole had an international business spread across three continents. He wouldn't struggle to find her if she ran.

"You want him out of your life?"

Her head snapped up, and she looked at me, wide-eyed. She knew what I was asking. And with only one moment of hesitation, she silently gave me her answer with a quick nod.

I left without another word spoken between us. I'd gone there to take care of business for Storm. Instead, I hadn't fucking taken care of business; I'd taken on another job. But the life it would save was more than worth the sacrifice. Isabel Stark's daughter needed a mother more than I needed her dead. I would find another way to take care of club business.

As I left her house, Ivy called. "King, I really need your help. Brian's not here, and I have to go see a guy who just called me about a possible job. Are you able to come pick me up and take me? Please?"

I would have preferred not to get involved in this. I wanted to help her get back on her feet, but I didn't want to encourage her to rely on me all the time. "There's a bus stop down the road, Ivy. Catch the bus. I'm in the middle of shit."

Silence, and then—"Yeah, I know, but I was hoping we could go over some stuff together afterwards."

"What kind of stuff?"

"Just some plans I have that I'd really like your opinion on."

Fuck. "Okay, I'm on my way, but I don't have all fucking day for this."

"God, no need to bite my head off. I'm just feeling a bit lost here, and you know me better than anyone, so I kinda feel like you're the best person to ask."

"I'll be there."

I shoved the phone into my pocket and exhaled sharply. I'd do this for her today, but if she kept calling, I'd have to put a stop to it. She needed to move on with her life. Without calling on me all the time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Lily

“Jamie’s coming over tonight. I hope that’s okay, Lil,” Brynn said to me late Friday afternoon while we sat on my couch inhaling wine. Well, I was inhaling wine, because it had been a long day in the pits of hell dealing with shitty patients and an even shittier boss. Jackson really needed to take that holiday he’d been putting off. Brynn was on Coke because of her medication, but I was pretty sure she wished it was wine.

I frowned at her. “Why wouldn’t it be okay? I love him.”

“I already feel like I’m in your way. I don’t want to subject you to him any more than you can handle.”

I chugged some more wine. “Look, it’s been a long day, and I’m tired, and so I’m just gonna say this however the fuck it comes out of my mouth. You’re my sister. I love you a lot more than I even know what to do with. I would do anything for you. And like I said, I love him.” I raised my glass at her as I added, “Oh, and you got me my favourite cake. No one ever buys me cake. Keep that shit up. You can do whatever the fuck you want if you buy me cake.”

She laughed. “I’m pretty sure you’ve been spending too much time with King lately. Look at all those fucks falling out of your mouth.”

I grinned. I *had* been spending a lot of time with my man. He'd had dinner here and stayed over every night for the last week, and he was coming over again tonight. "Do you like him, Brynny?"

Her face softened. "It doesn't matter if I like him. It only matters if you do."

"Yeah, I know, but you've always been a good judge of people, so I'm interested to know what you think."

"I like him. Like, I *really* like him for you. He has this way of taking charge when you need that, and then at other times, he just sits back and lets you run around like a chook without a head. You're an independent woman with a crazy streak, and King seems able to handle that while at the same time, giving it to you straight when he has a different opinion on something. And let me just say, I *really* like the way he handles Mum. I've never seen a man get her to do what he wants the way King does."

It made me happy that she liked him. I agreed with her that it only mattered if I liked him, but it meant the world to me that she also did.

"Oh, I meant to tell you I saw John Travolta again today, but it wasn't at the hospital this time. He was in the same freaking aisle as me in the supermarket, buying the same freaking cheese as me. And I swear to you he really does look like Travolta." When I'd told Brynn about this guy the first time, she'd asked me if I was hallucinating and imagining that he looked like John Travolta, because in her mind there was only one man alive as hot as him. My sister had a Travolta crush that had lasted decades, and we'd watched *Grease* together at least thirty times.

"Did you speak to him?"

I took a swig of wine and nodded. "Yes, and then we had a conversation about cheese and wine, and it was like he didn't wanna stop talking. I had to be kinda rude to him to get away from him. He's good-looking, but way creepy."

"Ugh. So nowhere near the real thing."

"Definitely not."

Mum interrupted our conversation. "Lily, why must you insist on mixing colours with whites when you do your washing?" she asked, wandering into the room holding a pair of pants of hers that used to be white. She looked stricken that they were now pink. I had to hold

my laughter in, and when she saw that, her lips flattened. "This isn't funny! I was going to wear these on my date tonight."

"You have a date tonight, Ma?" Brynn asked.

"Yes, with a gentleman I met at the library today."

"No one needs to be wearing white pants on a date, Mum," I said. Shifting off the couch, I grabbed her by the arm and led her into my bedroom as I said, "I have the perfect outfit you can borrow."

"Oh, Lily, I really don't think—" Her mouth clamped shut as she eyed the dress I held up. Her face brightened, and she took the dress off me. "Well, maybe this will do."

I grabbed a pair of shoes out for her, too. "It will more than do. I guarantee that if you wear this dress and these shoes, and you let me fix your hair, this man will be doing everything he can to get in your pants."

That was my mother's language, and she practically ripped the shoes from my hands. "I need to be ready in an hour and a half. I'll call out when I'm ready for you to do my hair." With that, she exited my room faster than I'd seen her move in a long time. She must have really liked this dude.

"And I didn't mix the colours and whites," I called out. "It was one of the kids." God, I was a grown woman who still needed her mother to know when she hadn't screwed something up. That was some crazy shit right there.

"Mum," Zara said from the doorway as I closed my wardrobe. The way her voice wavered caused me to turn to her without delay, and what I saw on her face broke my heart. The minute our eyes met, tears fell down her cheeks and she rushed towards me. "Sam broke up with me."

My arms circled her, and I pulled her tightly against me. "Oh, baby, I'm sorry."

We stayed like that for a long time as she cried her heart out. Sam had been her first real boyfriend, and I remembered how I'd been crushed when my first boyfriend broke up with me. While I may have been secretly cheering on the inside that she wasn't with the little shit anymore, I hated that she was hurting.

I moved us to the bed and pulled her into my arms while we sat against the headboard. Smoothing her hair, I said, "Do you wanna talk about what happened? I'm easy either way, but if you need to talk, I'm here."

She looked up at me, tears still filling her eyes. "He's with Carmen Breen now. And I'm pretty sure they were doing stuff behind my back." With that, another wave of tears overtook her. *Little fucking shit. I should have let King have a word with him.*

I squeezed my arms hard around her, as if by holding her so freaking tightly, I could keep all the bad stuff away from her. My instinct to protect her had never been so strong. *Maybe I could lock her in this house for the next ten years.*

She and I still hadn't gotten around to having a conversation I was satisfied with over whether she and Sam'd had sex, but thankfully she'd gotten her period so I knew she wasn't pregnant at least. But as many times as I'd asked her about sex, she'd brushed me off and told me no. I suspected she was lying, and I debated whether to broach the subject now when she wiggled out of my embrace, looked at me, and said, "I did have sex with him."

Oh God.

My tummy practically cramped up with stress.

I really will lock her in this house for ten straight years.

Maybe twenty.

Reaching for my hand, she said, "Mum, it's okay, we used a condom. And we only did it once. And that was only this week."

My heart beat furiously against my chest.

She was far too young for this.

Far too young.

Where did I go wrong?

I failed as a parent.

Failed with a capital F.

"Mum."

I blinked and found her staring at me. "Zara," I started, but my voice broke and no more words came.

"You were right about everything."

I blinked again. "About what?"

"That I wasn't ready for sex yet. And that Sam's a shit. He's been trying to get me to have sex for ages, and then he told me there was no point in us dating if I wasn't going to do it with him. So I did it, and then when I told him I didn't want to do it again just yet, he broke up with me. So yeah, you were right, and I wish I'd listened to you."

"That little fucking shit. I'll fucking go and tell him what I think of him myself." God, if I could wring his neck, I would. How dare he treat my daughter that way?

She grinned. "I like this new you."

"What new me?"

"This you that just says it like it is."

"I've always said it like it is."

"Not this much. I don't know, you just seem easier about things, not as tense all the time. I mean, you could stop harassing me about studying more and stuff, but mostly you seem happier these days. I like it."

I squeezed her hand before letting it go. "So you aren't in a hurry to have sex again?"

"I don't know. I guess it depends who I date next."

Oh God, please strike all the boys down in her school. Take them all out. Hit them with lightning or some shit.

I took a deep breath. "Promise me something."

She narrowed her eyes at me. "What?"

I reached out and pushed a stray hair off her face. My heart constricted at how beautiful she was. It was no wonder the boys were chasing her. I shuddered to think about the next few years. I would be fighting them off. *No, King will be fighting them off for you. Remember he said he wouldn't allow a daughter out on a date without his eyes on her. You can make him do that in exchange for sexual favours.* "Promise me you'll talk to me about it before you decide to have sex again." When she pulled a face, I said, "I'm serious, Zara. We don't need to discuss the physical stuff unless you want to, but I want you to talk to me about how you're feeling in here"—I placed my hand to her heart—"because that's mine to protect while you're still growing and finding yourself. And I'll be fucked if I'll let any other little shit break it without me knowing to get the bandages out."

Her breaths slowed as she took that in. Finally, she nodded and agreed. "Okay." She then threw her arms around my neck and hugged me for the longest time. By the time she let me go, we were both crying. "I love you, Mum. But man, you swear a lot these days."

I wiped my tears away and shrugged. "You're nearly fifteen, and it's the language you respond to."

She grinned. "So I can start saying it in the house?"

"Let's not get too excited. I don't plan on saying it often. Just when I need to get my point across to you."

"Trust me, Mum, you get your point across just fine."

"Well, I would argue with that, because usually you're arguing with me, not sitting on my bed talking to me."

"Yeah," she said softly, "but I'm always listening to you."

I grabbed her face with both hands and planted a big smoochy kiss on her lips that she wouldn't usually allow anywhere near her. "Maybe you could give me a heads-up every now and then that you're paying attention, because honestly, I'm flailing over here some days thinking you hate me."

She moved off the bed, grinning again. "Nah, I'd rather make you work for it."

I watched her as she walked out of the room until I couldn't see her anymore. I then face-planted into my bed, feeling all kinds of weird emotions. This parenting gig was freaking hard, and I really wasn't convinced I was going to make it through in one piece.

"Lily, you in here? I'm here early to take the kids." I sat up to find Linc standing in the doorway, watching me with a frown. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I just had a talk with Zara about boys. I need a cask of wine now." I paused. "Wait, why are you being nice to me?" While he'd been making an effort with the kids, he'd been icy to me ever since I'd told him we weren't getting back together.

"Fuck, I'm not a bastard all the time, Lil."

"Well, you have been lately."

His face clouded with displeasure. "I had good reason. You chose that asshole over me when all I was trying to do was be there for you."

I sighed. Would he ever understand? "Linc, it wasn't a competition. You and I weren't even on the cards. You made your choice years ago, and I've just been trying to figure out how to live with it since then. I finally have, and King came along at the right time. And while I appreciated all your help, don't do stuff for me if you're just looking for me to do stuff in return. I mean, I believe in give-and-take, but not for the sake of just getting shit out of people. I feel like after all these years, you and I should be there for each other out of respect and for the kids."

He listened to what I had to say, but all he said in reply was, "Okay, well I'm going to round the kids up so we can make it to the movie on time. Are you good with me keeping them for two nights?"

"Yes." I smiled. "I like this new thing we have going."

"What?"

"Where you want to spend lots of time with them. They love it, too."

"Yeah," he said and then left me in peace.

I had no idea if he'd really listened to what I said, but a girl could hope. And pray. Maybe I should take that up.

I reached for my phone and sent King a text. I hadn't sent him any today, and good God they were a good way to get him ready for me. He usually told me to stop sending him shit, but I had a sneaky suspicion he was starting to warm to them.

Me: Whatcha doing?

He took a good few minutes to come back.

King: Club shit

Me: Are you thinking about me?

King: Fuck, Lily I'm busy

Me: Well, for what it's worth, I'm thinking about you. And I'm thinking it would be really freaking good if we played with some toys tonight. You don't know this about me yet, but I have some. And while I know you're a man who has all the goods, I think I have some you might like.

Three minutes passed.

King: Fucking hell woman

Me: You want pictures? Gimme a minute to get some for you.

He rang. "For fuck's sake, I'm dealing with a fuckload of headaches today, and I don't fucking need you to send me any pictures. And I really don't fucking need to be thinking about you when I'm trying to sort this shit out. I'll be over in about two hours, and I suggest you have a bag packed that contains whatever toys you want me to use on you tonight. We clear?"

Oh, man, we were crystal freaking clear.

But I was just like my daughter. I liked making him work for it.

"Just one question—would you prefer—"

"I have no fucking preference on any of this. So long as I have your cunt, I'm a happy fucking man."

"Well, that was all you had to say," I said with the biggest smile on my face. Who knew bossy men who liked filthy words would get me so damn hot?

"We done?"

Also, who knew a grumpy question like that would make me smile? King didn't usually ask anyone if they were done with a conversation.

I had no idea where he was taking me, but I loved a good surprise, so I didn't push him for more on that. "We're done. I'll see you in a couple of hours."



He was moody when he arrived to pick me up. But I was horny as hell after our phone call, even two hours on. So he could stalk around the place throwing orders out like a general all he liked; I didn't care. Nothing was ruining my horny buzz.

I'd stopped drinking wine because the responsible side of me decided sitting on the back of a motorcycle drunk wouldn't be the best idea. But Brynn and I had spent a good part of the last two hours talking and laughing over stuff, which meant I wasn't quite ready when he rocked up.

He stood watching me in silence as I ran around my bedroom trying to locate clothes and stuff to pack. "Fuck, Lily, what have you been doing for the past two hours?"

I ignored his cranky tone and continued rifling through my underwear drawer for the exact right pair of panties that I really wanted to take with me. "Very important stuff, I'll have you know." I gave up on finding the underwear in that drawer and rushed out of the bedroom to the laundry where I did locate them. When I raced back to the bedroom, the glint in his eyes had shifted from pissed off to that intense look that got me excited. I slowed and placed my hand on his chest. "Why are you looking at me like that? Tell me what I did, because I need to file that information away for the next time you turn up here all moody and shit."

He reached for the panties in my hand and took them off me. "How many pairs of these do you own?"

"One."

"Buy more. In every fucking colour under the sun."

I smiled and pressed my body against his, looping my hands around his neck. "You haven't told me where you're taking me tonight."

His hand landed on my ass. He gripped it hard. "My place."

That answer caused an explosion of butterflies in my tummy. Threading my fingers through his hair, I said, "I like that idea."

His eyes searched mine, all the moodiness gone from them. "Yeah." He then slapped my ass and said, "Now get this ass moving."

I grabbed my panties from him and finished packing. Ten minutes later, we were on his bike heading towards his place. The level of anticipation I felt at seeing where King lived almost matched the level of need I had for him. Almost. Because nothing in this world matched that.

Traffic was a bitch, and it took us just under an hour to get to his place situated on the edge of the CBD that was, at most, thirty minutes from mine. As he pulled into the narrow lane, I glanced at the old converted warehouses lining it. Totally not what I was expecting. And that had to be one of the things about King I liked the most. I never knew what to expect. He was a constant surprise.

He pulled the bike into a garage that looked like a bike workshop with a wall of tools and parts. He also had some old couches and a

bar fridge in here. An image of him kicking back with a beer and the guys filled my mind, and I wondered if he did that. So many things still to discover about this man.

Once we were safely inside, he switched the bike off, removed his helmet, and turned his face to mine. "Come here," he bossed, his voice full of gravel. It hit me everywhere it should have, and I moved off the bike fast.

I took my helmet off, enjoying the way his eyes ran all over my body. Heat blazed from him, and I decided to give him a show guaranteed to get him hard. I slowly lifted my dress and slid my fingers down into my panties so I could lower them.

Our eyes locked as I kicked my panties to the side and moved closer to him. He held my gaze as I unzipped him and pulled his cock out. Wrapping my hand around it, I said, "You want my mouth on your dick?"

He gripped my neck and pulled me in for a kiss. Demanding and greedy as usual, he left me wanting more. When he ended it, he growled, "I want your fucking cunt around my dick."

I wanted that, too, but first I needed my lips around it. I loved King's cock. Couldn't get enough of it. Or of that piercing he had. My core clenched just thinking about how good it made sex.

Bending, I slid my mouth down over his dick, swirling my tongue around it as I went. I reached for his balls and cupped them at the same time, loving the deep growl of satisfaction that came from him. A girl could die happy knowing she'd made her man happy.

I sucked him with a slow rhythm until his hand curled around my neck and he forced my head up. His eyes burned with desire, and I knew he'd reached breaking point. He wanted inside of me, and he wanted that now.

Moving swiftly off the bike, he positioned himself behind me, bent me over the bike, and yanked my dress up. "Fuck," he growled as he thrust inside me.

I clutched the seat and held on tightly while he worked me hard. The vibrations of the bike had me wet for him, and judging by the way he slammed into me, this wasn't going to take long. I didn't care. This was just a warm-up for the real thing. If I knew King, he wouldn't let me sleep much tonight.

He came first, his fingers digging into my hips. I followed fast with an orgasm that shattered through me so completely that my legs threatened to give way. I wasn't sure I'd be able to stand, and remained bent over the bike after he pulled out.

He placed his hand on my lower back and asked, "You good?"

I shook my head. "No. You just killed me. I'm not sure I can walk."

Before I knew what was happening, he lifted me into his arms and carried me inside. The garage opened into an expansive living area that was bare except for a lone couch sitting on a large rug, overlooking a glass door that stretched the length of the room.

He placed me down on the couch, and I immediately stood, and said, "I need to use the bathroom." Glancing up at the mezzanine level above us, I asked, "Is it up there?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

I headed upstairs, taking in the exposed brick walls, polished concrete floors, and industrial-type fixtures and fittings. King's home was masculine to the nth degree, not only with all those things but also with the dark greys and browns throughout. The only thing that surprised me was the lack of furniture. He had the couch downstairs, and upstairs he had a king-size bed and another rug, but so far, that was all I could see. The bathroom had a handful of toiletries, but not many belongings. It was almost like he didn't actually live here.

I used the bathroom and made my way back downstairs, finding him in the kitchen. This room appeared more lived in, and I wondered if perhaps he was just in the middle of renovating the place, because it was amazing. I took a good look, loving what I saw. The high ceiling and large windows lent space and light to the room and allowed his use of black for the cupboards and black granite for the kitchen counters to work well. The splash of colour coming from the brick walls accented the black beautifully.

Meeting his gaze, I said, "Your home is not at all what I was expecting."

He rested his ass against the counter and crossed his arms. "What were you expecting?"

"Well for one, a lot more furniture. Other than that, I guess I just wasn't expecting a home that looked like an architect or designer

had been in recently. I wouldn't have picked you for a guy who would hire either of those. Are you renovating at the moment?"

He considered that question for a beat. He then moved to where I stood and said, "I bought this place eight years ago, but I don't live here. I'd intended to renovate it and have a family here. Those plans got fucked up, and I walked away and just let it sit. I came back about a year ago to finish the work so I could sell the place, but for some fucking reason couldn't bring myself to sell it, and never did finish the renovations."

"It looks pretty good to me. You mustn't have much left to do." It looked better than pretty good; the perfection in what I'd seen showed he clearly valued attention to detail.

He looked out through the doorway to the living area. "There's still a fuckload of shit to do." Settling his eyes back on me, he added, "Figure I might get started on that soon."

The way he said that made me feel he meant something deeper by his words, but I couldn't be sure. "By the looks of what you've done so far, you've put your heart into this place, King. I can't wait to see it when you're finished."

He studied me intently, causing flutters in my tummy. I didn't know why, but there was something in the way he watched me. He didn't say anything further about it, though. Instead, he finally dropped his gaze to my breasts and said, "You see that bed upstairs?"

I smiled and nodded. Was this a trick question?

"Get your ass up there and get naked. I'll be up in a minute."

I didn't wait for any further orders.

I did as he said.

But as I went, I grabbed my bag he'd brought in and left on the couch, because I had toys and I'd be making him use them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

King

"Ghost isn't giving us any hell," Nitro said after church early Monday morning. "He's staying with his sister still, and his brother has thrown him some work. I'll keep an eye on him, but from what he's told me so far, he doesn't seem interested in stirring up any hell."

It had been two weeks since Ghost had been released, and I hadn't seen him or heard from him. And that was exactly the way I liked it. I'd had Nitro and Hyde lay down the law with him, making it clear Storm wouldn't hesitate to deal with him if he was even seen looking at the feds.

"Good," I said, turning my attention to Kick. "Where are we at with D'Amato?" The last he'd told me, there was nothing happening there, but my gut told me that if the feds knew about Moses, it was only a matter of time before D'Amato got wind of it, too.

"There's nothing to report. He has a routine that's more anal than any I've ever seen, and he doesn't seem to deviate from it. Monday through Thursday is work and family. Friday is work and then boxing with his *Pulp Fiction* friend." He stopped talking for a moment, grinned, and then said, "It's the craziest shit, the guy looks like that actor from *Pulp Fiction*. And the weekends are mostly with his family. I got Zane to tap into his phone, and there hasn't been any talk

about us or the feds or anything that would lead me to think he knows."

Hyde leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. "So where the fuck are the feds directing their attention? And how fucking long are they gonna drag their feet on this? I'm tired of sitting around waiting for the shit to hit the fan."

He wasn't the only one. Axe's guy had advised me that regardless of what Detective Stark had told us, the case wasn't as tight as they'd thought. Eliminating Romano had helped with that, but also the information he'd given them had proved not as useful as they thought, because after all our visits around Melbourne and Sydney, no one was willing to talk about Storm to the feds. Also, their new witness looked likely to walk. At this point, I was more concerned about the fallout from D'Amato if they talked to him about Moses to confirm that information. And that all circled my thinking back to Stark and the fact I hadn't dealt with her like I should have.

I looked at Hyde. He was pissed I hadn't handled Stark, and had been very fucking vocal about it. "Getting Stark on our payroll is an option," I said.

"You're fucking kidding me, King. If you'd just done what you went there to do, we wouldn't be sitting around discussing one of your shittiest fucking ideas yet. You're going soft, brother."

"You'd do fucking well to watch what the fuck you say," I snarled. "Removing her from the case would only lead to them replacing her, and the body count would just keep rising."

"It'd send them a fucking message," he snapped, his shoulders squaring like he was preparing to go head-to-head with me rather than backing down.

I shoved my chair back and stood, more than ready to meet him where he was. "It'd fucking have them out for our blood more than they already are!" I bellowed, my fists clenching.

He jerked up out of his seat and came at me, fists raised. Before he managed to land a punch, Nitro had his arms around Hyde and halted his progress. "Not a fucking good idea, brother," he said as he spun him around and pushed him away from me. "We're all fucking exhausted and need to get our heads together. This kind of bullshit is what the feds want." He looked angrily between Hyde and me. "They fucking want us to fall apart and take ourselves down, and I

refuse to let that happen. I am not fucking going back inside because you two motherfuckers couldn't hold your shit."

Fuck.

I blew out an angry breath.

He was fucking right.

I glared at Hyde one last time before sitting back down. "Right, this is our fucking plan going forward. I'm gonna pay Stark another visit and push her to do what we need her to do. The fact we took care of her husband should go a long way towards us getting what we want. Kick keeps watching D'Amato until we sort Stark out. Everyone else gets on with our usual shit. With any fucking luck, we'll have figured everything out *and* taken care of Gambarro by the end of this fucking week." I exhaled sharply again. *And then I can spend the weekend fucking my woman without having to think about any of this bullshit.*

Hyde hit me with a filthy look as he stalked out of the room. I ignored it. We'd had worse trouble between us before. This shit would blow over.

"For what it's worth, I would have done what you did with Stark," Devil said after everyone left.

I nodded. "Yeah, brother." I believed he would have. We'd handled some stuff together that had shown me how similar we were in some ways.

He watched me thoughtfully. "You okay with this shit?"

I knew what he was asking. *Had it stirred up memories for me when I'd walked away from Isabel Stark? Had it reminded me that I allowed Margaret's killer to go on living after I discovered he was a single father to a daughter who needed him more than I needed vengeance?*

Devil was the only brother who knew this story of mine. He'd caught me in a bad moment one night, and after some whisky loosened my tongue, I'd shared some shit about that with him.

I nodded and jerked my chin towards the door. "Go. We've got a lot of shit to get through today."

My phone rang as he exited the room.

Ivy.

"Don't tell me you're calling for me to fucking take you somewhere today. I'm busy," I said as I answered it.

"I really need you to swing by, King. There's something wrong with the tap in the shower, and I can't get it to turn off. Brian's out

taking one of the girls to an appointment, and I'm worried about the amount of water we're wasting."

"Jesus," I muttered. "I'll send one of the boys over. Sit tight."

She turned silent before saying, "Oh, okay. I thought if you came, we could talk over some more of that stuff you helped me with the other day."

She'd made me sit and listen to her plans for getting back on her feet. She hadn't asked my opinion on anything, and I hadn't given it, but it had felt like she'd expected me to make offers to be by her side while she got to work on it all. That had thrown me, but I hadn't brought it up. I figured I was reading too much into shit, because surely she realised we didn't have a shot at ever being a couple again. But here we were again, and I knew I had to deal with this before it got out of hand.

"I'll be there in about half an hour," I said and ended the call.

I didn't have the time for this today, but it was something I had to make the time for. I'd meant it when I told Lily that Ivy was in the past. Now I had to make Ivy understand that, too.



"Thank you," Ivy said when I entered the kitchen after fixing the shower. "Brian would have been super stressed about the cost of all that water if he'd come back to a running shower. He seems worried all the time over money."

I dumped my tools on the table. "It's why I like working with him. He runs a tight ship."

"I wasn't saying it was a bad thing, King. He seems like a good guy."

"That's because he is a good fucking guy."

She frowned, coming towards me. "Why are you so short with me today?"

I raked my fingers through my hair. I'd been in a mood from the minute I'd stepped foot inside the place. Knowing I needed to discuss shit with her had me on edge. I was a bastard for what I was about to do. I'd fucked Ivy up in the past, and now I was about to cut her loose again, and that shit didn't sit right in my gut. But I couldn't figure out another way through this.

"We need to talk about some stuff," I said, holding her gaze, trying to get a feel for her mental state. So far, she'd been happy to see me and had jabbered on the whole time I'd worked on the shower. But fuck knew, Ivy could switch gears as fast as I could, so I needed to tread carefully.

"What stuff?"

"You and I stuff."

Her face lit up and she came to me, moving in closer than necessary. "I'm all for that."

Jesus, she thought I meant something I didn't.

I shook my head and took a step back. "No, that's not what this is about. This won't ever be about that."

Her face clouded over with disappointment. "Really? You expect me to believe you would protect me from my husband and then from Brant, bring me to Sydney, set me up here, come whenever I call you over, fix stuff for me, drive me to job interviews, and yet not want to be with me? I don't buy that bullshit for one minute, King. You want us to be together again."

Fucking hell.

I could see where she was coming from, but what the fuck happened to people just fucking looking out for each other because they cared about their safety and happiness? Why the fuck did there have to be conditions and expectations around stuff like this?

"I don't want us to be together again so you need to get that out of your head now. I did all that shit because even after all these years and after everything we've been together, I care about you. Just not in the way you think."

The disappointment on her face morphed to anger. "That is such utter crap and you know it. Men don't do stuff for women they don't wanna fuck."

"That's some twisted fucking thinking, Ivy. Of course they fucking do. And trust me when I say I don't wanna fuck you." I hadn't intended to be hurtful, but I saw that reaction in her eyes.

Before I could stop her, she closed the distance between us, grabbed my face, and kissed me.

It was a hard, desperate kiss, and I felt nothing.

Nothing but the realisation we really had reached the end of the line.

I'd already come to that understanding, but this absolutely and undeniably confirmed it. Where her touch had once sparked the kind of passion that would consume me for days, it now left me empty.

I took hold of her arms and forced her away from me. Staring down at her, I bit out, "Don't ever do that again. When I tell you something, I fucking mean it. And I mean it when I say I don't want to be with you."

She stared at me through tears. Hot, angry tears. Not sad ones. And then the rage came, and I knew this was repressed anger by the violence of it. It was also what she needed to get out of her, so I allowed it all to spew out without interruption. That, I would give her. That, she deserved from me. "I fucking hate you! And I fucking love you! And all I wanna do is forget you, but you are un-fucking-forgettable, King. That"—she jabbed her finger at me—"is the worst part of all this. I've tried for years to put you out of my mind, and I fucking failed. I didn't want to come to you about Tony, because I knew seeing you would kill me, but I did. I fucking came, and I helped you, and *this* is what I get for that? I even told Brant not to hurt your friend, and I thought he'd listened to me—"

My body tensed, every inch of me alert as her words triggered my fury. "What the fuck did you just say?"

She flinched at my tone and tried to move away from me, but I grabbed her arm and held her in place. "Tell me what the fuck you mean by that, and so fucking help you God, if you mean what I think you mean, shit isn't gonna be pretty."

Swallowing hard, she said, "You were right about Brant—he was crazy. Insane probably. I didn't know about his past, but I knew he was the kind of man to do anything for the woman he loved. And he loved me, so I let him close and I let him help me escape Tony. But I swear I didn't know he was going to shoot that woman. He'd told me he was tracking the woman you were seeing, and that he wanted to get back at you for all the stuff you did to me years ago. I told him to drop it, because that stuff was in the past, but he was intent on hurting you through her. I honestly thought he meant he was just going to hurt her. I never imagined killing her was on his mind."

I shifted my grip from her arm to her neck. Holding her tightly, I backed her up against the wall, pressing her hard to it. "Tell me the

fucking truth. You fucking knew he was going there to kill her, didn't you?"

Fear flashed in her eyes as she clawed at my hand around her throat. "Let me go, King! I didn't know. I promise." She struggled to get the words out, but I didn't give a fuck. I was dancing the line between sane and crazy here with her revelation, and it was a fucking taut line close to snapping and taking us all down with it.

Thrusting my face forward, I stared into her eyes. "Fucking tell me the truth, Ivy! At least fucking give me that!"

Tears streamed down her face, landing on my hand, but I ignored them. I didn't care about her tears anymore. "This is the truth. I might hate you, but I love you more. If I'd known his intentions, I would have made sure I stopped him. I wouldn't allow anyone to hurt you like that. Just like I didn't let Tony hurt you."

Hard, angry breaths forced their way out of me as I searched her eyes madly for the truth. It was in the blink, and she hadn't blinked. *She hadn't fucking blinked.*

Fuck.

With one last squeeze of her neck, I let her go and jerked away from her.

We stared at each other, a furious and bitter tension sitting between us. After all these years, this is what we had come down to. She said she loved me more than she hated me, but I didn't think she did. Love didn't lead to actions like hers. It was a false love. It was the kind of love rooted in fear and doubt. She might have thought she still loved me, but that was only because she didn't trust herself enough to love herself and let me go. I could blame myself for her brokenness, but she'd had years to move past what happened between us. She'd had time and resources to help herself, and she'd chosen not to use them. We were all responsible for our own happiness; no one could do a damn thing to make Ivy happy until she decided to make herself happy.

"I'm going to walk out that door and I'm never coming back. You need something, you ask Brian. He sees fit to ask me for help with it, I'll do what I can. Other than that, this is the end of the road for us, Ivy. And as much as you may not believe this, I just want you to be fucking happy."

Her tears still fell, but they didn't register with me.

Not like they once did.

We were well and truly finished.



I got sidetracked with club business that gave me a headache on my way to see Detective Stark, which meant by the time I finally tracked her down and stood in front of her, my skull felt like it had been hit by a sledgehammer a hundred fucking times. Between the bullshit that had gone down with Ivy this morning and the hours I'd spent on club shit, I was in no mood for her to say no to my proposal.

Isabel Stark was grieving the loss of her husband. Well, to the world she was. She'd taken a few days off, so I found her at her home again. She was not grieving the loss of her husband. She was cleaning her oven when I got to her.

She met me at her front door with cleaning gloves on, her hair a mess, and more light in her eyes than I'd seen the last time I called on her. Staring at me through her screen door, she said, "Are you here to finish the job you came for the other day?"

I arched a brow. "If you're asking me if I'm here to put a bullet in your head, the answer is no. However, if you're asking if I'm here to save my club, that would be a yes. Do not send me away without giving me what I want, Isabel. I've had a fucking shit of a day and you won't like the consequences of an incorrect answer."

She unlocked the door. "You better come in then."

I followed her into the kitchen where she pulled her gloves off before looking at me, and asking, "What do you want from me?"

"I want you to drop the fucking case against me and my club. I want you to walk the fuck away from it and never look back. And I'll fucking pay you to do that."

She considered that. "It's tempting, but I don't need your cash. My husband left me a great deal of money. So much that I don't have to work another day in my life if I don't want to."

"Well that leaves you and me with a big fucking problem then."

She took a deep breath. "No, not really. Not if you agree to a deal I have for you."

"What?"

"I've worked my job for too long now that I know how shit goes down. I put you away, and maybe some of your club, it still doesn't

fix the problems on the streets. You guys are a dime-a-fucking-dozen. And you just keep coming at me. I'm tired of working the system legally and never achieving my goals. I do this job so my daughter can be safe from men like you, but I'm jaded and don't buy into the bullshit anymore that what I do makes a difference." She paused for a beat. "But then you showed up here to kill me and didn't go through with it, because of the very reason I do my job—because you want to protect my kid from bad people. That surprised the hell out of me, Zachary. I did not see that coming from you. So here's what I propose—I leave you out there doing your thing, and while doing that, you help me keep the streets clear of as much bullshit as you can."

"You want me to work with you?"

"Not officially. This would be between you and me only. I'll bury the case against Storm, and in return, you'll do everything you can to keep the assholes you work with in line. You appear to have that power, so I figure why not use it for good as well as whatever the hell else you use it for. Keep the streets free of war, and I'll keep you free of jail."

"Fuck, that's a big fucking ask. Streets free of war aren't something you'll ever see."

"I understand that, but I think we can agree you have the power to control a lot of it. You just need to decide to do that."

"I guarantee you our ideas of war are two different things. Some of it is necessary, and that shit I won't ever stop. So if this deal is gonna go down between us, you need to understand that sometimes I'm gonna handle business in ways you won't like. Having said that, I'm all for keeping motherfuckers in line, so I'm on board with that part of it."

"Good. We have a deal then. And now you can get the hell out of my house and never come back here. In future, you have no reason to come to me. I will come to you if there is a problem."

I moved closer to her and dropped my voice to a dark rumble. "If I have reason to come to you, I fucking will. Do not make the mistake of thinking you have any power here. You don't. If this deal goes south, I will find another way to get what I want."

Without waiting for a response, I turned and strode towards her door.

I'd taken a few steps when she said, "Thank you." The words were delivered with a softer tone, and I knew she wasn't referring to anything we'd just discussed.

Looking back at her, I gave a quick nod, and then I exited her home.

I never imagined the day I would get into fucking bed with the cops, but here it fucking was. I would play this game with Detective Stark and see where it got us. If she tried to switch her rules up at any point, I'd abandon the deal and force my own upon her. But for now, this would do.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Lily

“What the fuck is that music?” King asked, entering his kitchen on Wednesday night.

I’d dropped the kids over to Linc after work, stopped at the supermarket to buy the ingredients to cook dinner for us, and had arrived here about an hour ago. He’d given me a key to the place two days ago and told me to use it whenever. I’d told him I really wasn’t sure when that would be since he didn’t have any furniture in the place, to which he’d called me a smartass and told me he would buy some. That had caused butterflies in my tummy and that in turn had resulted in him receiving a blowjob he’d loved so much that he had then proceeded to fuck me for three hours straight. Needless to say, Tuesday had been a long, exhausting day at work.

I looked up from my laptop and eyed him, noting the tension lining his face. “It’s Taylor Swift. Surely you’ve heard of her.”

He put the beer he’d bought in the fridge and came to me. Placing his hand on the back of my neck, he bent and dropped a kiss on my lips before continuing on his way out to the living room. “Never fucking heard that song, and never fucking wanna hear it again,” he said as he moved.

I smiled.

All was good in my world.

My man was his usual moody self, my kids were with their father, my sister was with her guy, my mum was out on another date with the library dude, and I had just figured out how to perfect a lemon cheesecake that had given me grief the last time I tried to make it. King would benefit from that on Saturday night, and then I would benefit from him being happy. It turned out he had a sweet tooth. And it turned out that I could get him to do all kinds of shit when that sweet tooth was satisfied.

I shuffled the playlist, and a One Direction song came on. Grinning, I called out, "Is this one better?"

He didn't reply, but when he entered the kitchen again a couple of minutes later, he said, "Your taste in music is shit. Anyone ever told you that?"

"Only every guy I've ever dated." His features darkened, reminding me of his demand I never mention another man to him again. I'd momentarily forgotten. *Shit*. In an effort to shift his thoughts from that, I said, "Who's your favourite band?"

My gaze dropped to take in his change of T-shirt into a clean, white tee. I'd never seen King wear white before. It kinda threw me, but in a good way. He'd also taken his boots off and walked barefoot towards me. I loved it when he wore no shoes. I felt like it showed his relaxed state, and that was a state I wanted him in a lot more. I didn't like the idea of my man stressing over shit all the time.

When he reached me, he slid onto the barstool beside me at the breakfast bar. "Is this gonna be twenty questions?"

I smiled as I ran my fingers through his long hair that had fallen across his face. It reached just below his beard now, and I had to admit, it did good things to me. I'd never been into this kind of haircut on a man before, but on King, I loved it. "Will you play with me?"

His eyes searched mine. "Twenty is a fuckload. Hit me with five."

"You play hard to get."

"Metallica."

"Does that mean I only have four left?"

"Yeah, and you're running out of time."

Shit, I had so many questions that my brain scrambled to pick the best. In the end, I decided to keep this light and fun. The deeper stuff could wait. I wasn't convinced he was in the mood for it tonight.

"Favourite meal?"

He didn't have to stop to think about it. "Your roast chicken and that gravy you make with it."

Oh God, he was trying to kill me here.

"Favourite number?"

"Who the fuck has a favourite number?"

"I do."

"What is it?"

"Seven."

"And what the fuck makes it your favourite?"

"It's my lucky number."

"How the hell is a number lucky, Lily?"

"I choose it when I put the Lotto in or when I have to take a number at the butcher or—"

"You don't just take the number at the front?"

"No. I search for one that has a seven in it."

"That makes no fucking sense. You'd be waiting there longer than you have to."

I shrug. "So?"

He shook his head and swivelled so he faced me. Spreading his legs, he reached for my stool and pulled me closer. "You do the strangest fucking things, woman."

I lifted my legs so I could wrap them around him. "Pull me closer." Once he had me right next to him, I put my legs around him and rested my feet on the stool behind him. I then placed my hands on his chest. "What things do I do that are strange?"

He rested his hands on my legs. "Lucky fucking numbers for one, but let's list this shit out. You watch Elvis movies like they're going out of fucking fashion, you have bows everywhere on your bags, bracelets, shoes, and underwear, you eat chips with chocolate, you eat fries with ice cream, you read five books at once, you have hard rules around what butter and cheese you will buy, you insist on fucking texting me all the time, you insist on sleeping with the fan on every fucking night, you don't like your food touching other food on your plate, your cookbooks have to be in alphabetical order." He paused, arching his brows. "I could go on."

"Don't knock my bows! You seemed to like them on my panties."

"I fucking like anything to do with your panties. I'd like it a hell of a lot more if you never wore them again, though."

"I bet you would," I murmured, leaning in to kiss him.

The kiss started out slow, but quickly worked its way to being one of King's demanding kisses. By the time he let my lips go, he had a hand inside my bra. Stroking my nipple, he said, "How long do we have before dinner is ready?"

"You're seriously going to stop whatever you have in mind just so we can eat?"

His eyes flashed with heat. "Once I get started with you, we won't be stopping for dinner. I'm also not giving up anything you've cooked, so yeah, how fucking long before dinner is ready?"

I grabbed his face with both hands and kissed him long and hard again. Pulling away breathlessly, I said, "It's ready."

"Fucking hell, woman, why didn't you just say that?"

I grinned. "Because I like to work you up a little."

He smacked the side of my thigh. "Yeah, I've fucking worked that shit out." Attempting to pull my legs from around him, he added, "Get your ass up and serve me my food."

I gripped his hips with my legs, refusing to move. "Oh really, Mr Caveman? You seriously think I'll respond to that shit?"

He curled his hand around my neck and pulled my face to his. Against my ear, he growled, "The longer you fucking sit here arguing, the longer till I get inside you. And I've been thinking of nothing but that today, so stop fucking arguing with me."

I stopped arguing with him. I mean, I didn't care that he went all caveman on me. I just liked to push him to see how demanding he'd get, because that shit turned me on.

As I served up our dinner, he sat on the stool watching me intently. King was always watching, always taking note. He'd proved that when he rattled off his list of strange things he'd observed about me. I loved that he already knew those things, but what I really loved was knowing he paid attention.

I passed our plates to him and said, "We didn't finish your five things. I still have a few questions."

With his gaze firmly locked to mine, he said, "We have dinner. Then we have my time with your pussy. Then we have sleep. Maybe after that, we have five fucking questions, but don't fucking count on it, because the way I'm feeling, I'm gonna need a whole lotta time with your pussy."

I sat next to him and picked up my fork. "I really like your place."

His eyes found mine. "I like it now you're here."

Butterflies. Tummy.

God, this man.

After that, we ate. Then he did all those things he said he would. We never did get to five fucking questions again, but I'd make sure we played that game a lot in the future.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

King

Lily: How do you feel about cream as a colour?

I stared at the text from Lily. Fuck knew where she was going with this. It was her day off, so I expected this shit to continue throughout the day. But I really didn't have the time to be going back and forth texting about fucking colours right now so I rang her.

"Hey. Did you get my text?" she asked.

"Yeah. What's this about?"

"Well," she started and then stopped for a beat before continuing, "so I was shopping at Target, and I saw this... Wait, first tell me your feelings on girlfriends who take over your life."

"Fuck, Lily, I'm busy. Can this wait until tonight?"

"No," she snapped. "It'll take less than five minutes. Surely you have five minutes."

I forced out a long breath. "Spit it out. What have you done?"

"I may have just bought you a new blanket for your bed. And before you say anything, it's getting colder at night, and I worry about you being cold there. I mean, not that you really sleep there on your own anymore, but you might, and I don't want you to get a cold. But I can return it if this is overstepping the girlfriend line."

Fuck, she hit me fair in the gut with that. "Don't fucking return it."

Silence, and then—"Okay," soft as fuck, causing my gut to tighten again.

"We done?"

"Yeah. I'm going to head over to your place now and drop this blanket off. I'm going to do some washing and stuff, too. I'll try not to text you too much." With that, she ended the call and I leaned back in my chair thinking about her taking over my life. She had no fucking clue that she didn't need to buy me shit to do that; she'd taken it over the minute I'd decided to make her mine. And she could do whatever the fuck she wanted to my place, because I intended for it to be hers at some point, too.

I'd just finished the call with Lily when Axe rang.

"What's up, brother? And where are you?" I asked. After he and Zane had left Sydney, they'd headed back home to Brisbane, but Axe often went away for work if Zane needed him on a job out of town.

"I'm at home. Just checking in on you to see how things have shaped up. The feds still on your back?"

"No, I took care of that shit the other day. We're getting back to business as normal now, thank fuck."

"Good to hear. You speak to Zane yet? Clear shit between you two?"

"Yeah." He'd fucking pissed me off by not giving me all the information I needed, but we'd cleared the air. We'd known each other for too long and had been through too much not to fix shit between us. And I'd decided that perhaps he had a fucking point that I needed to trust him more, because he was right—he hadn't ever let me down.

"So I'm also calling to let you know I'm taking off for a while. Justine walked out on me and has moved in with the motherfucker she cheated on me with. They're talking marriage, and I can't fucking watch this bullshit, so I'm taking some time off work and getting the hell out of town."

"Fuck, Axe. Where are you going?"

"Fuck knows. Where the wind blows for all I care. The baby isn't due for another six months. I'll be back in plenty of time for that. She's made it clear she doesn't want me around, and I'm done fighting."

"Well, you know my thoughts on the matter. It'll do you fucking good to get away. Keep in touch so I know you're not dead in an alley somewhere."

"Will do," he said, ending the call.

I hated that Justine had fucked him over like this, but I was more than happy he was out of that shitfight of a relationship. With any fucking luck, he'd find a better woman fast. Axe had never been good on his own. He preferred to have a woman by his side. I just hoped the next one was the complete fucking opposite of Justine.

I left the office and headed out to the bar. Kree met my gaze as I entered, and hit me with a smile. She'd moved past our previous problems now that her life had gotten back to normal. I appreciated a lot of things about Kree, but the fact she didn't hold grudges had to be one of the best things about the woman. She was low fucking maintenance and handled her business with little fuss, and that shit made life far fucking easier when dealing with her.

I'd come looking for Hyde and found him at a table in the corner. Pulling up a seat, I said, "We need to go over Winter's proposals. You got some time now?"

He nodded. "I've got a couple of hours."

Our disagreement of a week ago was long forgotten. Neither of us held onto that kind of shit. And he'd accepted the deal I'd made with Stark. He'd actually fucking liked the idea which had surprised me.

We ran over the proposals Winter had sent through for the Melbourne operation, and came to some decisions about how we thought it best to proceed. I may have hated that city, but it was shaping up to be a profitable venture for us down there. We'd almost finished working shit out when my phone rang.

Bronze.

I hadn't heard from him in almost a month so I'd figured he'd taken my advice and moved on with his life.

"Bronze," I answered the call. "Why are you still calling me?"

"I've been digging. I told you I would. And I have something you're gonna wanna hear."

"Keep talking."

"I've been tracking Ryland, trying to get to the bottom of whose payroll he was on. He dropped out of sight, which I'm guessing you know, but I followed his trail to South America. Someone paid him a

shitload of cash to disappear, and that someone was Dante D'Amato."

I gripped my phone harder. "You sure about that? One hundred fucking percent sure?"

"I'm sure."

Jesus fucking Christ.

"I appreciate the info. And just letting you know, I've sorted my problems with the feds, but I doubt that extends to you, so you need to get as far from Storm as possible."

He turned quiet for a moment. "Watch over Hailee for me, King."

"Yeah."

I ended the call and dialled Lily without wasting a second. "You still at my place?" I demanded, not giving her a chance to get a word in.

"Yes, why—"

"Do not leave there. I am on my way over now."

"King, what's going on?"

"I'll tell you when I get there, but do not leave and do not let anyone in."

"Umm, does that mean I have to kick your neighbour out?"

My blood turned to ice, cooling my veins as it flowed. "What neighbour, Lily?"

She didn't answer. Instead, all I heard were muffled cries before the line went dead.

I pushed up out of my chair. Eyes to Hyde, I bellowed, "It was fucking D'Amato! All this fucking time! And now he has Lily."

Hyde jerked up. "Fucking hell!"

We rounded up everyone we could find and roared out of the clubhouse. My heart beat furiously the whole fucking way there. I couldn't recall the last time I'd been so fucking stressed. If D'Amato hurt Lily, I would hunt down every last member of his family and rip them apart limb by fucking limb. I would make them bleed in ways they never knew they could, and he would wish he'd never laid eyes on my woman.



Hyde wanted to be strategic about how we got inside my place to Lily, but I didn't have the patience for that. D'Amato knew we were coming, so there was no point fucking about getting in there. I gave Hyde half a minute of airtime with his objections to my plan, and then I fucking stormed the place.

"King, you move fast," D'Amato said when we entered my living room.

My eyes went straight to Lily who sat on the couch with her hands bound, her mouth gagged. She met my gaze, and I saw the fear in hers. *Fuck*. I had done this to her when all I'd tried to do was fucking keep her safe.

"Has he touched you?" I demanded of her.

She shook her head. *Thank fuck*.

D'Amato moved to her, pressing his gun to her temple. "You can't imagine how happy I was when it came to my attention you'd found a new plaything. After I killed your previous one, I felt a little empty. I decided that was because you didn't get to see me do it, so this time around I'm fixing that mistake of mine. This time you will have front row seats. All I have to decide now is how long to make you wait for the final performance."

"You're fucking insane," I snarled. "All this for a nephew you hardly knew and didn't like?"

He pushed his gun harder against Lily's head, rage written all over him. "No, all this for my sister whose son I presume you killed. I might not have liked the boy, but after his death, she spiralled into depression and addiction, and killed herself. I lived through those five years of her hell, and I've lived through the rest of these years in my own hell. And that was all on you and your fucking club. I just never knew who to blame until Ryland brought me the information."

I assessed the situation. I had six men at my back, ready to defend me. I could lunge at D'Amato and hope like hell he shot me rather than Lily, at which time my men could save her. My concern was he'd shoot her and take whatever consequences that meant for him. His only goal here was to see me suffer, and killing her was his ticket to that.

I decided to keep him talking while my brain ran through other possible scenarios.

"I didn't kill the baby, but I did deal with your nephew. He was a fool who couldn't keep his dick in his pants. When the club whore turned up with the child and dumped it with him, he panicked about his girlfriend finding out, and killed the whore. It was a clusterfuck for my club, because she had family connections we didn't need to be dealing with if they found out. I only went to your nephew to give him a piece of my fucking mind, but he lost his shit and ended up dead in the process."

"Where's the fucking child now?"

"That was the thing in all of this that threw us—Moses disappeared. Someone took him from his cot. We never worked out who, and we never found him." It was the truth, but I was hoping it rattled him to the point of stepping away from Lily and coming to me.

It didn't.

Instead, he yanked her up off the couch, pushed her in front of him, and put the gun to her head again. Fear flashed in her eyes, but she showed no other emotion. No tears. No muffled cries or screams. My woman stood fucking tall and took what he did to her without anything but that flicker of fear as she watched me.

"Maybe I won't kill her, King. Maybe she'll simply disappear. I'll take her with me and you'll never see her again. Never find her." His voice dropped to a menacing evil tone. "You'll never fucking know what filthy things I've done to her." He shifted the gun from her head to run it slowly over her body. "She looks like a fun plaything, and the more I think about this, the more I like the idea."

I gritted my teeth.

No fucking way was he walking out of here with her.

That would happen over my dead fucking body.

I found her eyes again, silently begging her to stay strong, but she didn't need my encouragement. Lily *was* fucking strong, and she wasn't showing an ounce of fear now. That had disappeared from her eyes. The only thing I saw there now was determination.

D'Amato continued talking, but Lily drew my attention from his voice when her eyes widened and she started shifting her eyes to the side and back, over and over. Like she was trying to give me some kind of signal. Problem was, I had no idea what the fuck she meant. I glanced to the right in the direction she kept moving her eyes, but the only thing there was the couch and above that, the mezzanine level, so that couldn't be what she was trying to get across to me.

"Are you listening to me, King?" D'Amato barked. At the same time, he threw his arms up in the air, showing his frustration.

Lily took her moment. She turned to her right, spinning around to face D'Amato, and pushed him hard as best she could with bound hands. He stumbled back, but he didn't fall. I rushed at them, trying like fuck to get Lily away from him. While I did that, Hyde bellowed, "To the right!" and the sound of gunfire filled my home.

I had no idea what was happening behind me; my only focus was Lily. Unable to get my aim on D'Amato without the likelihood of hitting Lily, I lunged for him rather than shooting him. Lily was in the fucking way, so she went down with us. Our guns went flying, but I didn't need a fucking weapon. I would kill this motherfucker with my bare fucking hands.

Fists flew and legs kicked while D'Amato and I fought like hell to kill each other. Thank fuck Lily got out of harm's way. I couldn't see her, but I knew she wasn't anywhere near him. I managed to get my hands around his neck, and I reefed him up to a standing position, his back to my chest. However, he then used all his force to ram me backwards against the brick wall, winding the fuck out of me. The loud crack of my head as it hit the wall filled my ears and slowed me down as pain radiated through my skull. It only slowed me for a moment, but it was enough for D'Amato to gain the upper hand.

Turning quickly, he faced me and wrapped both hands around my neck. Squeezing the fucking life out of me, he snarled, "Change of plans, I'll kill *you* first, and then your little plaything."

My gaze focused behind him, taking in what was happening there. D'Amato had brought his own men with him, and they had engaged my men in battle. If I was to save my life and Lily's, I had to fucking do it now before he choked me, because I had no backup to rely on.

And then Lily's voice cut through the battle sounds. "Change of plans, motherfucker. *I'll* kill you, and then my man will kill yours." My eyes landed on her as she put my gun to D'Amato's head and pulled the trigger.

I wasted no time pushing him out of the way, ignoring the blood and shit that splattered over me as she shot him. Ripping the gun from her, I headed into the fucking fray and lost my fucking shit, shooting at every last fucking cunt who'd threatened my woman's and my men's lives.

A fucking hurricane of fury raged out of me as I took down anyone who came at me. That he had put Lily through this drew my demons to the surface. They wanted to dance, and I welcomed that with open fucking arms. So we fucking danced. And when we were done, the place was a mess of dead bodies and blood splatter that fucking sang to me. It was like a goddam orchestra of death and destruction playing in my head, dragging me closer and closer to the edge of no return where the music played twenty-four-fucking-seven.

I'd fought against following that music my whole life.

Had kept my distance.

But it fucking called today.

When my woman almost died because of me, it fucking called.

As the last man standing took my bullet, I looked for her.

I needed to touch her.

Needed to know she was okay.

"King."

I turned to her voice, finding her standing where I'd left her near D'Amato's body. She watched me with that same fierce look of determination she'd had before. So fucking strong.

I closed the distance between us and she moved into my arms. Wrapping hers around me tightly, she said, "I thought you were going to die," right before her first tear fell.

I held her until she stopped crying. Hyde called Nitro who'd been out on a job all day, and asked him to organise a cleaning crew. The place would take fucking hours to clean, but that was the least of my worries. My only concern was Lily and getting her the fuck out of here.

"I'm taking Lily home," I said to Hyde.

He nodded. "Yeah, brother. We'll get this shit sorted. Don't bother coming back."

I cleaned us up and organised for Devil to drive us to her place. I sat in the back with her, not letting her out of my arms. The emotions coursing through me were unlike any I had ever experienced. For the first time in my life, I had felt fear. It was a foreign feeling to me, and not one I ever fucking wanted to feel again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Lily

I'd always wondered if there would be a moment in my life that punched me in the gut and winded me so badly I would struggle to recover. I'd thought I had come close when I discovered Linc cheated on me. I then thought I'd come closer when we divorced. And then when Brynn had been shot, I knew I'd reached that moment. However, when that man had threatened King's life today, I finally knew I'd found the moment that would wind me so badly I wouldn't be able to breathe for a long time.

I'd wanted him to kill me instead.

It had been the most selfish moment of my life, because I never wanted to leave my children without a mother, but in that split second when I thought King would die with that man's hands around his neck, I wanted to offer my life in exchange for King's.

I hadn't been able to breathe.

I hadn't been able to think straight.

All I had wanted was to give my life for my man's.

And then my brain had kicked into gear, and I'd done some straight talking and reminded myself I was a mother with responsibilities. I'd told myself to find a way to save both of us and then I'd done that.

I'd picked up King's gun. I'd been completely focused on my goal. I'd killed a man. Something I never imagined doing.

That moment had winded me, and I was sure it was going to take a long time for me to breathe properly again.

Devil had driven us to my place, and King hadn't let go of me until we were there safely. He'd told me to go inside while he went over some stuff with Devil. Brynn had gone out for the day with Jamie, so the house was quiet as I slowly made my way to my bedroom. My legs felt heavy, my heart, too. And my head was filled with a non-stop replay of that man's gun pressed to my head. I felt the gun still now. Every time I saw it in my head, I felt it like it was still digging into my skin. It continued to make my heart race with fear. And as much as tears threatened, I refused to allow them. I refused to allow his actions today to make me run or hide away from the world. I was stronger than that.

I had just sat down on the edge of my bed when the front door slammed closed. I jumped at the noise in a way I didn't usually jump, but I closed my eyes and breathed through it.

And then King stalked into the room, a rush of wild, angry energy that completely threw me.

Coming at me, his eyes ferocious, he roared, "Don't you *ever* put yourself in harm's way like you did today!"

My heart banged against my chest at his outburst, and I shot up off the bed. "What the hell, King? What's gotten into you?"

"You!" he barked, jabbing his finger in the air at me. "*You've* fucking gotten into me. If you are *ever* in a situation like that again, Lily, you fucking run when you can. You do not fucking hang around and pick my fucking gun up and shoot someone. You get your ass out of there as fast as you can and you save your fucking life. You do *not* think about me."

His anger bled into me. It combined with the adrenaline racing through me, and I slammed my hands against his chest and yelled, "I will never not think about you! And don't you ask me not to. If your life is being threatened, I will do anything and everything I can to save you."

He gripped one of my wrists, squeezing it tightly as he pulled me to him. If I thought his eyes looked ferocious before, I wasn't sure what I'd call them now, because they blazed with more fire than I'd ever seen from him. "This is not something up for negotiation. You

have never held a gun before. You have never shot a gun before. That situation could have turned out a whole lot fucking differently than it did today. You could have been killed. Do you fucking understand that?"

I glared at him. "Do you fucking understand that *you* could have died?"

His other hand snapped around my neck and his eyes bored into mine. "I live with that fucking understanding every day of my life. You do not. And I'll be fucked if you're going to start now."

"So teach me how to use a gun. Teach me how to defend myself. Make me as fucking indestructible as you, King, but don't you ever dare take away my ability or right to defend my man's life. I won't stand for it. I'm your woman, and I have your back just as much as you have mine."

His nostrils flared as his fingers dug into my neck. "Fucking hell," he rasped before his mouth crashed down on mine and he kissed me so savagely it hurt. But I wanted that pain. I needed it. And I gave it back to him just as savagely, and when we finally came apart, we were both breathless with desire.

We tore at each other's clothes until we were both naked. His hands then came to my body with the same brutal energy his mouth had, and he wrestled me to the ground. When he had me pinned under him, his hands holding mine down, he thrust his dick inside me harder than he ever had and growled, "I cannot fucking lose you."

He pulled out and slammed back in.

I put my legs around him while trying to struggle out of the hold he had on my hands. He kept pounding into me as I demanded, "Let me go. I need my hands on you."

He didn't let me go.

He bent his face to mine and bit my bottom lip before kissing me.

He then bossed, "Stop fucking arguing with me."

"Stop fucking bossing me."

"Jesus fuck," he said, steam practically billowing from him. He thrust in hard again. "You're gonna spend the rest of your life fucking challenging me, aren't you?"

"Yes, because you're gonna spend the rest of your life not listening to me."

He tightened his hold on my hands even though his hold was already hard as hell. On another thrust, he ordered, "Tell me you

won't put yourself in danger."

"Let me go first."

"Fuck, Lily, fucking tell me and then I'll think about it."

"Fine, I'm not gonna put myself in danger, but that's because you're gonna show me how to use your gun."

He stopped all movement and stared down at me. Shaking his head as he let my hands go, he said, "I fucking love you, woman, but you are gonna cause me no fucking end of headaches."

I stilled, all previous thoughts whooshing out of my mind. Gripping his biceps, I said, "You cannot tell me you fucking love me while shaking your head at me, King. If you really mean it, you need to tell me while not shaking your head."

He continued staring down at me, silently now. And then he angled his face so he could kiss me. This time it wasn't as savage or as urgent. This time it felt like he had all the time in the world to devote to my mouth. I lost myself in this kiss. I never wanted it to end. When King took it upon himself to give a girl a kiss she would never forget, he outdid himself. And when he did finally let my lips go, I felt every ounce of his hesitation to do so. "I fucking love you, and I'll show you how to use my gun, but I will do everything in my fucking power to ensure you never need to use it like you did today."

All my fight disappeared as I smiled up at him. "I love you, too, baby," I said softly.

"Fuck," he muttered as he thrust in again. "You fucking kill me."

He then spent the next two hours fucking me before wrapping me in his arms in bed and holding me close. We didn't speak for a long time until I finally said, "I've listened to everything you've had to say about me not trying to protect you, and you need to know something. Your job is to worry and protect. My job is to nurture. And sometimes, part of nurturing is protecting. Just so you know."

His lips twitched ever so slightly and then he kissed me before saying, "Are you good if I get back to the clubhouse and take care of some shit?" He watched me intently for my answer, almost like he wasn't convinced leaving me was a good idea.

I nodded. "I'm made of some tough stuff, dude. Today was hard and it sucked and I'm not keen to ever have another day like it, but I'm okay. My kids and sister are going to be home soon, and I'm gonna spend the afternoon hugging them tightly and loving on

them. And then you're gonna come over tonight and love on me. So yeah, I'm good."

He lifted a brow. "Dude?"

I grinned. "Yeah. Dude."

He kissed me one last time before leaving the bed and dressing.

After he'd left, I thought about what I'd said to him. I did feel like I was made of tough stuff, but I was shaken by the events of the day. I wouldn't make a huge song and dance about that, though. King had enough on his plate, and if I believed one thing, it was that while I would share my life with him, I would do what I could not to add to his worries. Life was never easy, but every hardship built a little more strength and a little more character. And I had the grit to weather any storm so long as I had him by my side. He could do the worrying. I would do the nurturing. And together we could protect and look out for each other.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

King

"You want a beer, King?" Kree asked late Friday afternoon as the boys started rolling in after taking care of business for the day.

I shook my head. "I'm heading over to Lily's soon."

She smiled as she wiped the top of the bar. "She's good for you." At the lift of my brow, she said, "I saw you smile today. She's good for you."

Kick sat on the stool next to me, grinning as he overheard what Kree said. "I saw him smile yesterday, too."

"Fucking hell," I muttered. After Kree had moved on to take someone else's order, I said to Kick, "You sort Brian out?"

"Yeah, I gave him that cash and took care of the repairs that needed doing around the place. And he said to tell you Ivy has found a job."

"Good."

Hyde joined us, a pissed off look on his face. "I just heard the news report on Gambarro. We should have moved sooner on him before they arrested the asshole."

"Yeah, brother," I agreed. "But we've waited this fucking long to get to him, we can be patient for a while longer."

Hyde frowned. "What the fuck, King? Did you take some happy fucking pills or some shit today?"

I moved off my stool and grinned. "Think about it, Hyde. Gambarro fucked a lot of people off who are in prison because of him. Way I see it is that now he gets fucked over in there while they all take their turn with him, and then we can either have him taken care of inside or we can wait our turn and take care of him ourselves when he gets out. Either way, he's gonna get a lot of what's coming to him and we won't have to work as hard to make that shit happen."

The feds had arrested the motherfucker this morning. He'd been my first gift to Isabel Stark. I'd thought long and hard about whether to hand shit over to her so she knew where to look for her evidence, but in the end, I decided my club had been through enough. We were finally beginning to get back to normal business; I didn't wanna put them through another hard battle. I'd let Gambarro go to prison and see where the dust settled. Patience might not have ever been a strength of mine, but a man could fucking change.

A text came through on my phone.

Lily: I think I'm about to take up smoking again.

Me: Why

Lily: Zara.

Me: Fuck

Lily: My thoughts exactly. She has a new boyfriend. God let me down.

I had no fucking idea what she meant about God letting her down, and I wasn't about to get into it with her.

Me: I'm on my way

Lily: Hurry. And have a smoke on the way so you smell like cigarettes. You may save me from taking them up again.

Jesus, this woman.



"Lily," Hannah was saying as I entered Lily's kitchen an hour later, "do you have another dress I can borrow tomorrow?"

Lily had her ass in the air while she bent over searching the cupboard for a container. I settled against the counter, crossed my arms and enjoyed the view.

"Are you seeing the library dude again?" Lily asked while she rummaged. I could tell by the way her actions were becoming jerky that she was growing impatient trying to locate the container. Without waiting for her mother's response, she muttered, "Ma, have you taken my red Tupperware container home? I could have sworn it was in here the other day."

Hannah, who had her back to me, moved to another cupboard and opened it to search in there. "No," she said, and then, catching sight of me, she stopped and hit me with a smile. "Hello, King. I didn't see you standing there. Have you seen that red Tupperware container Lily always insists on using?"

Lily straightened and turned to me. Her eyes went wide and she pulled the face she used when her mother was driving her crazy. She then said to her mother in a snappy tone, "I don't *always* use it, but it's the best one I have."

I jerked my chin at the cupboard next to the one where the glasses lived. "It's in there."

Lily located the container and shot me a smile and a "Thank you" before saying to her mother, "Ma, why don't you go and hang with Brynn? I've got everything under control in here."

Her mother lifted her brows. "I really don't think you do, darling."

As Lily pulled another face, I pushed off from the counter and said, "Hannah, I'll help Lily."

A smile spread across her face. "Oh, you are a good man, King. Thank you." With that, she exited the kitchen, leaving us in peace.

Lily came straight to me, gripping my jacket. She leant in close and inhaled deeply. "Oh, good God, you smell good." She then face-planted against my chest and said, "Between her and Zara, I'm not sure I'll survive this weekend." She lifted her head and met my gaze. "You're free tomorrow, right?"

I curled my hand around her neck. "What for?"

"Ah, smart man. Don't agree to shit until you know what it is. So, Zara has a date with this new boy, and I was thinking you could get eyes on her." She bit her bottom lip waiting for my reply.

My lips twitched and I let her neck go. "Get eyes on her? When the fuck did you start talking like that?"

She smacked my chest lightly. "Since I met you I'm saying all kinds of shit I never used to say, thank you very much. You're a very bad influence." She paused. "So is that a yes?"

"Where are they going?"

"To the movies. I'm dropping her off and picking her up, and I've told her only one-hour extra time after the movie finishes. It's that hour I'm concerned about."

I didn't tell her she should have been worried about a fuck of a lot more than that hour. I tipped her chin up. "Is this how you want every date she goes on to go down?"

Her eyes widened. "You were the one who told me you wouldn't let a daughter out without eyes on her."

"Yeah, but just because I would do shit a certain way doesn't mean it's how you would do it."

"You don't think I should do this with Zara?"

"You've started talking to her about this shit. You've got open lines with her. Don't fuck that trust up."

She thought about that for a moment. "That was totally not what I was expecting from you. You were supposed to be my go-to guy for this heavy work."

I grinned. "I never said I wouldn't take on the job of sorting out the kid she's dating."

Frowning, she said, "You've lost me."

"I'll drop her off, and while I'm there, I'll find the kid and have a chat to him. I'll lay the fucking law down with him. And if you're not happy with how something goes down, I'll handle it."

She moved close, pressing her body against mine. "Now we're talking. This sounds like a good deal."

I placed my hand on her ass and bent to kiss her. "Fuck," I murmured after I'd had her lips, "I've been thinking about that for hours."

Pushing me away, she said, "Okay, you need to take your ass out of here so I can finish getting dinner ready."

I watched her for a few moments while she located a saucepan and filled it with water. Fuck, I could watch her for hours and never grow bored, but I needed to leave the kitchen so we had half a chance at eating dinner tonight. My need for her body was intense tonight.

I grabbed a beer out of the fridge and headed into the lounge room.

Jamie was on his way out as I entered. He grinned at me. "Hey, man."

I jerked my chin at him as he walked past, and sucked back some beer. I then took a seat on the couch next to Robbie who sat watching his favourite show on his iPad.

He glanced at me. "You wanna watch?"

I smiled and shook my head. "I'm gonna check out the footy."

"It hasn't started yet."

"Who's playing?"

"The Bulldogs and Raiders."

"You gonna watch with me?"

He nodded. "Yeah." He went back to his show for a few moments before looking at me again. "We should get a movie tomorrow night."

"Yeah. Your pick."

He grinned. "Cool." And then he was back to his show, and I flicked through the channels on the TV until I found what I was looking for.

Our peace was shattered when the girls all came in about fifteen minutes later. The couches filled with Lily, her sister, mother, and daughters, and the noise of their conversation drowned out the television. Robbie looked at me with a frustrated expression, and I nodded my agreement while taking a swig of beer.

Lily snuggled up to me on my other side, her hand curling over my thigh dangerously fucking close to my dick. The woman was lethal in her moves when she wanted to be.

"I'm just saying that maybe you should give the library dude another chance, Ma," Brynn said.

It had been just over a month since she'd been shot, and she was doing well with her recovery. Lily had told me yesterday she was going back to work part-time next week.

"No," Hannah said, "he didn't open doors for me. You know I'm fussy about that."

"God, Mum, I'm concerned you're going to be single for the rest of your life with all the requirements you have," Lily said.

Her mother's lips pursed before she said, "Well, if you can find a man like King who looks after you the way he does, I can certainly keep searching until I do, too."

Lily's hand squeezed my thigh as she chuckled. "King doesn't open doors. In fact, I doubt he would satisfy any of your requirements, so that just shows you that men can still be right for you even if they don't tick boxes."

I stretched my arm across the back of the couch as I ran my eyes over Lily's body. She had on the tightest fucking T-shirt, and I struggled to keep my eyes off her tits.

"What do you think, King?" Brynn asked, drawing my attention to her. "Do you think Mum should hold out for her perfect man or acknowledge that perfection doesn't exist?"

Fuck, how had I been wrangled into this conversation? "Check out how he is with his family. That'll tell you a lot about how he's likely to treat you down the track."

Lily fucking squeezed my thigh again. That was after she slid it even fucking closer to my dick. And before she pressed a kiss to my lips and murmured, "I love you."

I lifted her hand and removed it from my leg. Moving my mouth next to her ear, I muttered, "I'd love you a fuckload more if you stopped fucking with my dick when I can't do anything about it."

She curled her hand around my neck and blasted a smile at me. "Tonight we play five fucking questions and then you get to do whatever you want to me," she said softly enough so only I heard.

I finished my beer. She didn't know that tonight I'd only be playing one fucking question, and if she didn't give me the answer I wanted, I'd fuck it out of her.



I stretched my legs out on Lily's bed and rested my back against the headboard while I watched her fuck around getting ready for bed. We'd just taken a shower together where I'd warmed her up for the

night. I planned a long night, but first I needed to get her to stop screwing around doing whatever the fuck she was doing.

"Lily," I said, and waited for her eyes.

She didn't give them to me, though. She carried on rifling through drawers.

"Lily," I barked.

Her head snapped up and she turned to me instantly. "What?"

"Bed."

"I'm just looking for the T-shirt I wanna wear tomorrow."

"Leave it."

My tone registered with her, and she hit me with a glare. "No. I don't wanna be running around in the morning, stressing over finding shit. You can wait five minutes for me. And besides, you've already had your way with me tonight."

I moved off the bed and closed the distance between us. Standing behind her, I wrapped my arms around her and gripped both her wrists, halting her movements. Mouth to her ear, I growled, "I haven't had my way with you yet, not even fucking close. I need at least two hours with your cunt before we're even talking close, so stop what you're doing and get your ass on the bed."

She finally fucking did what I said, and I positioned us so she straddled me while I sat how I had been before. Placing her hands on my bare chest, she said, "You're lucky I like your bossy, filthy mouth. I'm not sure there are many women out there who would put up with it."

"I only want one woman, and she's the one who can't get enough of my mouth."

"Let's not get carried away."

I arched a brow. "I stop giving you my mouth in any way for a month and you'd lose your shit."

She wiggled her ass, grinding herself against my dick. Gripping my face, she said, "You stop giving me your mouth for even a day and *you'd* lose your shit."

She wasn't fucking wrong.

"Okay," she said, letting go of my face, "let's do these five fucking questions, so you can get to your favourite part of the night."

I wrapped my hand around her neck and rubbed my thumb over her throat. "It's my turn to ask the questions tonight."

Her eyes lit up. "Ooh, okay."

I kept my hand around her neck. "Beard or no beard?"

"Beard."

"Good fucking answer."

She grinned.

"Morning or night?"

"You are so freaking predictable with your sex questions."

I gripped her neck harder. "Morning or night?"

"Night, but only because there are more hours for you to get your mouth on me at night."

I eased my grip a little. "July or August?"

She frowned. "Huh? What's in July or August?"

I pulled the blue box from my pocket and opened it. "July or August?"

Her eyes widened. "Holy fuck, King." She glanced between the ring and me. She stared at me for the longest time, and then she crashed her lips to mine, her hands grasping my face with the kind of grip that turned me the fuck on. When she'd had her fill, she tore her mouth from mine and said, "Oh my freaking God, yes!" She looked at the ring in the box again, bending her face close, her eyes lighting up, and then looked up at me. "This ring is fucking beautiful."

Jesus, I'd been hard for her all fucking night; I wasn't convinced I'd make it through this proposal without ripping her clothes off and sinking my dick as far inside her as I could.

I pulled the ring out of the box and got it on her finger before she changed her mind. As she held her hand up to her face, checking out the ring, I growled, "Lily." When she gave me her eyes, I demanded, "July or August?"

A smile spread slowly across her face. "You mean you're actually giving me a choice? You're not gonna just boss my ass into one of them?"

Fucking hell, this woman.

"You have exactly three seconds to choose one. After that, I'll boss your ass into a fuck of a lot more than just the month."

She leaned in close and brushed her lips across mine before saying, "July, but only because it comes first. If I had my way, I'd choose September because it would be warmer."

"July it is."

She looped her arms around my neck. "I love you, King. You might be a hard-ass out there in the world, but for me, you're everything I need." She studied the ring for a moment. "And this ring is perfect. Thank you."

I'd taken a photo of her grandmother's necklace that Holly had sent me, and asked a jeweller to design me a ring that matched it. A diamond bow, it matched not only her necklace, but also half her fucking belongings.

I took her face in my hands and kissed her. Deep and slow to begin with, it quickly became the usual demanding kind of kiss we both craved. When we were done, I rasped, "I fucking love you, woman. If I could, I'd marry your ass tomorrow."

Fuck, as long as I lived, I'd never get my fill of this woman.

She'd breathed life into me when I hadn't thought there was any life beyond what I already knew.

She'd given me hope after I'd forgotten what it was.

She'd fucking helped quiet the demons raging deep inside me.

And I was holding on tight.

Wherever Lily went, I would follow.

She may have thought I was running this fucking show, but she was wrong.

She owned the fucking show.

EPILOGUE

King
4 Years Later

I stood on my back deck and watched the kids running around the backyard as I sucked back some beer. Holly pushed Cade on the swing I'd built last weekend while Zara carried Meredith on her hip, laughing at something Lily said. Robbie and the girl he'd invited over for the party sat on the wooden bench I'd built for the back corner of the yard. Lily's meditation bench. The one she spent a good fucking half hour on every afternoon while I played with the kids inside. She called that half hour her Sacred Pause. I didn't give a fuck what she called it so long as she had it. Lily without that pause was wired for my blood. With it, she was wired for my dick.

"Hey, brother," Hyde said, stepping out onto the deck. "We finally made it."

I glanced at him, my gaze going straight to his daughter, Sage, who held her arms out to me. Letting her climb across to me, I said, "Your dad being an ass today?"

"King," Monroe said as she and Tatum walked past us to head downstairs. Her voice held a warning like it always did when I had her daughter. I cut back my language around the kids, but as far as I was fucking concerned, ass wasn't a word I needed to watch.

"Mama," Sage called out as she spotted Monroe. I put her down, and she ran to her mother who scooped her up and carried on towards Lily.

"Everyone here?" Hyde asked, surveying my backyard where club members and their families hung out laughing and drinking.

"Everyone except Fury."

Hyde met my gaze. "You got him out on a job today?"

"Yeah. I doubt he'll make it." Not with the messy shit he was taking care of for me today. Detective Stark would breathe easier tonight thanks to Fury.

"King!" Kick called out. "We need you to settle something for us." Elizabeth whipped past him, distracting him for a moment. Mostly, though, I figured it was his wife who did that as she chased after their daughter. He'd announced her second pregnancy last week. Fuck, we were having a fucking population explosion in the club these days between Hailee almost ready to pop a kid, Lily two months pregnant, and now Evie, too.

I headed down to where he stood with Devil and Nitro.

"Devil thinks that when you guys built this place, Lily got the final say in everything, because there's no way you would have chosen half the shit here," Kick said.

Lily's hands slid around my waist as she pressed her body to mine from behind. "Wrong," she said. "Well, kind of wrong. I did get the final say in everything, because let's face it, King wants his dick sucked at night, but he chose more than half the shit in this place. My man has immaculate taste."

"No shit," Devil said, smiling at Lily. Fuck, every fucker in the club had a soft spot for my old lady. A hell of a lot of respect too, which was deserved. The past four years had shown Lily's grit in ways I fucking wished we hadn't had to live through.

"No shit, asshole," I said. "Now give me a minute with my wife."

As they walked away from us, I turned to face her, my gaze landing on the bruises on her neck. Tracing my finger over them, I said, "Fuck, I need to go easier on you." Especially now that she had our child in her belly.

"Don't you dare."

I found her eyes. The heat in them caused my gut to tighten. I'd had her cunt twice already today, but it wasn't enough. I'd arranged for her mother to take the kids tonight so I could dedicate a long

stretch of time to her. We'd need it before I headed away for up to a week tomorrow. I had shit to take care of in Melbourne. Shit that was giving me nothing but fucking headaches.

"I spoke with Jackson yesterday," I said, broaching the subject guaranteed to piss her off.

She frowned. "Why?"

I kept my gaze pinned to hers. "Because he needs to hurry shit the fuck along and make you part-time already. He's been promising you that for months."

"Fuck, King, I told you to stay out of that. I can fight my own battles with Jackson."

"You've been fighting this one for too fucking long. I've sat back and let you handle shit, but I'm done waiting. I told him I wanted a call within the week to confirm your part-time status."

"King," she started, but I shook my head and cut her off.

"Lily, you're exhausted. Hell, if I had my fucking way, you wouldn't work at all. But I know better than to push you for that, so I'm pushing you and Jackson for what I know I can get."

She stared at me silently for a few moments, before muttering, "You drive me fucking crazy half the time."

"You return the fucking favour."

Moving closer, she jabbed me in the chest. "I'm going to push you on something then, too."

Jesus. "What?"

"You need to quit smoking."

"Fuck, woman, we've already discussed this. Don't give me hell over it again."

"Your doctor said—"

"I don't give a flying fuck what my doctor said."

Her face softened. "Yeah well, maybe you should, because I don't want you to die sooner than you have to." Tears welled in her eyes, and as she wiped at them, she grumbled, "God, I hate pregnancy hormones."

That fucking made two of us.

"Daddy!" Cade ran at me, arms outstretched, and I bent to lift him up as he said, "Auntie Skye got me a twuck for my birfday!"

I jerked my chin at Skylar who'd just arrived with her latest boyfriend. I gave him a month at the most before she kicked him to the kerb. Skylar couldn't seem to find a man who would stand up to

her and her bullshit, and this dickhead didn't fit that category either. I'd told her to get some advice off Annika who had finally married the guy she'd met two years ago. He had some fucking balls on him that I could respect.

I eyed my son. It was his third birthday today. I'd managed to knock Lily up fast after I'd married her. If I had my way, she'd have a baby in her belly more often than not, because my kids made my fucking life. But Lily had told me six was a good number to stop at, so after this current pregnancy, I'd be heading into a new kind of battle. The day we were married, I'd told her I wanted four more kids, and I hadn't been fucking about. I intended to win that battle, but fuck, I wouldn't complain if it was a long, drawn-out one. Going to battle with my wife got me hard as fuck and led to some crazy shit going down between us. It was the kind of shit a man could die happy having experienced.

I smiled at Cade. "Why don't you and Meredith play with it in the sandpit?" Eyeing Lily's mother, sister, Jamie, and Adelaide coming down the stairs, I added, "Grandma's here."

He squealed with delight, wiggled out of my hold, and took off in Hannah's direction.

Building this place had been one of the best damn decisions Lily and I had made. We'd sold the place in the city after the shit that went down there and bought this land. And neither of us had looked back. Lily had surprised the hell out of me by how she'd handled the D'Amato shit, but it had just been the first in a line of incidences she'd had to stand tall against as my old lady.

"Oh God," she muttered, her hand landing on my chest, scrunching a handful of my shirt.

"What?" I asked, following her gaze.

"Zara. Shit, shit, shit. Now is not the time for her to get distracted from her studies."

I found what she was looking at, and I didn't fucking like it either.

"I'll have a word with him," I said firmly as my shoulders tensed.

Lily looked at me. "King, don't be hard on him. It's not his fault Zara's watching him."

I clenched my jaw as I watched Fury making his way through the party toward me, oblivious to the fact my daughter had her gaze trained on him. "That may be the case, Lily, but if I'm not hard on

him, he won't have a reason to keep his distance from her." And no fucking way was a man like Fury getting anywhere near my daughter. She may have been eighteen now, but I still saw her as the fourteen-year-old I'd handled little shits for.

Fury stopped when he reached us. Glancing between Lily and me, he said, "Hate to interrupt, but I need a word with King."

Lily smiled and nodded at him. "Sure." Then she turned and gave me her wide eyes that meant I should pay attention to what she'd just said about not going hard on him. I had no fucking intention of doing that so I ignored those eyes.

Fury watched her leave and then said, "I've taken care of what you wanted. There was some collateral damage, though."

"How bad?"

"Nothing I couldn't handle. It's all been cleaned up."

"Good."

"You got anything else for me today?"

"No, but it's come to my attention that my eighteen-year-old daughter has eyes for you." My voice dropped to a hard command. "Under no fucking circumstances are you to look at her, speak to her, or fucking touch her. If I find out you've done any one of those things, I will make it so you wished you fucking hadn't." I paused for a beat. "We clear?"

His brows lifted. "I'm not into eighteen-year-olds, King, and I'm sure as fuck not into anyone related to you, so yeah, we're clear."

"Good. Keep it that fucking way and we won't have a problem."

"If you don't have anything more for me, I'm gonna go off-grid for the day."

"Do that. We've got a fuckload of shit on when we hit Melbourne, so make sure you're ready for that."

"I'll see you tomorrow."

He passed Zara on the way out and didn't so much as look at her. I found my wife again. "I've sorted the problem."

"King, I hate to break it to you, but the problem is Zara. Not your guys. And that's the kind of problem I have no clue how to sort."

Zara had given Lily hell for years when it came to boys. And since Zara had turned her attention to Storm members, it had become my hell, too.

"Well, as far as I'm concerned I've handled it. Now, are we gonna do the cake, because the sooner we get this party done, the sooner I

can clear people out, and the sooner I can get inside you."

"They only just arrived like an hour ago. You can't start kicking them out soon."

I lifted a brow. "You wanna fucking watch me?"

She shook her head at me, but her eyes had that heat in them again. Moving into my embrace, she said, "I'm so glad I decided to grow old with you and your filthy ways."

My hands landed on her ass. "You had no fucking choice in the matter. I decided for you."

She smiled up at me. "Yeah, baby, you did, because you're bossy like that." She kissed me long and hard before adding, "Right, I'll go get the cake. You round everyone up. And then we start working on getting them to leave."

My gut tightened as I watched her walk across the lawn, up the stairs, and into the house. I hadn't ever imagined finding a woman like Lily. She was my opposite in almost all ways, and yet we worked. Fuck how we worked. And now I couldn't imagine a life without her.

I'd laid myself bare for her.

I'd bled for her and wouldn't fucking hesitate to do it again.

I fucking breathed for her.

And while my family and my club were everything to me, I existed for Lily.

KING: THE EPILOGUE COLLECTION

NOTE FROM NINA

Dear Reader,

This book was a complete passion project for me. It's the 'what happens after the HEA' story that I couldn't get out of my head. We all know King is a hard man to be with and to live with. I wanted to explore how they each navigate the journey from falling in love to living together to getting married. This is that part of their story. I hope you love it as much as I do.

I've also included some extra chapters for you, showing other slices of their life together. Some are in the future and some are from the past (those ones feature King, not Lily, but I wanted to include them here for you as well because they help show you more of King).

I've been asked if there will be more books featuring King and Lily. I don't plan to write them another book, but they will feature in future Storm MC books, just like all the other couples do. And I will probably continue to write free bonus scenes featuring them because there is so much more of their story in my head that I will need to get out at some point. If you love bonus scenes, make sure you [join my VIP list](#) so you can access my Alpha Vault where I store these scenes, free for all email subscribers.

Enjoy! And thank you so much for your continued support!

Nina xx

KING & LILY: THE WEDDING

For me and all my King lovers.

Thank you for embracing my imagination.

ROSES WITH THORNS

“A soul mate usually only comes once in your life to shake things up, show you true love, and stand up to you in ways no one else ever has. They adore you yet challenge you to your fullest potential. A soul mate relationship isn't only peaches and cream, it's roses with thorns.”

~ Anon

CHAPTER ONE

King

Lily would be the death of me.

The absolute fucking death.

I threw some whisky down my throat as I kicked back on one of the couches in the clubhouse and watched as she made her way around the guys, chatting and having a fucking Friday-afternoon catch-up that was cutting in on my time with her cunt.

I'd made it clear to her when she'd arrived half an hour ago that she had ten minutes tops before I wanted us out of here and on our way home. Her ex had the kids this weekend, and I planned to take advantage of every second alone with her.

"You were in a good mood earlier. What's made you grouchy this afternoon?" Kree asked as she placed another whisky in front of me. She followed my gaze towards Lily. "Ahh. You know, she's good for the club. The guys love her and the way she's taken an interest in everyone and their families. Let her be."

I drained my first glass of whisky and reached for the new drink. "I'll let her be for the time it takes me to drink this."

Kree sat herself down across from me. She had the look in her eye that she got when she was about to share her thoughts with me. They were usually unwanted thoughts she should just keep to herself. But Kree wasn't a woman ever deterred by anything I had to say. "You've slowly been growing moodier and moodier the last couple of weeks." She paused briefly at the arch of my brow, but only briefly. "Hear me out. You might actually like what I have to say this time." Another pause, marked by the slight smile forming on her lips. At my nod, she continued, "There are three more weeks until

your wedding and I can already see how those three weeks are going to go down. My suggestion is you bring the wedding forward. It'll save a whole lot of issues caused by your grumpy ass. At the rate you're going, I'm concerned you'll fuck a lot of shit up before you get that ring on Lily's finger."

This wasn't something I hadn't thought of. Fuck, at this point, I wondered why I'd given Lily eight weeks to plan the wedding. I'd spent the past few weeks listening to her, Brynn, and Hannah go on about the finer details of it. I wasn't interested in any of that. All I cared about was that my woman was happy and that she had my last fucking name. I wasn't convinced Lily *was* happy with all the planning she was doing; from where I stood, it seemed to me that with each passing day, she was growing more stressed by all the shit she had on her mind.

I emptied my glass of whisky and stood. "Thanks for the drink," I said to Kree before making my way to Lily.

Placing my hand to the small of her back, I cut in on her conversation with Devil. "We need to talk."

The command in my voice captured her attention. Turning and meeting my gaze, she said, "I was just telling Devil about—"

"Now. My office." This was said with more force. A demand I wasn't backing down from.

Her forehead wrinkled as a frown formed on her face. She didn't argue with me again, though. Lily had figured out fast when to go up against me in my clubhouse and when not to. We'd never had to have a conversation about it; she was good at reading me. Better than anyone. And she knew now was not the time to argue.

She led the way to my office. Silently. That silence ended when I closed the door behind us.

Facing me, annoyed, she said, "That was rude, King. I was in the middle of a conversation and you know it pisses me off when you do shit like that."

Closing the distance between us, I wrapped one hand around her throat and backed her up against my desk. The heat that my touch always brought to her eyes hit me deep in the gut, intensifying the feelings roaring through me. I needed to be inside her and I fucking needed it now. "Been waiting all fucking day for your cunt, Lily, so I don't give a fuck if you're pissed off. After I've had you, you can take as many shots at me as you want."

My lips crashed down onto hers, taking any further argument she had with them. A second later, my long, deeply satisfied growl filled the room as I stripped away everything between us except our need for each other.

Her hands came to my clothes, tearing them off while I ripped hers away. Dragging my mouth from hers, I spun her around, placed her hands to the desk, gripped her hips, and thrust inside.

Christ, give me strength.

I was coming out of my fucking skin, which was fucking ridiculous because I'd had Lily this morning. And two or three times every other day since I'd made her mine. This insatiable need I had for her was unlike anything I'd experienced, and it was sending me fucking crazy.

It was also causing me to grow rougher with her each day, and today was no exception. I shifted my hands, hooking one arm around her waist and one hand around her neck again. My grip was tight. I knew she'd struggle for breath, but for the fucking life of me, that only turned me on more.

"Fucking hell," I rasped against her ear as I pounded harder into her. "It's fucking with my head how much I need you."

She was unable to speak, but her moan let me know how much she was into this. Lily's love for my filthy ways increased daily. Our nights were spent with me taking more than any woman had ever allowed me to take, and her begging for every second of it. How I managed to make it through my days dealing with the club shit we had on was beyond me when she was on my mind almost every damn minute.

As my fingers dug harder into her skin, her hands came up, reaching for my head. She grabbed my hair and pulled it, letting me know she was at her limit. Usually, I'd ease up at this point, but today I was so fucking wired for her that I took a moment to give her what she asked for.

She yanked my hair again.

Rougher.

Madly.

Furiously.

I let her go and spun her to face me again. I wanted my eyes on hers while I fucked her. What I wasn't prepared for was something Lily had never done.

She pushed me away, anger bleeding from her.

Catching her wrist, I demanded, "What the fuck was that for?"

"That was for you being an asshole this week. You're getting moodier and bossier, and I don't like it."

"You knew what you were signing up for when you chose me, Lily. You can't fucking pick and choose what you want from me."

She snatched her wrist back. "Yeah, I did, but I'm drawing the line here. Something's going on with you, and I wanna know what it is if I'm gonna be the one to bear the brunt of it. *That's* what I signed up for. Give and take. You sharing some of your burdens. Me supporting you through shit."

Jesus fucking Christ she was blazing with the kind of anger and passion and fight that spoke to me. Everything she'd said was right, but I wasn't used to being called on my shit. I wouldn't take it from anyone but her, and even then, I'd only allow it very rarely. Hell though if it didn't spark fire and lust and the urge to bend her over this desk and force her to just accept what I wanted to give. And yet, that was the beauty of our relationship—she didn't always give me what I wanted, but she sure as fuck gave me what I needed.

"You know I won't discuss club business," I said, working my jaw. I might have liked her fight, but I had no intention of starting down the path of involving her in club stuff.

Her eyes still flashed with anger. "I don't want to know your club business, King. Fuck." She exhaled loudly, frustrated. Then, taking the step that brought us skin-to-skin again, she stabbed a finger into my chest. "I just want you to let me help you. To let me take care of you like you take care of me. I need to feel like I'm contributing to this relationship, too."

"You *are* fucking contributing to this relationship."

"What, by spreading my legs every fucking night and allowing you to pound your frustrations out on me?"

"Fucking hell, Lily, if that's all you think you contribute to us, we need a long fucking talk about shit."

She raised her brows, giving me a look of exasperation. "*That's* what I'm telling you. We need to talk more!"

Sharing my load wasn't something I was good at or something I needed to do. I wasn't built that way—my father had seen to that. And I couldn't see that changing. Not even for Lily.

When I didn't respond straight away, she continued, "All I'm trying to say is that I love you, but you make that hard when you're the King you've been this week." She stopped for a moment before saying, "You don't have to handle your stress on your own anymore, King."

A text came through on my phone as she uttered her last word. It was bad fucking timing, and usually I wouldn't even look at it, but I had club stuff going down that it could relate to, so I reached for my phone.

It *was* club shit and I had to take care of it now.

Either the look on my face or my body language let Lily know what was going down. She was used to me taking off to deal with things, and never had a problem with it. But today I didn't miss the disappointment that flashed briefly in her eyes before I said, "I have to go."

She nodded. "Yeah."

As she bent to retrieve her clothes, I gripped her arm and pulled her close. Kissing her, I forced my tongue into her mouth, demanding she kiss me back.

Lily could never fully shut down on me. Not when a glance or a touch or a kiss had the ability to fuel her desire.

She needed me as much as I needed her.

By the time I ended the kiss, her arms were wound tightly around me, her body was pressed hard against mine, and she was moaning into my mouth.

As I exited the room a couple of minutes later, she called out, "King," and hit me with another kiss before pushing me away and saying, "I fucking love you."

One of her rules was to never let me leave for club business without telling me she loved me. One of her other habits was not to calm down fast from a fight if we left it unfinished.

Hell fucking help me.

CHAPTER TWO

Lily

“Why are you stomping around this house all feral?” Adelaide asked half an hour after she’d answered my plea for company, which was approximately fifteen minutes after King had left to take care of club business. She’d met me at home with a bottle of wine and my favourite snacks. Three different kinds of cheese plus an assortment of gourmet crackers. My girl knew me well.

I slammed the cutlery drawer closed and passed her a knife for the cheese. Every cell of my body blazed with irritation and frustration. God, how I loved King, but God how the man pissed me off sometimes.

I met my best friend’s eyes. “It’s like he’s fucking built with weaponry that zeroes in on which button to push which day for maximum capability of pissing me off.”

Addy’s brows pulled in. “So what happened today?”

“Fuck,” I muttered, pulling my hair up into a messy bun. I was so worked up that even my hair was annoying me. “It’s more like what’s he done this *week*. He’s stressed about something and has been in a foul mood. I can deal with his moods, but this is something else.” I stopped, but only for a second. I had more shit to get off my chest. “And the way he takes care of all of us but never lets us take care of him. I’m over it.”

Addy arranged the cheese and crackers on a platter. “Well, we all know what I think of King’s moods, so I won’t go there. But that bit about being over him taking care of you, even I have to admit that’s one of his best qualities. And a far cry from how Linc used to treat you. So why the issue with it?”

Adelaide and King were still figuring each other out. She hadn't fully come around to accepting my choice in a life partner, but she was at least trying. Usually I'd hesitate to whinge to her about my problems with him, but I was frustrated enough today to let them all out.

I threw my hands up. "Ugh. I don't have an issue with him taking care of me. God, not at all." Some of my frustration disappeared as I thought about how much I loved being with a man whose actions lined up with his promises. "But he needs to let me take care of him too."

Addy nodded as she handed me a cracker with cheese she'd prepared and a glass of wine. "Here, honey, drink up while we accept the fact you're marrying a man who will probably never give you that."

I took the wine and drank some. More than some. *A lot*, because at the root of my crazy emotions was, I suspected, the feeling that she was right. King loved me. I knew that down to my bones. But that didn't mean he was suddenly going to change his ways that were so deep in his blood that they ran through him *like* his blood.

The thing was, I didn't want to change him. Not at all. I loved everything about the man, even his weapons of mass frustration. I just knew that for us to weather this storm of life, we had to figure out how to live with each other's ways. Me blindly accepting his extreme mood swings and putting up with all of them? Nope, that was never gonna happen.

"I don't accept that he can't or won't budge a little. I've already seen him make allowances for things that have come up between us. But, I think you're right. It's going to take some work and a lot of communication to get him to see how much this means to me." I raised my glass. "I put up with Linc's shit for a long time. I'm a strong woman. And I'm in this for life with King, so I'll keep pushing him."

Addy grinned as she took a sip of wine. "Oh I expect nothing less from you, honey. I just want to know if King's ever been with a woman who has as much perseverance and backbone as you. I'm not sure he knows what's coming."



Adelaide left around 8:00 p.m., at which time I ran myself a bath. I took the remainder of the cheese platter in with me, along with a new meditation I'd found on Spotify, and did my best to calm myself down before King came home.

That was easier said than done.

I found it impossible to shut off the constant stream of thoughts about him. I loved King so damn much it physically hurt sometimes. I woke up needing him; I went through my days counting down the minutes until I saw him again; I lived for the nights with him once the kids were all asleep; and I went to sleep dreaming of the life we were building together.

I was consumed by King.

I'd never felt this in my life.

Ever.

And maybe that was some of the problem. Maybe I was out of my depth with knowing how to navigate the love and passion I had for him.

"How long have you been sitting in this tub thinking?"

The sound of King's voice startled me. I'd been so lost in thought I didn't hear him come home. I looked up, watching as he came and sat on the edge of the bath. Exhaustion lined his face.

One of the things that struck me about King was how he read people so well. In the grand scheme of life, we'd known each other for a blip of time, and yet he knew me better than anyone. He connected dots fast, and when we'd started seeing each other, he'd quickly connected my bath time with me sometimes losing my mind to the confusion that too much thinking could create. He knew that if I'd been in the bath too long, I could be a handful afterwards.

Needing contact, I placed my hand on his. "Long enough to have decided I'm out of my depth with us."

He studied me for a long moment. Contemplative. "Why?"

This was the King I needed right now. His earlier mood had shifted, giving me the man who listened and reflected on what I said. "I love you too much. I'm not sure I can see things rationally when it comes to you and how we are together. You push buttons I didn't even know I have, and I'm confused about my reactions to some things that happen between us." I sat forward, coming closer to him. "The only thing I know for sure is that I can't get enough of you, and while that's exactly how I want to feel about the man I love, I need to

have boundaries surrounding my love. I've already had one failed marriage with no boundaries. I don't want a second." It hurt my heart to even consider our relationship failing, but I had to be realistic and smart this time around.

His chest rose and fell as he took a long breath, thinking about what I'd said. I knew his tells as well as I knew my own. "Boundaries aren't something I'm good at, Lily."

I searched his eyes, finding honesty blaring from them. King had told me he wasn't good at relationships; I believed the opposite. I believed he'd just had to find the right person. That was true for everyone. With the wrong person, we didn't flourish. We descended into a hell of bad arguments that had no hope of going anywhere. We suffered from doubt, indecision, and days of feeling less worthy than we were. With the right person, we grew and thrived. We felt supported and encouraged to be all we could be. Arguments led to better places, doubt was short-lived, and while our days could be hard, love took the edge off.

I knew what it felt like to be with the wrong person.

And now I knew what it felt like to be with the right one.

King was all kinds of right for me.

And as much as he thought he wasn't good at boundaries, I knew he was a man who could do anything he put his mind to.

"Neither of us are," I said. "Yet."

He took that in and sat with it for a moment. Finally, he leaned forward and cupped the back of my neck, pulling my mouth to his. Our kiss was slow to begin with, but just like always, it quickly turned urgent and frantic.

King pulled me out of the bath and carried me into our bedroom. Dropping me on the bed, he lifted his shirt over his head and stripped out of his jeans. He was naked underneath; King wasn't big on underwear. He particularly wasn't big on *me* wearing underwear, but because I had a preference for wearing it, he'd filled my drawers with *his* preferences. That mostly consisted of scraps of material that covered very little, but he made sure to get anything with bows on it that he could find. He told me the bows were for me, but I knew he'd taken a liking to them since meeting me.

"Stop thinking, Lily," he ordered, taking hold of his dick, "And get on your knees." The pulse of darkness in his tone thrummed in my veins.

I loved King's crudeness in the bedroom.

His filthy desires.

He'd awakened *my* filthy desires.

I did as he said, keeping my eyes locked with his while I knelt. The approval I saw there hit my core and I slid his cock into my mouth on a moan.

Placing his palm to my head, he held me in place while I sucked his dick. I didn't need any encouragement; this was one of my favourite things to do. I'd gotten my gag reflex under control since meeting King and embraced the hell out of his love for deep throating.

Placing my arms around him, I took hold of his ass and pressed him to my face while sucking and licking exactly how he liked it. The sharp dig of my fingernails into his skin caused him to hiss and tighten his hold on my head. Knowing my nails fuelled his hunger, I increased the pressure while sucking him as far back as I could. When he hit my throat, he growled so gutturally that it caused me to moan again.

"Fuck," he rasped as the vibration of my moan hit him.

Needing a better position, I pulled away and turned around so my back was to him. I sat with my knees up, feet backed against my ass, hands flat to the floor behind me, and leaned my head right back. King stood over me, and I guided his cock into my mouth, taking him in deep. He fucked my mouth, allowing me to take control of the speed and depth, and allowing me to swap his cock for his balls every now and then.

I could deep throat him daily; I loved it that much. Especially because I knew how much *he* loved it. The exchange of power thrilled me, because while King could take over and force control of my mouth, he never did. This was one part of our sex life where he handed all that control to me.

Just when we'd found a good rhythm, he pulled out and headed in the direction of our wardrobe. He searched in the area where we kept our sex toys, grabbed what he wanted, and came back to me, jerking his chin at the bed. I did as he directed and spread my legs wide for him because I knew what he had planned by what he held in his hands. King could be one of the most unpredictable men I knew, but there were some things I could predict.

This was one of them.

Kneeling in front of me, he placed the bottle of warming lube and strap-on butterfly vibrator he'd grabbed on the floor. Then, taking hold of my legs, he bent his face to my pussy and licked me from one end to the other, starting near my ass and ending with my clit between his lips. Bringing my legs up and over his shoulders, he settled in, sliding his hands under my ass and eating me like he'd never tasted me.

He licked and sucked and tongued the hell out of me, driving me closer and closer to orgasm. I held his head with both hands, pulling his hair as the pleasure ran through me.

Just as I was about to come, he let me go and sat back. Eyes full of dark lust, he ordered, "Finish yourself off."

King liked to watch me touch myself. Holding his gaze, I gave him what he wanted. He watched silently for a few moments, growls of satisfaction escaping his mouth, before joining in.

As my fingers worked faster, he gave me his tongue, licking and then sliding it inside me. When I started to remove my fingers, he held them in place, and together we chased my orgasm. My fingers, his tongue.

My release shattered through me, my cries gaining King's approval. I'd barely finished when he stood, lifting me with him, and spread me out on the bed.

Kneeling on the mattress, he slammed his dick inside me on a hard thrust. "Fucking hell," he roared, hand to my throat, eyes boring into mine. "I wanted to fuck your mouth again and come on your face, but I need your cunt." He pounded into me, his thrusts growing rougher, faster, more demanding.

I knew this was a deviation from what he'd planned after bringing the vibrator back with him. *And there was my unpredictable man.* And my intense man who hunted down what he wanted with laser focus.

These were the moments I lived for.

The moments when King made me feel like the only woman in the world.

The moments when he showed me I was most definitely the only woman in the world for him.

Brilliant light crashed all around me as my eyes closed.

The pleasure was too intense.

Building and building.

I was bursting with it.

Tumbling down a cliff I wasn't sure I'd ever survive.

It was too much.

King was too much.

My heart and brain and core all collided as I came again.

My senses were in overdrive, aware only of King who was losing himself in me.

Thrusting, growling, grunting.

Trying like hell to find the release he needed.

But I knew it wouldn't come yet.

It never did.

Not when he was worked up like this.

He would chase it for hours. He would fuck me until I was raw and barely able to take anymore. Until I knew both pleasure and pain inside out.

Exactly how I liked to be fucked.

Then, if I knew my man well, he would wake me tomorrow with the same level of need he had now, tonight's sex barely touching his ferocious hunger. And this was how I always wanted it to be between us, because King never failed to give me *what* I needed even when I didn't *know* I needed it.

CHAPTER THREE

King

“Any news yet?” I asked Nitro and Hyde when I arrived at the clubhouse early the next morning. “Have we got a location yet?”

“No news. No location. I just spoke with Axe and he said to stay close to the phone as he might have something soon,” Nitro said.

I rubbed my temple where a headache was forming. They’d become a daily occurrence again since having to deal with Clark fucking Kent. Not that we knew his real name. We’d named him based on his looks. With any fucking luck, we’d know his name, address, and whether he liked pain or not by the end of the day. The sooner we dealt with this motherfucker, the better, and not just for my head.

Lily was right to call me out on my extreme moods. Since Clark Kent had shown up on the scene two weeks ago, peddling coke sourced from someone other than Storm, I’d grown angrier with each passing day. I’d worked hard to re-establish Storm as king of this fucking city, and I wasn’t fucking backing down on my push to find Kent and deal with him in such a way that other assholes would think more than twice about fucking with my club. Taking my moods home had been unavoidable, and Lily had copped it worse than anyone. In the past, I wouldn’t have given a fuck about any of this, but these days I found myself contemplating shit more.

Hyde met my gaze. “I checked in with Bones last night. Word on the street isn’t good.”

“Fuck,” I muttered. “We need to shut this asshole down. Today.”

Hyde nodded. “Yeah.”

The longer Kent dealt coke not sourced from us, the more likely we were to lose our hold over the city. And that was a place we

couldn't afford to find ourselves in. Especially not now that Winter and I had established Storm's dominance in Melbourne. One sniff of us losing any part of Sydney and they'd start coming at us down there too.

A text came through on my phone.

Lily: You left without waking me. Will you be out all day?

Me: Not sure.

I'd planned on spending all weekend with her while the kids were at Linc's, but Axe had texted me just after 6:00 a.m. to let me know he was closing in on Kent, so I'd headed to the clubhouse to wait for news. I was hoping this wouldn't take hours, because my preference was to spend those hours with her.

Lily: Did you eat?

Me: I'll grab something soon.

Lily: I'll bring you something.

Me: No. Go back to sleep.

Lily: I'm bringing you food. I doubt you ate last night. You need sustenance.

I called her. Texting back and forth did my head in. "Don't bring me anything. I'm sending Kick out to get food."

"I highly doubt that, King." Frustration laced her voice.

"Fuck, Lily, I've got shit I need to focus on today. The last fucking thing I need is you here distracting me."

"You won't even see me. I'll just put it in the kitchen for you and then leave."

Another call came through on my phone, so I said, "I've gotta go. Don't bring me anything."

Without waiting for her reply, I ended the call and answered the incoming one.

It was Axe. "Zane got a hit on a possible location for your guy. Liam is close to it, so he's gone to check it out."

Liam worked with Zane and Axe in Zane's security business. The three of them had flown to Sydney three days ago to help me with this problem.

"Text me the address. I'll get some of my guys over there too."

"No, wait until Liam confirms it. There's no need to waste manpower if it's not needed."

"We can't afford to lose this asshole. Just text me the address."

"Liam's not going to lose the guy if he finds him."

"Fucking hell, Axe, just send me the fucking address."

He turned silent for a beat before saying, "Christ, you're wound tight, Zac—"

"Yeah. The club's got some shit coming its way if we don't take care of this motherfucker. So send me the address and then we can all get the fuck on with sorting this mess out."

He blew out a long breath. "You owe me for this, and I'll be calling in the favour soon."

I didn't bother asking him what for. Axe kept shit close to his chest until he no longer needed to, so chances were high he wouldn't share it with me yet. My gut instinct was that it had something to do with his ex. Axe left town a little while ago to get away from all their drama, but he'd returned almost as fast as he'd left. And they'd been arguing ever since.

We ended the call and a text came through soon after with an address that I forwarded to Nitro. "Take Kick and check this address out for our guy," I said to him. "And if he's there, don't hurt him too bad. Save that for me."

It had been a while since I'd had to get my hands dirty. A long fucking while. And that was half the problem between Lily and me at the moment. I needed to rid my body of the frustration I felt over someone gunning for my club. Getting some blood on my hands would help us a whole fucking lot.

CHAPTER FOUR

Lily

"Lily, darling, slow down and listen to me. I really think you will regret it if you don't get married in a church this time."

My mother was killing me. Slowly. And daily. Marrying King was the thing I wanted most in the world right now, but with each day came a whole new round of my mother's ideas for the wedding. Eloping was starting to feel like a much better option.

Placing the knife I held down—after considering stabbing her with it—I said, "I'm not getting married in a church, Mum. I've told you this already, so please don't keep going on about it."

She looked at me with exasperation and sighed. "Why must you insist on arguing with me over every little detail of this wedding?"

My eyes widened. "It's *my* wedding. That's why." *I need a smoke. I should never have given up.*

She waved her hand in the air at me. "Well, I can see I'm not going to get anywhere with you this morning. When will King be home? Maybe I should come and talk to him about this."

I placed the sausages I'd cooked for King's breakfast into a container and said, "You know what? That sounds like the best idea you've had in a long time. I'll call you when he gets home so you can come talk to him."

Picking up her handbag, she shook her head at me like I was someone she couldn't fathom and said, "Good. And I'm bringing my folder of ideas with me. The ones you've already pooh-poohed. He should at least get to take a look at them. Maybe he'll see sense where you couldn't. I mean, wanting to hold the reception in a marquee outside at this time of year is absolutely ridiculous. You'll most

likely get rained on and the whole thing will be ruined. Not to mention how cold it will be.”

Ten.

Nine.

Eight.

Seven.

Six.

The front door closed, signalling her exit from my house. I collapsed onto a chair at the dining table and screamed out, “Aaarghhh. I’m going to kill her!”

All the shitty memories of my first wedding came screeching back. We’d argued over a church wedding then, too. I’d been younger, though, with more energy, and I’d found it a lot easier to just drown her out. With everything I had going on these days—work, the kids, King, and the wedding—my energy was too low for this. I’d be lucky to make it to the wedding in one piece the way we were going.

Okay, get your shit together and take King some food. Then you can go and have a massage or a pedicure or something that will take your mind off her.

I packed everything up, grabbed my car keys, and drove to the clubhouse. No way was I *not* taking him food. He could tell me to stay away, but this was one way I could help him. God knew he refused almost all my other efforts.

It was quiet when I arrived. There was a low hum of voices I could hear from the direction of King’s office, but that was it. Not unusual for a Saturday morning, and it meant I could get in, drop the food off for him, and leave without anyone stopping me for a chat.

I was slowly finding my way with the club, making an effort to get to know everyone and their families. Some of the women hadn’t been too welcoming. They’d made it clear they’d wait and see if I had the grit needed to be a president’s old lady before having anything to do with me. Apparently I wasn’t wild enough for them. Not edgy enough or some shit. They didn’t understand what a suburban mum, good girl like me wanted with an MC president. Whenever I saw them at the clubhouse, they didn’t hide their contempt. But I wasn’t about to let some bitches who had nothing better to do with their time than sit around talking shit about me get in my way. I may

not have fit their idea of who King should be with, but when the time came for me to stand the fuck up, they'd see just what I was made of.

I'd just placed the container of food for King in the fridge when Devil entered the kitchen. His easy smile came my way when he saw me. "Mornin', Lily. You're here early."

"Just dropping some breakfast off for King."

His smile grew. "He's a lucky fuckin' bastard."

"Yeah, and a grumpy one too." I reached into my handbag and pulled out some Advil. "Can you please give him these in case he runs out?"

He took the pills. "You really do look after him, don't you?"

"It's purely selfish. I want him home in a good mood. If he runs out of those, I've no hope of that."

Chuckling, he nodded. "Sounds about right." Jerking his chin towards the office, he said, "You want me to get him for you?"

I shook my head. "No. I'm not staying. Just let him know food has arrived."

"Will do." With that, he exited the kitchen.

I quickly washed the few dirty mugs in the sink before leaving and was almost finished when Cherie came in. She was Wolf's old lady and seemed to be on the fence about me. Not quite in the camp of bitches who had it in for me, but wary of accepting me.

"Hey," I greeted her as I emptied the sink.

"Hi, Lily," she said as she placed a large box of lamingtons on the counter in the middle of the room. Her tone was cautious, making me think she didn't want to talk to me.

"Are you on your way to soccer?" I knew her son played every Saturday. Wolf had told me all about how proud he was of Jeremy for his achievements on the team.

Surprise filled her features. "Ah, yeah." Her words were stilted, like I'd caught her off guard. Cocking her head to the side, she asked, "How did you know that?"

I smiled. "Wolf told me. He's a proud dad when it comes to your kids."

Her brows arched and a scowl settled across her face as her shoulders stiffened. "Oh really? That'd be why he never makes it to soccer practice or very many of the games or our daughter's dance recitals then, wouldn't it?"

What she said about Wolf didn't line up with what I'd seen of him so far, but what did I truly know? Some people were good at showing the world what they wanted them to see. "I'm sorry to hear that."

She crossed her arms, scowl still in place. "Yeah. But you know what?" She settled her weight onto one leg, her body language blazing with attitude. "At least I know it's because of this club rather than the fact he doesn't care. At least there's that."

I frowned. "What's the club got to do with it?" I suddenly felt very defensive on King's behalf.

"Don't give me that shit, Lily. You're one of us now; you know what it's like being with a club member and always coming second to Storm."

I knew what she was getting at, and yet I didn't feel the way she did. I'd accepted right from the start of my relationship with King that his club came first. I had no issues with that because he'd never made me feel like I came second. Even when I was frustrated that he'd been called out while we were in the middle of stuff, I knew he didn't make that choice easily.

"I know what you're saying, Cherie, but it's a choice we make when we choose to be with a club member. We can't pick and choose what we want from them at certain times." God, King's words were coming back to me from last night when we'd argued in his office. It irritated me that I'd just used them on her, but damn it, he was right. I'd have to think some more on that later.

"Yeah, I understand that, but it doesn't mean I have to like it when my man's feeling the pressure from King to do shit. He's got family stuff going on at the moment, but I know he'll never say anything or ask for some time off, because the club makes it clear they always come first. I'd just like a little compassion when it's needed." She pointed at the lamingtons she'd brought in. "Let them know these are here. I'd hate for anyone to go hungry while they're working on a Saturday."

I didn't miss her sarcasm and was still working my way through what she'd said as she stalked out of the kitchen. Wolf had seemed weighed down when I'd talked to him yesterday. But it wasn't my place to ask him about it, so I hadn't brought it up. And I wasn't sure if I should mention it to King. Club business wasn't something I ever wanted to get involved in. But if I knew something that could help

King, was that something I should bring to him? Jesus, navigating my way through this was tricky. I was going to need a lot of time in the bath to think about this.

"Lily."

King.

I locked eyes with him, my core instantly heating from his attention.

He came my way, looking anything but pleased. "I told you not to come."

"And I told you that you need to eat."

"Fucking hell," he growled as he curled his hand around my neck and brought his lips down onto mine. When he ended the kiss, he said, "One day you'll actually fucking listen to me."

"I do listen to you, King. I just don't always do what you want me to do. And I never will, so you better be ready for that if you want to marry me."

His fingers dug into my skin as he tightened his grip on my neck. "Someone woke with some fucking attitude this morning."

I scrunched a handful of his shirt and pulled him closer. "You love my attitude, so I'm just giving you what you love."

His nostrils flared. His eyes blazed with heat. And he kissed me again. This kiss was a much longer one. While I gave him the attitude he craved, King was giving me the hard, rough touch *I* craved. When we finally came up for air, he rasped, "You won't be sleeping tonight. Be ready for that."

He let me go and took a step away from me. After spending a few moments running his eyes down my body, he turned and left the kitchen.

"Fuck," I muttered, reaching out for the counter to steady myself. *That man.*

Today was going to be a long day waiting for him.

CHAPTER FIVE

King

Clark Kent eluded us for another fucking day. The address Zane got a hit on turned out to be a dead end. And although I waited all day for further news, no other location materialised. Whoever this Kent asshole was, he had magic fucking skills at hiding.

I arrived home later than I would have preferred, just after 7:00 p.m. The smell of roast chicken filled the house. I found Lily in the kitchen on her knees, ass in the air, as she rummaged in a drawer.

Resting my hip against the kitchen counter, I crossed my arms and settled in to watch her. I often found her like this. Cleaning out kitchen cupboards and drawers was one of her go-to activities when she was stressed. And while I didn't like her being stressed, I loved the fuck out of watching her on her knees.

"What's going on?" I asked.

She didn't stop what she was doing when she answered me. "My bloody mother is what's going on."

"Care to elaborate?" Hannah pushed Lily's buttons more than I did, and that was saying something, because I pushed the hell out of them at times.

She yanked a Tupperware container out of the drawer and added it to the pile of containers she had on the counter. Pushing up off the floor, she stood and faced me, eyes wild with anger. "Oh, she's on her way over. You'll find out soon enough. She thinks you need to make the decisions for our wedding. Apparently, I suck at making the right decisions."

Lily had been to the hairdresser. Another sign of her stress. She hated going to the hairdresser and either went only when she des-

perately needed to or in times of stress. Since I knew she'd only just been a couple of weeks ago, this visit was due to her emotional state.

"What decisions?"

She rolled her eyes. "All of them!" Turning back to her containers on the counter, she started muttering shit under her breath I couldn't make out.

Moving to her, I reached around and placed my hands over hers, stilling her. "Calm down. She'll come over and I'll let her know I want nothing to do with any of this shit."

Her shoulders lifted as she took a deep breath. "You know it's not that easy with her. She has it in her mind that I made all the wrong choices when I married Linc, and she's determined to help me make better ones this time around."

I turned her and found her eyes. "That makes no fucking sense, Lily. What the fuck does your wedding to Linc have to do with ours?"

She was silent for a few moments before biting her lip. I didn't miss the tears threatening to fall and wondered what the hell was going on here. Lily wasn't the kind of woman to cry over much. She was a fucking soldier when it came to life, just getting on with shit. So whatever this was, it was big for her. "She made a comment yesterday that made me think that *she* thinks I screwed up my marriage to him right from the beginning. And her religious side makes her think some crazy shit, like that if I'd married him in a church, we would have lasted. Stuff like that." At my disbelieving look, she added, "I know it sounds out there, but you know my mother, King. She's fucking out there. And she's driving me to drink with this!"

I studied her for a beat, processing what she'd said. Something was missing here. Lily didn't cry over shit her mother said, so the fact tears were close led me to believe this wasn't just about Hannah. "What else is going on here, Lily?"

She frowned. "What? Besides the fact my mother is causing me the kind of stress that—"

"No, I mean what else is going on with you besides what your mother is saying?"

Before we could get to the bottom of this, the front door opened and closed, and Hannah came our way with, "Lily, what happened to the front door mat? It's raining outside and I couldn't wipe my feet, so I'm traipsing mud through your house." She stopped when

she saw me. "Oh, King, I'm glad you're here. We've got things to discuss."

"So Lily tells me." I jerked my chin at the table. "Sit. We'll talk, but I'm not guaranteeing you'll like anything I have to say."

Lily and her mother were surprisingly alike in some ways, but vastly different in many others. The one thing Lily definitely got from her mother was her tendency to ignore some of the shit I said when she didn't want anything to do with it. Hannah tended to ignore my tone when I was sending her a warning, and this time was no different. She brushed me off with an "Oh you're going to love my ideas, King. I just know it."

Lily sat next to me at the table, and as Hannah opened the folder she'd brought with her, she said, "Perhaps you can tell Mum that we haven't decided on the location for the wedding yet, but that as soon as we do, she'll be the first to know." Her tone dropped to a low, pissy one when she added, "And that this decision is *ours* to make, not anyone else's."

Hannah's shoulders pushed back. "Lily, there's no need for—"

"We've got some ideas," I started, "but not one of them involves a fucking church, Hannah."

Her eyes widened. I made a point not to swear when talking to Lily's mother; it was a throwback to Margreet's upbringing. However, it was clear Hannah needed to be jolted into paying attention to Lily and that I was the one who needed to make that happen, so I didn't hesitate to do what had to be done.

"There's no need for that language, King," Hannah chastised.

"There is when you won't listen to what your daughter is telling you."

She hit me with an expression of disbelief. "I do listen. Today was the first time it's been mentioned that you won't be holding the wedding in a church."

Lily cut in. "I've tried to tell you before, Mum, but King's right; you just don't listen."

The disbelief in Hannah's eyes turned to hurt and she picked her handbag up and slung it over her shoulder. "It's fine, Lily. If you don't want my input on this, I will leave you two alone to make all your decisions. I'll simply show up on the day."

I stood and followed her out of the house. "What did you say to Lily about her making the wrong choices when she married Linc?"

She eyed me like I was talking another language. "I didn't say anything like that to her. Why?"

"Yesterday, you said something to her about screwing her marriage up to him right from the beginning. That her marriage failing was her fault. What was that about?"

"No, that wasn't what I said. I would never say that it was all Lily's fault. It wasn't."

"Well what the hell did you say? Because she seems to think you said that and that you believe a church wedding is the right way to start a marriage. And as far as I'm concerned, that's bullshit, and I don't want Lily stressed over something ridiculous like that. So you and I need to come to an understanding about how you're going to proceed from here on out."

Her eyes widened again. "I am her mother, King, and I will not have you talk to me like that."

"Yes, you're her mother, and I respect that, but you need to respect the fact I'm going to be her husband, and that her happiness falls on my shoulders. There is nothing I won't do to ensure that happiness, even if it means I have to tread on your toes. So tell me what I need to know, Hannah, and I will help you two fix your shit."

She huffed her disapproval but started talking. "Yes, we were discussing her first wedding yesterday. And reflecting on what I said, I may have given her the idea that I wasn't fond of her wedding choices back then. But I never said they were the wrong choices, just that I would have made different ones."

"Like getting married in a church?"

"Yes."

"And what else?"

"What do you mean, what else?"

"Did you say that if she'd married him in a church, her marriage would have lasted?"

"No." She paused briefly before saying, "The only thing I said about that was that God would look favourably on her for choosing a church wedding."

Fucking hell.

This religious shit Hannah had going on pissed me off. It wasn't that I didn't respect her beliefs; I just had zero patience for where those beliefs sometimes took her and how she tried to force them on her daughters.

"Did he look favourably on you for your church wedding?" I demanded, knowing this was a prick of a question because Hannah's husband had left her. But fuck, she needed to see her own faulty thinking.

Her lips pursed. "That's a whole different situation—" she started, but I cut her off, unwilling to listen to her justifications.

"No. It's not. And I want you to think some more about this before you set foot in this house again." I stepped back from her. "Lily and I are not getting married in a church and I don't want to hear another thing about that. Are we clear?"

She stared at me for a long moment before finally nodding. Without another word, she made her way to her car and left.

Fuck, I'd forgotten what it was like to deal with family who got in between a relationship. And while it was a headache I didn't need, I'd go to battle for Lily every day if I had to.

"Has she gone?" Lily asked when I entered the kitchen again.

"Yeah. And you and I need to finish our conversation from before."

"We did finish it."

"No, we didn't. You told me that you think your mum blames you for your marriage not lasting. She just told me she doesn't."

"I can assure you she did tell me that."

"No, I don't think she did."

She stared at me like she couldn't believe I was disagreeing with her. "Are you kidding me right now? You know what my mother is like."

"Yeah, and I also know what you're like. She says one thing and you hear another. And usually that's because you're not feeling confident about whatever it is she's going on about." I moved closer to her. "I think you're worried our marriage isn't going to last. I think you've somehow convinced yourself that you failed once, so you'll fail again. And I need you to know that's a load of fucking bullshit."

Her eyes shined with the tears that hadn't fallen earlier and she swallowed hard. When she spoke, her voice cracked. "It's not a load of bullshit, King. I did fail at marriage, so it's not beyond belief that I could fail again." She gripped my shirt. "I don't want us to not work out. It would kill me if I lost you."

Fuck.

"You're not going to lose me, Lily. I'm staying right the fuck here. With you. In good times and fucking bad."

"That's easy to say now. Before shit gets hard. Trust me, I've lived through a shitty marriage, and it's the hardest thing I've ever had to do. Some days I felt like I was being crushed by the weight of it. Like I couldn't breathe." Her first tear fell as she added on a broken whisper, "Like I didn't *want* to breathe."

"I know that feeling, too. I've been there, and I'm telling you right now, hand on my fucking heart, there is no fucking way I'll allow us to ever get to that point."

"Because you love me?"

"Yes, because I fucking love you."

"And what if love isn't enough, King? What if my neurotic ways and your asshole moods turn out to be too much for us to cope with?"

I grasped her neck, pulling her to me. "I am marrying you and making you mine, and I'm not a man who ever lets go of what is his. You can lose your shit at me, over and over, and I will never let you go. And as for my moods, I'm fairly fucking sure you're the only person alive who has any chance of telling me to fuck off without fear of suffering consequences. I have no doubt we'll fight our way through shit, but at the end of the day, I'm committed to you in a way I've never been committed to anyone. So just try and leave me, Lily, and you'll see that divorce is not something in our future." I bent and kissed her before adding, "I will never give up on this marriage."

Her hands came to my neck and she grasped it while hooking her leg around my body so she could climb me. I placed a hand under her ass and helped lift her while backing her up against the wall.

I needed her naked and I needed to be inside her.

When I finally thrust inside her, I growled deeply with the relief I felt. Because that's what being with Lily felt like to me.

She was my respite from the demons clawing me.

She was my comfort, my peace.

If she ever thought I could live without her, she had no fucking idea.

I would choose death over living without her.

CHAPTER SIX

Lily

I woke to heavy rain Sunday morning. One of my favourite things ever. Especially on a Sunday. I couldn't think of anything better than spending the morning in bed with King while listening to the rain on the roof.

He'd made good on his promise that I wouldn't sleep last night. It had been almost 4:00 a.m. by the time he finished with me. The six hours of sleep I'd had since then was nowhere near enough, and I planned to spend most of the day napping on and off before the kids came home just before dinnertime.

"What are you thinking?" King asked as he ran his hand over my naked leg.

I rolled to face him. "That I want to spend all day in bed with you."

Regret flashed in his eyes. "I have to head over to the clubhouse soon."

My disappointment was high, but I didn't voice it. "Okay then, how about I cook us breakfast before you leave?"

His lips were on mine fast before he smacked my ass and ordered, "Up. And take your time walking out of here."

King wanted a show and I was more than happy to give him what he wanted. Slowly I found clothes as I went, but didn't dress until I reached the door. His eyes all over my body as I slipped one of his T-shirts over my head was a damn good way to start the day. I'd been surprised he hadn't wanted sex before we ate, but even if he had, I didn't think I had it in me. Not after how many times he'd had me during the night.

I hummed to myself as I walked to the kitchen. After he'd dragged my fears about our marriage from me last night, I felt lighter. I hadn't realised how heavy I'd felt about it before we'd talked. All I'd known was the last two weeks had been difficult, and I'd put that down to his moods. Sure, he'd been hard to live with, and that was some of the problem, but now we'd had that conversation, I understood my fears were part of the problem too. And while my mother's frustrating ways didn't help, King had been right to force me to see that I misinterpreted what she'd said.

God, if I was honest, I'd done that my whole life. And I knew Zara had the same problem with me. The mother/daughter relationship was such a minefield of possible misunderstandings and heartache.

"Do you feel like bacon and eggs?" I asked when he joined me in the kitchen.

He gave me a look as if I'd asked him the dumbest question in the world. "I always feel like bacon and eggs."

I grinned, loving his easy mood. Loving the place we'd gotten to after talking about my fear of failing again.

While he settled his ass on the stool at the breakfast bar, I grabbed the bacon and eggs from the fridge, and caught him up on what was going on with the kids next week.

Since he'd moved in with us, he'd involved himself in every aspect of my children's lives. King was more hands-on than Linc was or ever had been. Linc talked up his fathering skills, but his actions didn't always match his talk, especially since he'd started dating his current girlfriend. King, on the other hand, spent more time doing and less time talking. Something he'd initiated, that I cherished, was our Sunday talk about what everyone had on over the next week. Together we came up with a plan for how to tackle it all.

"I can get Robbie to karate on Tuesday afternoon if Linc can't," he said after I told him I wouldn't be finished work in time to do it. "But getting Zara to her maths tutoring could be hard. I can have one of the boys take her if you're good with that."

I'd just finished cooking our breakfast and slid his plate across to him with, "I love you, and yes, that's good with me."

Taking the seat next to him, I started telling him that the girls wanted me to go out with them next Saturday night. Monroe had

found a new club she wanted us to check out. "I know I don't usually go out with the girls on the weekends the kids are here, but—"

"You can't next weekend."

"Have you got something on?"

He looked at me. "We're bringing the wedding forward. To next weekend."

"Huh?"

"Next Saturday, Lily."

I blinked, confused by what he said. Putting my knife and fork down, I held up my hand. "Okay, stop, because I could swear you just said we're getting married next Saturday. And that's some crazy talk because there is no way I will be ready for this wedding in a week."

He shovelled bacon into his mouth with a nod. "You will be ready because it is happening. In a week."

I stared at him. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

"Why? What's the rush?"

He finished eating and pushed his plate away before turning to face me. "I don't want to wait any longer. And also, I'm fairly fucking sure that if you spend another three weeks thinking and planning, you're going to send both of us fucking crazy."

"Well you can't just make this decision on your own. I need a say —"

His phone sounded with a text and he swore as he read it. Then, looking at me, he said, "I've gotta go. I'm hoping this won't be an all-day thing again, but it might be."

"King, we haven't finished talking about the wedding."

We can't bring the wedding forward.

I don't have a dress.

Or a venue.

And we still haven't decided on the reception.

He is freaking mad thinking I can make this happen in a week.

One freaking week!

The man has some wild ideas sometimes, but this one takes the freaking cake.

When he didn't respond, I repeated myself. "King! We need to finish this discussion. The wedding—"

His mood shifted. No longer easy, his intensity returned. "Think about it today. We'll discuss it more tonight."

I stared at him, my mind spinning out of control over this. There were a million things I wanted to say to him, but I knew he'd shut down on our conversation. His mind had already latched onto whatever it was he had to go and take care of. So I took a deep breath and forced all my thoughts back into their box until later when he'd be focused on us again.

As he moved off the stool, I placed my hand on his arm and stopped him. I wanted to bring up Wolf with him before he left. "I don't know if this is something I should tell you or not, but I spoke with Cherie yesterday and she told me that Wolf's feeling some pressure at the moment."

"We're all feeling some fucking pressure at the moment, Lily." His voice turned hard, causing me to doubt that this was a conversation we should even be having. But I'd heard something in Cherie's voice yesterday that made me feel it was.

"I know, but I think something's going on with him. Cherie seems stressed out. Maybe you should just check in on him or something."

He stood and looked down at me with an expression that would send most away. "This isn't your concern. And Cherie knows fucking better than to make it your concern." Bending, he brushed his lips over mine and then said, "I'll see you later."

Clearly I'd overstepped. I wouldn't make that mistake again.



After King put me on the spot about bringing the wedding forward, I called Tatum and told her I needed her right fucking now to help me work through it all in my head. Out of all the girls, she was the practical one who was good in situations I wasn't. I would get lost in my emotions. She could separate the facts from the emotions and guide me.

She told me to give her an hour and then she'd be on her way. She also told me to call the others in case they could get to me sooner. "Your crazy is already hitting," she'd said. "I can hear it from

here. Hopefully someone else can get there sooner than I can, because we need to get that shit under control fast."

Evie and Hailee were both busy, but Monroe came straight over and spent the half hour before Tatum arrived trying to take my mind off King and his half-cocked idea.

She wasn't successful.

"I mean, does the man even understand how difficult it is to plan a wedding and get everything to line up perfectly?" I said to her as Tatum entered my kitchen.

Before Monroe could respond, Tatum held up her hand and took over. "Stop right there, Lily, and take a deep breath." She dumped her bag on the dining table and removed her leather jacket. "And just on a side note, does anyone know how long this fucking rain is predicted to last?"

My brain raced at the thought of rain on the weekend. "Jesus, I am definitely not moving this wedding if the rain is going to last all week! I will not allow my mother to be right about a reception under a marquee!"

Monroe frowned. "What has Hannah said now?"

I exhaled loudly, trying to force the tension from my body. "What *hasn't* she said? I don't want to talk about her today. But I need to know the weather forecast before I make any decision about the wedding date."

As I reached for my phone, Tatum stopped me. "Lily, slow down and let's go over this. Tell me why King wants to change the date."

"He doesn't want to wait any longer and he also thinks I'm going to send both of us crazy if we wait another three weeks."

Tatum nodded slowly. "I'm sorry to say it, but I tend to agree with him on this."

The significance of Tatum agreeing with anything that King thought made me stop and really consider what she said. She pretty much never agreed with him. And if she did, she hated admitting it.

King knew my limits well, so he was probably right that another three weeks of this wouldn't end well. I liked to bury my head in the sand about some things, and I was likely doing that about the wedding plans.

Bringing the wedding forward *might* have been the smart move, but knowing that didn't mean my brain would easily accept it. Not when I felt so overwhelmed by the practicality of changing dates.

Not to mention the realisation that, if this all went ahead, I would be married in one week.

King would be my forever.

And while marrying him was everything I wanted, what if I screwed it all up?

Oh God.

I thought I was feeling better about all this after our talk last night, but it turned out I wasn't. I still doubted myself.

"Okay, I concede that he might be right about me and my crazy train, but that doesn't mean I can rearrange everything to make it happen in time. Surely you agree with me on that." The panic setting in was real. My stomach was a knot of stress.

Monroe joined in. "Oh, honey, you're forgetting who your friends are. Tatum and I can make anything you want happen. Even if King changes his mind again and wants a wedding tomorrow, we're your girls."

"Oh God," I said, my stress increasing. "Really? I mean, we don't even have a venue yet. I'm not convinced we can find one this fast."

Tatum nodded as she headed to my pantry and pulled the tin of Milo from it. Holding it up, she said, "First, we drink. Then, we plan. Even if I have to beg someone for a venue, we will make this happen. And if you ever tell King I was the one who told you he was right, I will deny it until the day I die."

CHAPTER SEVEN

King

I'd wasted another fucking day waiting for the location of the motherfucker who was screwing my club over. And Eric Bones had confirmed that more coke had hit the street that wasn't sourced from Storm.

"Have you heard from Winter today?" Hyde asked, taking the seat opposite mine in my office. He looked as pissed off as I was.

"Yeah. He's feeling some heat from this." He'd told me that the Melbourne chapter of Black Deeds was making some noise about taking some of our territory.

"Everyone's here, ready for you."

I'd called every member in to go over what we needed to do now. I wasn't waiting anymore. We'd hunt the city for this asshole and find him ourselves. Before he caused any further problems for us.

Shoving my chair back, I stood and made my way out to the clubhouse bar. All eyes came to me fast as everyone waited for what I had to say. The entire club getting called out at 7:00 p.m. on a Sunday night wasn't something they were used to, so they knew shit was about to go down.

Looking around the room, I said, "We've got a new enemy. One we need to put an end to fast. Tonight, we all go fucking door knocking and find him. I don't care if you have to kick down doors, drag people out of bed, or cause havoc; we do not fucking stop until we have him." My voice darkened as I demanded, "Am I understood?"

As they gave me their confirmation, I said, "See Hyde for more information, and if you find this guy, I'm the first to know. You can

do whatever you need to do to restrain him, but he comes to me alive."

I left them and stalked back to my office. Pulling out my phone, I called Lily who took her sweet fucking time answering. "King. Are you coming home soon? Or do you want me to put your dinner—"

"I won't be home tonight. Don't keep any dinner for me."

"Oh, okay." A slight pause and then—"Is everything okay? You don't sound happy."

I scrubbed my face. "Yeah. I'll see you tomorrow."

Ending the call, I placed my phone on the desk and reached for the bottle of whisky behind me. I poured a glass and downed it in one go. It hit the spot, but I needed more to help take the edge off. I was fucking wired for blood. When we found Clark fucking Kent, I would spend hours getting his blood on my hands. And that couldn't come fucking fast enough.

I threw another glass of whisky down my throat as Wolf stepped into the room. Taking in the expression on his face, I recalled Lily's words from earlier. *I think something's going on with him.* It had fucking pissed me off that his old lady had approached Lily with this shit. And it had also pissed me off that Lily had brought that shit to me.

"What?" I barked, not wanting to hear whatever the fuck he had to say.

"Fuck," he muttered, unease clear in his voice. "I really hate to come to you with this—"

"Well don't. Walk back out of this office and go handle the shit you've been asked to handle."

He stared at me in silence. When that silence had passed its use-by date, I said, "Have we got a problem, Wolf?"

He only thought about that for a second. "No."

"Good, because as far as I'm concerned, I made it clear as fuck what I expect from you tonight, and if you can't do what I've asked, then we've got a big fucking problem that I can guarantee you neither of us want."

Shaking his head, he said, "There's no problem, King."

I watched him leave, the beast inside roaring to life.

Blood.

I needed to see it.

I needed to feel it.

I fucking needed to spill it.



"The rain isn't helping any of us," Nitro said five hours later when I called to check in with him. "It's fucking pouring down on this side of town, slowing us down. And the fucking cops are out in full force thanks to it, too. I'm not sure we're gonna have much success tonight."

He was right; the rain had turned torrential. Some streets were beginning to flood.

"I've got one more place on my list. How's everyone else's list going?" Nitro was the one keeping tabs on our operation, ensuring every last corner of Sydney was checked.

"They're making progress, but we're not even close to finding this guy. Either no one knows a fucking thing about him or he's paid them well enough to keep their mouths shut."

My guess was the latter. "The rain's not stopping us, brother. Push everyone harder. I want him found."

"Fuck, King. I feel you, but—"

"No fucking buts, Nitro. We keep fucking going."

I stabbed at my phone to end the call before eyeing Devil. Jerking my chin at the house we stood outside of, I said, "You take the back."

He nodded and quickly made his way around the side of the house while I headed for the front door. Already soaked, I barely noticed the rain or the mud as I stalked through it.

Before I reached the door, it opened and a guy barrelled out, coming at me with a gun and a roar of anger. Mine was aimed and ready to go, and the sound of gunfire mingled with the heavy rain as we both pulled our trigger.

His bullet just missed my right arm. I was so fucking hyped up that I hardly registered it. I picked up my pace and charged at him. My bullet ended up in his stomach, slowing him down, so I had little trouble getting my arms around him and taking him to the ground.

I had never heard of this guy until an hour ago when another asshole we'd talked to gave me this address. He'd told me that this guy hadn't shut up about a friend of his going after Storm's business. I

figured that, based on the welcome party I'd received, we were a step closer to finding Clark Kent.

"Jesus, King, you good?" Devil asked, joining me back out the front of the house.

"Yeah. Help me get him inside."

The guy kicked and screamed, trying desperately to escape our hold, but Devil and I managed to carry him inside. I was covered in his blood and mud by the time we dumped him on his couch. In an effort to control him, I punched him hard in the face. "Shut the fuck up!"

He spat up at me. "Fuck you! I'm not telling you anything."

I reefed him back up, spun him around, and shoved him hard across the room. When he landed on his ass, I took my gun and shot him in the leg before crouching in front of him. "I'll riddle your body with bullets if I have to, but I'm not leaving here until you tell me everything you know about what your friend is doing." Taking aim, I shot his other leg and snarled, "And if you ever fucking spit at me again, I'll dedicate hours to making you hurt."

The guy roared in pain, his face an angry red mess of hostility and agony. When he continued carrying on with his anger rather than giving me what I wanted, I yanked out my blade. Gripping his jaw, I said, "You know what my favourite thing to do to assholes like you is?" I pressed the tip of the knife to his chest, my beast feeding off his fear. "Some call it stabbing, some refer to it as slicing, but I like to think of it as carving. I like to create fucking masterpieces of flesh and blood." I reached for his shirt and slashed it in half down the front. "And I like to take my fucking time. So settle in, because we've got a long night ahead of us."

As my knife pierced his skin, he screamed out, "I'm not fucking ratting him out!"

I carved a deep gash down his stomach, near the bullet wound I'd already inflicted. "You will," I promised, my demons blazing to life.

Devil held him down while I continued to slice into his skin. I had to give the asshole props; he didn't squeal for a while. It wasn't until I'd carved my way down to his fingers that he finally started talking.

With blood dripping from his body, he panted, "Fucking hell, he's left town. Don't cut my fucking fingers off.... I'll give you what-

ever you want."

He shared everything he knew after that, which wasn't too fucking much, but it was enough to know we weren't going to find his friend in Sydney. Clark Kent had gone back to Brisbane to source more coke.

After we'd extracted the information, Devil eyed the guy on the floor. "What do you want to do with him?"

I stood and pointed my gun at the guy's head. Extracting information from him had taken some of the edge off my need for blood. Pulling the trigger contributed to that. But until I had Kent's blood on my hands, that need would not be fully satisfied.

"Call Nitro," I answered Devil. "Tell him we have what we need so he can send everyone home."

As he called Nitro, I called Scott Cole. He answered on the fourth ring. "Fuck, King, it's late. What's up?"

"I've got a job for you. And I'll be in town tomorrow."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Lily

King was leaving town.

The man had practically forced a change of wedding date on me yesterday, and now he was fucking leaving town for an unknown amount of time.

Deep breath, Lily.

You're used to this.

This is what he does.

He makes plans and then he changes them just as fast.

You've got this.

Deep fucking breath.

"Lily," he demanded, "did you listen to anything I just said?"

I stared at him as he sat on the end of our bed lacing his boots. And I took that deep breath and nodded. "Yes, I heard you."

He took that in, narrowing his eyes a little as he did so. Like he was trying to gauge my feeling about this new development. "My guess is I'll be home by Thursday. Friday at the latest."

I couldn't with him. I just couldn't. Not today. The kids had given me hell this morning and I'd been late getting them to school. Linc had given me grief over my request for him to cough up his late child support payment. My mother had left me a weird message on my phone that I couldn't, for the life of me, figure out. The general gist was that she was cranky with me. I'd deal with her later. And on top of all that, the washing machine had died this morning, and when I'd mentioned it to King, he'd shrugged his fucking shoulders and told me it'd have to wait until he got home from Brisbane. At that point, I didn't even know he was *going* to Brisbane.

I continued staring at him, because really, there was nothing else to do than that. I mean, I had no clue what would come out of his mouth next. "I should hope you'll be home by Friday since we have a wedding to attend on Saturday."

Before I knew what was happening, he'd stood and taken hold of me as he walked me backwards to the wall. "Do we have a problem?" he growled, his hand around my neck.

I attempted to pry his hand from my body but failed. "Let me go, King. This is not the time for you to be manhandling me."

Dark, stormy eyes locked onto mine as he refused to let me go. "I'm going to be away from you for days, Lily, and the last fucking thing I need to be worrying about is whether you're in a fucking mood with me. Tell me if you have a problem with this."

I placed my hands to his chest and pushed him away. He hadn't seen that coming, so I was successful in escaping his grip. "Yes, I have a fucking problem with this! You forced me to change the wedding date. You told me you'd help me with the plans. You said it would all work out okay. And now you won't even be here this week while I probably have a fucking meltdown over all the shit I have to take care of!" My body flowed with the same stormy energy King's did as I let all my frustrations out. "I don't have a problem with you going. You know I never do. But fuck me, I would have preferred it to not be this week." As he came for me, I stabbed my finger in the air and added, "And now I sound like a whiny bitch! You should have just left and I would have called Brynn to get all that off my chest. Why do you always have to force me to tell you stuff I don't want to?"

He crashed into me, his strong arms lifting me and throwing me on the bed, his hands ripping my clothes off, his lips devouring mine. When he came up for air, he rasped, "Because I need to fucking know what you're thinking. I don't give a fuck what you sound like; all I care about is that we get that shit out and we deal with it. You don't want to fail at another marriage? You fucking give it to me straight. *That's* how we don't fail."

My breaths came hard and fast as I took all that in. Fuck, he was right. Why did he always have to be right? I wrapped my legs around his naked body and took hold of his face. "God I love you, but fuck you annoy me sometimes!"

As I pulled his mouth back to mine, he thrust inside me. Our bodies moved together, fast and furious as we each chased our release. Anger and love and hope met head-on, our own special kind of alchemy. By the time we came, King had worked my frustrations out of me and all that was left was the deep love I felt for him.

After, as he zipped his jeans, he said, "I'll do my best to be home on Thursday."

I slipped my T-shirt over my head and nodded. "I know you will."

We watched each other silently as we finished dressing. Then, pulling me to him, he ran his hand over my hair, smoothing it. Kissing my forehead, he exhaled and said, "Fuck, I love you."

I put my arms around him and snuggled against his chest. It wasn't often King gave me this side of him, so when he did, I cherished it even more. "I love you, too."



Monday was a write-off and Tuesday wasn't much better. King made it safely to Brisbane, thank God. I always worried about him when he went on a ride, so I didn't sleep much Monday night. Having to work all day Tuesday, on very little sleep, with assholes filling my day, left me with the headache from hell by that afternoon. King had organised for Kick, who had stayed in Sydney, to take Zara to her maths tutoring after school, and he'd been called back to the clubhouse while driving her home afterwards, so I drove over to collect her from there.

With said headache.

And a million jobs on my to-do list for the night that was only causing the headache to intensify to unbearable levels.

So it was in that state that I came across Jenny from the Block, otherwise known as Marley, otherwise known as the bitch who hated me. I referred to her as Jenny from the Block in my head because she looked like Jennifer Lopez. I needed to stop thinking of her like that, because while she was beautiful like Jennifer, her soul was ugly as hell.

I stumbled across her in the kitchen when I ducked in there to grab a drink. She and June, another old lady, were discussing the fact

King had ordered their men to go to Brisbane with him. They didn't hear me come in and carried on unaware I was listening.

"I'm so fucking over this bullshit," Marley said. "King speaks and our men just have to come running."

"Lizard is this close to wanting to leave the club," June said.

"Yeah, I keep telling Marx to stand up to King—" Marley started, but I cut her off.

"You know, if you have such a fucking problem with King and this club, *you* should just fucking leave," I said, glaring at both of them. "Jesus, do you two even understand what the club is all about?"

Marley returned my glare and came towards me. "Of course we fucking do. We've been around for a lot fucking longer than you have, remember?"

"Well it doesn't sound like it, Marley. It sounds like you need a lesson in how shit works around here and to learn some respect for the club and for King."

"Are you fucking serious right now, bitch?"

I stepped right into her personal space and crowded her. "Yes, I fucking am."

Fuck, right now, after the day I'd had, I wanted nothing more than to knock this bitch down. And I would if she kept pushing me. And I didn't even care if King took issue with that.

She pushed my shoulder and hit me with a nasty smile. A smile that told me she didn't think I had it in me to take her on. "Yeah, I doubt it, Lily. You're a fucking basic bitch. I have no idea what King sees in you. I mean, it's not like you've got the balls to be the kind of old lady he needs. I'm pretty sure he's got a couple of sluts on the side who fuck him the way he really needs—"

My brain exploded with both pain and anger. How dare she say that shit about my man? I lunged at her, shoving her back so hard she slammed into the counter in the middle of the room. Every inch of me blazed with fury as I closed the distance between us again and went after her some more. Slapping her face, I yelled, "Don't you ever fucking say shit like that about King again!"

Her face contorted with her own fury and she screamed back, "I'll say whatever the fuck I want to say!" Grabbing at my hair, she yanked it hard before punching me.

Soon, we were punching, slapping, and screaming at each other. Kitchen equipment flew everywhere as we made a mess in there. June tried to get in on it, too, but I punched her so hard she collapsed onto the floor and didn't come back up.

"Fucking hell," Kick yelled when he came to see what the noise was all about. Pulling Marley off me, he roared, "Stop!"

She thrashed in his hold, but was no match for him. "Put me down!"

"I'm not fucking putting you down until you calm down," he said, his eyes meeting mine. "What the hell happened?"

I arched a brow as I pushed my hair out of my eyes. "I was just taking care of business."

It was his turn to arch a brow. "This is your way of taking care of business?"

I took the few steps to where he stood with Marley. Looking her dead in the eyes, I said, "No, this is." Gripping her face hard, I snarled, "If you ever talk shit about King again, I will make you fucking regret it. I will do everything I can to ensure you never fucking step foot in this clubhouse again. And if you think I don't have the balls or the power to do that, fucking try me, bitch."

She glared at me for another long minute before jerking out of Kick's hold and striding out of the kitchen.

June scurried after her as Kick whistled low and said, "Remind me never to cross you, Lily."

"I don't think that'll be an issue, Kick. You're not a bitch like those two."

He chuckled and then lifted his chin towards the door. "Zara's in the bar waiting for you, but if I were you, I'd go clean up your face first."

I reached for my bag. "Thank you for getting her to her tutoring this afternoon. I owe you."

Grinning, he said, "I'll take some of your famous roast chicken the next time you cook it."

I laughed and then grimaced as pain shot through my face where Marley had hit me. "God, this is going to hurt like a bitch, isn't it?"

"Hate to break it to you, but yeah."

"It was totally worth it," I said before exiting the room and making my way to the bathroom to clean up my face.

On the way, I ran into Cherie whose eyes widened as she took in my face. "Shit, what happened to you?"

"Your friends, Marley and June, got into it with me."

As I tried to walk past her, she placed her hand on my arm and said, "Marley and June aren't my friends, Lily."

I stopped. "Well, whatever they are to you, they are far from that to me. And to be quite honest, I'm not interested in talking about it."

"Fair enough. But I hope you won. Those girls could do with someone putting them in their place."

That surprised me. "Well, I hope I did. It was my intention."

She smiled, and it felt like the most genuine smile I'd received from any other women here other than the ones I was friends with. "Don't let those two bring you down. There's a lot of us here who are on your side."

"I didn't get that vibe from you the other day."

Her smile disappeared. "Yeah, about that, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have voiced any of my worries about Wolf."

Going completely against what King had said to me about this being none of my concern—because basic human kindness *was* my concern—I said, "You should feel free to share your struggles, Cherie. I'm always here if you need someone to talk to."

She glanced down for a moment before meeting my gaze again, tears in her eyes. Biting her lip in what seemed to be an effort not to cry, she said softly, "Thank you. I don't have many friends, and I feel like everything is out of control at the moment with my family. With Wolf. And I'm really worried...."

When she dissolved into tears, I put my arms around her and hugged her. "Do you want to tell me what's going on?"

Pulling away, she wiped her tears. "His father committed suicide three weeks ago and he's going under. He needs help, someone to talk to, but he refuses to get it. Says he's fine and doesn't need to share his shit with anyone. He fights with me over everything and he's started not coming home some nights." She madly wiped her face again. "I just don't know what to do."

My heart broke for her and her family. I didn't know how to help her right now, but I would find a way. For this week, I knew Wolf was in Brisbane with King, so I said, "Do you and the kids want to come over for dinner tomorrow night? I've got the day off and I'm going to cook a roast." Cherie worked full-time, so I knew she'd

probably appreciate a night off cooking. "Maybe after dinner, we can talk some more."

If there was one thing I recognised in another mother, it was pure gratitude, and that was exactly what I saw in Cherie's eyes then. "I would like that. A lot. Thank you."

I pulled her in for another hug before letting her go and nodding. "So would I. Come any time you want tomorrow. I'll be home from about four."

On the drive home, Zara looked at me and asked, "Why are you smiling like a crazy woman?"

I smiled even harder. "No particular reason. I'm just happy."

She rolled her eyes. "You are the weirdest mother I know."

I didn't know why it meant so much to me that I'd made a friend in Cherie, but it did. Women needed to stick together as far as I was concerned. Those catty bitches could fuck off; I wasn't giving them another second of my time. But the women who stuck by me? I would do anything for them.



As I was going to bed that night, King called. It was after midnight, so I hadn't expected a call. Not after he'd sent me a text earlier.

"Hey, you," I said around a yawn, snuggling under the covers. It had rained all day again and the winter chill meant it had been freezing as well, so I had multiple blankets on me tonight. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah." His deep rumble touched me everywhere. "Is everything okay with you?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Heard you got yourself into a fight today. What's going on?"

"Nothing's going on, so you don't need to worry. I was just sorting out some stuff that needed sorting."

He turned silent for a beat. "Have you spoken with your mother yet?"

"No."

"You need to."

"I will."

"Lily," his tone became more commanding, "call her tomorrow."

"God, you're so freaking bossy, even all the way from Brisbane," I muttered. "Fine, I'll call her tomorrow."

"Let me know when you've spoken to her."

Jesus, the man was relentless.

I changed the subject. "I spoke with Cherie again today."

"Fuck," he growled, but I cut him off.

"Before you go all hard-core president on me, I'd just like to point something out here. Me sharing what I know with you is like you getting involved in my problems with my mother. In the same way that you're trying to help me, I'm trying to help you."

I waited for him to say something, but when he didn't, I continued, "I don't want a thing to do with your club business, King, so get that idea out of your head. But what I am going to do in future, whether you like it or not, is tell you stuff I think you might need to know for the sake of your club. And what you need to know today is that Wolf's father committed suicide three weeks ago and he's struggling. That's all I'm going to say on the matter. And you can come home and tell me to keep shit to myself or whatever you want, but you need to know, before we get married, that if I have information I believe is important to one of your club members' wellbeing, I'm going to pass it on. That's just basic care for a fellow human."

Silence again, and then—"You finished?"

"Yes."

"Go to sleep. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

We ended the call and I wondered if he'd listened to what I'd said. Like, *really* listened. I hoped so, but if nothing else, he hadn't argued with me over any of it.

Who knew what thoughts ran through King's mind? I certainly didn't. What I did know, though, was that he surprised me more often than not, so maybe he had taken in what I said and maybe he would act on it.

CHAPTER NINE

King

Late Wednesday afternoon, Havoc turned up at the Brisbane clubhouse with the information I'd been hunting for weeks.

"Found your guy, King," he said as he entered Scott Cole's office where Cole and I had been going over our plan for the night.

"Where?" I asked, feeling more fucking hopeful than I had all day. I'd come this fucking close to Kent earlier, but someone had tipped him off.

"I dropped him off at the warehouse about half an hour ago. He's restrained and waiting for you. A word of caution though: he's Salvatore Bianchi's cousin."

Fuck, that was why we'd failed to locate him. Bianchi was a kingpin with a network of allies that stretched to every fucking corner of the country. If he wanted to hide someone, you'd never find them.

"How did you find him?" Cole asked.

Havoc unscrewed the lid of the whisky bottle on the desk. "When you've been on the road for as long as I have, you meet a lot of fuckin' people. And if you give them enough liquor, soon enough they start talking." He poured a drink and threw some down his throat before looking at me and saying, "You're lucky he's still alive. The motherfucker gave me enough hell that I wanted to take my own fuckin' knife to him."

Scott eyed me. "You want any help on this?"

I poured myself a whisky and drank it in one gulp. "I'll take Hyde." But first, I had someone to see. Glancing at Havoc, I said, "Good fucking work, brother."

He nodded and I left the office to find Wolf.

Locating him in the clubhouse bar, I took the seat across from him. His exhaustion had set in harder than when I'd seen him this morning. Grief was strangling him in much the same way regret had its claws in me. That it had taken Lily to make me open my fucking eyes weighed heavy on my mind. I'd sworn I wouldn't make this kind of mistake again after I'd let Nitro down, and here I was, repeating fucking history.

Wolf lifted his chin in greeting and murmured, "King," as I sat.

"You've got a flight to catch in two hours. Nash will take you to the airport."

His brows pulled together. "What's going on?"

"Kick will be waiting for you in Sydney when you arrive. He'll drive you down to Wollongong where Cherie and the kids are with her parents." I slowed my words as I said with determination, "I want you to take some time off and spend it with your family. I also want you to find someone to talk to about your father. The club will pay for whatever you need."

What I said irked him and he fired up. "I don't fucking need to talk to someone, King. This isn't shit that'll be fixed after I tell someone how I fucking feel. And I sure as fuck don't need time off."

"Yeah, you do, Wolf. And you're not coming back until I say." I stood. "I'll make sure your bike makes it home safely."

As I headed out of the bar to look for Hyde, Lily sent me a text.

Lily: This wedding can't happen on Saturday.

Me: Why not?

Lily: No dress, no location and it's fucking flooding.

Me: You sort the dress. Leave the rest with me. This wedding is happening this weekend.

Lily: You are the most difficult and painful man I know.

I didn't respond to that. Instead, I checked the weather forecast on my phone. Turned out she was right about the flooding. Parts of Sydney were going under, as were parts of the coast road.

"Hey." I glanced up at Hyde's voice. "I heard that Havoc found our guy. You ready to take care of him so we can get the fuck home

before this rain closes the road between here and Sydney?"

Another text came through.

Lily: Seriously, check the bloody weather, King! Even you can't control that.

"Fuck," I muttered, looking at Hyde. "Does Monroe give you grief over shit that doesn't need worrying over?"

His mouth curled up in the kind of grin I never saw on Hyde's face. "Fuck me dead. Never thought I'd see the day you bitched about a woman."

Nitro joined us, looking as ready for blood as I felt. "We leaving now?"

Hyde shifted his attention to Nitro. "Yeah. King's just dealing with a situation at home first."

"What kind of situation?" Nitro asked.

I rubbed the back of my neck and stretched it. "The kind that gives me headaches."

Another text.

Lily: King! Are you even reading my texts? I'm about to cancel the wedding FYI.

I worked my jaw. "Gimme a minute," I said before stepping aside to call Lily.

She answered as fast as I hit the phone to dial her. "Did you check the forecast?"

"Yeah, I checked it. The rain'll be gone by the weekend."

"You're making shit up, King. There's no way you know that."

"Lily—"

"At this rate, you won't even make it home in time. They've started closing parts of the coast road."

"They—"

"And I doubt—"

"Lily!" I barked. "Calm the fuck down and listen to me. I'll be there. I don't care what the fuck I have to do to ensure that, but I will be there. And I've almost sorted out the venue, so you concentrate on the dress and stop fucking worrying."

"What venue?"

"A venue you're going to fucking love."

"Well I need to know where it is so I can choose a place for the reception that's not too far."

"Jesus, woman, I'll figure that out too. For the love of Christ, where's your sister?"

"She's here, but—"

"Put her on." When she started to argue, I barked again, "Lily! Put Brynn on the fucking phone. Now."

The sound of rustling and swearing filled my ears, but a moment later, Brynn came on the phone. "Yes, your highness."

Brynn could be a fucking smartass, but for the way she could pull Lily into line, I ignored her shit. "I need you to help Lily find a dress. That's all she has to do. I'm taking care of everything else. Can you do that?"

"There are so many things I could say to that question right now, King. For example, the fact you even asked rather than just told me —"

"Brynn, I asked you one simple question. I only need one simple answer." Fuck, these Bennett women were testing me today.

"Well the answer is yes, but you do know that she has Tatum and Monroe helping her organise everything already, don't you? I don't think they need you to do anything except help figure out the venue."

I wasn't aware of that, but I could work with it.

"Put Lily back on. And don't let her worry over this shit all week."

As she handed the phone to her sister, I heard Brynn mutter, "Are you sure you know what you're getting yourself into with him, Lily?"

No way in hell would I be able to put up with him."

"What did you say to her?" Lily demanded.

"I have to go. And I won't be anywhere near my phone for hours, so don't call."

I ended the call and immediately phoned Tatum.

"King," her voice came on the line, "Why are you calling me?"

"Trust me, Tatum, it wasn't my preference either, but I need a favour." *Fuck.*

"This should be interesting."

I then rattled off everything I wanted her to do for the wedding. By the end of the call, I knew this would probably be something I'd regret. Asking Tatum for anything always was.



When Havoc restrained someone, he did a good fucking job of it. We found Kent hanging upside down, legs tied together at the ankles, hands zip-tied together, arms secured by his waist with rope, and tape wrapped around his head, covering his mouth.

Hyde and Nitro cut him down while I dragged a chair over to sit on. Kent blinked rapidly as he watched me. He grunted and groaned in an effort to talk, but the tape restricted him.

When they had him on the cement floor, Hyde took a handful of his hair and yanked his head up to look him in the eyes. "You ready to talk, motherfucker, or do you need some encouragement?"

Nitro wasn't as patient. While Hyde had his face angled up, Nitro delivered a ferocious punch to his jaw. Another few followed, and more after that, hard and fast, inflicting maximum pain and bewilderment.

I crossed my arms and enjoyed the show.

"Who the fuck are you working with?" Hyde demanded as Kent's head hit the cement with a crack. Blood pooled where he landed. Nitro had stopped for now, but in a short amount of time, he'd put Kent in a world of hurt, and he looked ready to continue if we didn't get the information we were after.

Kent growled with that pain when Hyde finally tore the tape from his mouth. His top lip curled up in a snarl, though, and he bit out, "Get fucked. I'll die before I tell you that."

I grunted as I shot up and stalked to him. My boot connected with his stomach on a heavy thud as I kicked him. "It'll be a slow and fucking excruciating death." I kicked again before putting my boot to the side of his face and pressing down hard. "So I suggest you reconsider."

He attempted to curl his legs up against his chest, but he struggled. Spitting again, his mouth curved into a crazed grin and he laughed. "Do your best, King." His breathing was laboured, his words slow to come out.

I usually got a good feel for people and whether they were bluffing or not, and I had a suspicion this asshole wasn't. I suspected he wanted to die.

As Nitro's fists clenched, ready for round two, I stopped him. Crouching, I tipped Kent's chin up to bring his gaze to mine. "You want us to kill you, don't you? Because you think it'll be a walk in the fucking park compared to whatever torture waits for you out there. That's what this is about, isn't it?"

The fear I hadn't seen in his eyes yet surfaced. He tried to hide it, but I saw it. And I had my answer.

Standing, I jerked my chin at him. "Untie him. We're putting him back out there for whoever wants him more than we do. Once we find that cunt, we'll take care of everyone involved."

My demons roared to life at the thought of watching Kent while he waited for his day of reckoning. Witnessing that kind of suffering wasn't as satisfying as inflicting it, but it came fucking close. And knowing it would lead me to who I really wanted caused my demons to get their fucking dancing shoes out.

Havoc's warning from earlier came back to me: *he's Salvatore Bianchi's cousin*. Salvatore Bianchi had been untouchable for years. He'd never been on my radar, though, because he'd never stepped on my fucking toes. If he had now, I didn't give a fuck who he was or what power he thought he had; he would pay with his blood for coming after my club.

CHAPTER TEN

Lily

"He's going to make it," Tatum said as she placed her hands on my shoulders and pushed me to sit on my couch. "

"Yes, I know," I said, earning me a confused look from her.

She sat on the coffee table in front of me. "Okay, so what happened to the stressed-out Lily I spoke to on the phone an hour ago? Not that I wanna see her again, but I need to know if you're bullshit-tin' me here or not."

Monroe sat next to me and hit her cousin with a smile and a glass of wine. "I gave her some pot. It was the only way to calm her down."

I rolled my eyes. "She didn't give me pot. I just came to my senses."

Tatum drank some wine and encouraged me, "How so?"

I shrugged. "This is King we're talking about. It might be Friday night, and it might be flooding across half of the state, and he might have been on the road for two days trying to get home with no luck, but I know my man, and he'll be here." I lifted my glass of wine and added, "Oh, and this helps. A lot."

Tatum shook her head, took a long sip of wine, and said, "Okay, I get the picture. We're all just gonna get trashed tonight and pray that God forgets what an ass King can be and remembers what a good person you are and as a result decides to let King home. Does that about cover it?"

I cocked my head and squinted one eye shut so I could see her without seeing double. "I didn't think you believed in God?"

"I fucking don't."

I giggled, my head spinning a little as I took another sip. Before I could get that sip, Tatum stole the wine glass from me with, "Okay, you're giggling and I'm putting my foot down. No more wine for the bride. I do not need to deal with King's cranky ass tomorrow when he turns up to discover you've got a fucking hangover at your own wedding."

I pouted. "I don't know why you two don't get along better. You're both as bossy as each other. And grumpy."

"That is fake news, Lil," Brynn said, entering the lounge room. "There's no one alive who is as bossy or grumpy or asshole as your man."

"Amen," Tatum said, nodding at her. "Right"—she stood—"we've got the dressmaker arriving in about fifteen minutes with the dresses. After that, I'm heading out to get the flowers while you get in the bath, and Brynn and Monroe organise dinner. Evie can't make it because she can't get a sitter for Elizabeth, but Hailee said she'd try and come over. I'm not holding out hope, though, because the streets around her are still flooded."

I rested my head against the top of the couch and did my best not to think about the fact half of Sydney was still flooded. I'd come to the decision about half an hour ago, that if the wedding didn't happen tomorrow, it wasn't the end of the world. I mean, I wasn't the one who wanted to bring it forward, anyway. Either way, King and I would be married. It just might take another week.

As the girls scattered, my phone rang, and I smiled when I saw King's name flash across the screen.

"Hey you," I said. "Where are you?"

"Not too far away now. I'm just checking in to see how everything is going there? Did Linc come through for you?"

An unexpected feeling of serenity washed over me. All week I'd been stressing and having meltdowns over the phone with King, and all week he'd moved mountains to ease my stress and get home in time. Sure, he'd been his usual moody, bossy self doing it, but the fact was, he always had my best interests at heart. And the thing I'd finally come to understand was that when I just allowed him to care for me, that in itself was one way I could care for him. Because when King knew those he loved were okay, *he* was okay.

This realisation didn't mean I was about to always just blindly let him take over our lives, but I was going to pick my battles with him

more wisely.

"Yes, Linc came through. The kids are with him while we take care of the final preparations here, and then he's going to bring them home early tomorrow morning to get ready for the wedding."

"Good. I'm hoping this road is going to open soon, which should put me home by morning."

I gripped the phone tighter. "I miss you."

He turned silent for a moment. "Yeah." It came out on a gruff rumble, and I knew that one word conveyed so many more words that didn't come easily to him, but that he felt. My man was economical with his words, but I felt his feelings from miles away.

"King," I started and then stopped.

"What?"

"I don't need any more boundaries surrounding our love. I love us just the way we are. And I love *you* just the way you are."

Silence again, and then—"Fucking hell, I should go away more often."

I smiled, bigger this time. "You should not." And then, to play with him a bit, I said, "Just so you know, I've never been hornier than I am this week. I'm really freaking hoping you get home before the morning, because I'm not sure I can wait for you to fuck me tomorrow night."

"Who the fuck said anything about waiting until tomorrow night?"

Lust flooded my veins. "Okay, we need to end this call now because I've got a house full of people and can't do what I really want to do."

"Is your mother there?"

I sighed. "No."

"Lily. Get your ass over to her place and fix this because the wedding isn't going ahead if she's not there."

That surprised me. I didn't think there was anything that would stop King from marrying me. "Turns out you like my mother, huh?"

"Fuck," he muttered, "One of you will be the death of me, and I'd rather it be you than her, so sort your shit out and let me know once you have."

"I love you even more for loving her, even if you won't admit it."

"Get some sleep tonight."

They were his final words before he ended the call. I dropped my phone on the couch and savoured the moment.

I was happy.

The happiest I'd ever been in my life.

It seemed that even in the storms of life, calm existed. In amongst the chaos and turmoil of relationships, peace existed. And it seemed, happiness weaved its way through it all. We just had to allow it in instead of fighting against it.



"I'll wait out here while you go in and talk to her," Brynn said half an hour later as we sat outside our mother's house.

"Why?"

"Ah, because you've both been awful to deal with this week and I don't want anything to do with this conversation. You know, out of all the fights you two have ever had, this one feels like the worst. I've never seen Mum so upset."

As much as Mum had driven me crazy over the past couple of weeks, I hated that we weren't talking. We never stopped talking for longer than a few hours when we argued. Usually, she turned up at my place and acted like nothing had happened. And if she didn't, I made the effort to bring us back together. But this time, neither of us had waved the white flag.

I opened the car door. "Okay, wish me luck, Brynn. I think I'm gonna need it this time."

Mum came to the door almost as fast as I knocked. "Lily," she said, her tone a little short. A lot hurt.

"Mum."

She didn't move to let me in, and I wondered if maybe this time it might take us a little longer to find our way back to each other.

"Can I come in?" I asked, noting her closed-off body language. A rush of fear sliced through me at the thought of my mother saying no to me.

You only get one mother, Lily.

She might send you to drink sometimes, but you. Only. Get. One. Mother.

"Please," I added, my voice wavering.

"I'm not sure I'm ready to speak to you yet." The hurt she felt blazed to life and regret overwhelmed me.

I placed a hand on her arm. "Mum, I'm sorry I was awful to you. It's no excuse, but I've been feeling really out of my depth with everything lately, and when you try to take over like you did, it just messes with my head. I should have been more patient."

"Yes, you should have. I was only trying to help you, which is all I ever try to do for you and Brynn. And then King.... Well, he's a whole other story with the way he behaves. I'll be having a word with him about all this, too."

I exhaled the breath I'd been holding.

We're going to be all right.

She frowned. "What do you mean when you say you felt out of your depth?"

"Can we go inside to talk?"

Peering around me, she said, "Go and get your sister out of the car. I just put the kettle on. We need tea for this. And for goodness' sake, darling, we need to do something about those eyebrows of yours. You can't get married with all those eyebrows."

I managed to keep my laughter on the inside. Hannah Bennett would never change, but I could definitely try harder to not lose my shit at her so often. I'd never felt the fear of losing her like I just had. She might be difficult and overbearing, but I couldn't imagine a life without her. One day, I'd have to, but until then, I would love her in spite of her flaws. God knew she loved me in spite of mine.

Ten minutes later, the three of us sat around her table with mugs of tea, and she asked me again, "Why have you felt out of your depth, darling?"

I took a long sip of tea before placing my mug down. "I've been thinking a lot about marriage and divorce, and how hard relationships are. And I was worried that King and I maybe clash too much to be able to make a successful marriage. I just wasn't sure if I had it in me to deal with his brand of getting shit done."

I expected Mum to dismiss my concerns like she usually did with her way of burying her head in the sand, but she surprised me by listening intently and then saying, "When I got married, my mother gave me some advice, and while my marriage was not a good one, her advice helped me a lot, so I'm going to share it with you." She

paused before adding, "I think you're going to need it to survive living with King."

Brynn almost spat her tea. "I think that might be the truest thing you've ever said, Mum."

I knew by the seriousness of Mum's expression that whatever she was about to tell me, she fully believed was advice I needed. "When you argue, there isn't a winner or a loser. You are partners so you either win together or you lose together. You need to work for a solution, nothing else."

Mum had my complete attention with that. Brynn's too. I felt every word she'd said so far because I knew I hadn't always approached my first marriage in the best ways. I'd allowed petty arguments to grow into more than they should have, and I was determined not to make the same mistakes with King.

"Also," Mum continued, "marriage isn't 50-50. It's 100-100. Give everything you have, all of the time. You don't wait until things become problematic to give your all. And lastly, when you have a problem with King that you want to talk to him about, don't start a sentence with the word 'you,' always begin with 'I.' Don't tell him your thoughts, share your feelings."

Brynn stared at our mother like she'd grown another head. I stared at her like she held all the secrets to life and had been keeping them to herself.

I leaned over and threw my arms around her, love engulfing me. After hugging her for the longest time, I pulled away and said, "Thank you."

She smiled and cupped my cheek. "I only want you girls to be happy. That's all."

"I know," I said softly as I wiped tears from my eyes. "God, I've become an emotional wreck this week. It's ridiculous."

Mum narrowed her eyes at me. "You're not pregnant are you darling?"

I hadn't thought of that. Not that I would be, because I made sure to take my pill religiously. "No. I'm just crazy. And lucky that you all put up with my crazy."

Brynn squeezed my hand. "Your life has changed so fast over the last few months, Lil. I don't blame you for being crazy. And as much as *I* could never live with King, you two are perfect for each other, because you're both as fucking crazy as the other."

Mum nodded and then arched her brow. "Yes, and he and I have some ground rules to establish as to how I will be treated going forward. You, my darling, might be willing to put up with his dictatorial ways, but I will not."

Brynn laughed. "Oh God, Mum, good luck with that. I don't think King even knows the meaning of ground rules."

As Brynn laughed and Mum continued on with her rant about how King bossed her around, I tried to slow time so I could truly appreciate the bond the three of us shared. It was something I didn't do enough of. Life with a busy family ran at full steam ahead most of the time, and I found myself missing these rare moments. I made a decision to find ways to intentionally bring more of them into my life, because when all was said and done, the best part of life was love and family.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Lily

“Lily, girl, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so fucking calm. Tell me what drugs you’re on,” Monroe said when she arrived Saturday morning holding a big bag full of gumboots.

Taking a quick glance at all the boots, I said, “No drugs, just love.” I pointed at the bag. “What’s with all those?”

“Ah, it’s almost 10:00 a.m. and King’s nowhere to be seen, there’s still no confirmed venue for the wedding, and you’re not a ball of stress. I’m not buying it. You snuck some weed, didn’t you? Or maybe some Valium?”

I laughed and shook my head. “I’ve taken nothing. But I’m completely intrigued by the gumboots. Are we planning on wading through some water?”

It wouldn’t surprise me, thanks to all the rain we’d had this week. The best news was the rain stopped last night and the flooding eased. King called me just after six this morning to let me know he was finally on the road again. The wedding was planned for 2:00 p.m. but since he still wouldn’t tell me where it would take place, and since he probably wouldn’t be home by then, I had no clue where or when I would say my vows to him.

I didn’t care, though. So long as he got home today, I knew we’d be married by the time we went to sleep tonight. This chopping and changing of plans was how King lived his life, so it was now how I lived my life. I’d made peace with that somewhere along the way this week and would embrace it as hard as I’d embraced him.

Monroe eyed the bag of gumboots. “I honestly don’t know why we need these, but Kick turned up at my place this morning and

dropped them off. He told me to bring them here."

Tatum joined us in the lounge room. "Roe, we're going to need your make-up expertise. The make-up artist can't get through the flood waters."

"Shit, I would have brought all my stuff if I'd known," Monroe said.

"She just called now. We'll have to make do with what we can find. Brynn's just gone to her place to grab her stuff, and Adelaide has a lot here, so between all of us, I think we'll be okay," Tatum said.

Monroe glanced between us. "Is the hairdresser here?"

I nodded. "Yes. We're all going to have amazing hair, so long as it doesn't rain again."

"You're never going to forget your wedding," she said.

A loud crash at the front door drew our attention there. Hailee smiled at us as she entered the house lugging a bag of gumboots the same as Monroe had and a few other smaller bags. "Sorry, Lily, I hope I didn't just break your door, but these bags are out of control. And what the hell are these gumboots for? Devil made me bring them."

I took the bag of boots from her. "I have no idea." Peeking inside the bag, I counted five pairs, the same as in Monroe's bag.

Before we could discuss the boots more, Mum waltzed in and with a clap of her hands said, "Girls, we need to get through all this hair. Who's going next?"

"Have Zara and Holly had theirs done?" I asked.

"Yes, and I've laid their dresses out on their beds," Mum said. Her eyes softened as she met mine. "Those dresses are beautiful, Lily. But are you really sure about the leather jackets? For a wedding?"

"Yes, Mum, it's cold outside. And they'll match me and the girls."

Brynn and Adelaide were my bridesmaids, and the three of us were all wearing biker jackets over our dresses. Both Zara and Holly had told me how much they loved that, so I'd made sure to get them some, too.

"I'll go next," Monroe said.

"Good," Mum said and waltzed back out of the room with a twirl.

Hailee laughed. "I love your mum. She's so much fun."

My phone sounded with a text.

King: Can you be ready in about an hour?

I called him.

"Did you get my text?" he asked, in greeting.

"Yeah. Are you nearly home?" My tummy fluttered at the thought of seeing him. Or maybe nerves. Either way, I felt like my entire body was smiling.

"I'm sending the boys to pick you all up and get you to the wedding. I'll meet you there."

"So we're doing this before two?"

"Yeah. I'm not taking a chance on the weather holding out until then."

"Hang on, let me check something," I said as I headed to Monroe and Tatum. When I had their attention, I said, "Can we all be ready in an hour? King wants to bring the wedding forward in case it rains again."

My mother's eyes widened in horror. "Darling, no."

I still had my phone to my ear, so I heard him say, "If you can't make it happen, we'll stick to the original plan. But I'm looking at the sky here and it's not looking good."

"And we're getting married outside?"

"Yeah."

"King, just tell me where already. The freaking suspense is killing me."

He ignored me and said, "Can you be ready? I need to know so I can put new plans into action."

"You're seriously not going to tell me, are you?"

"Fuck, Lily, yes or fucking no?"

I made a snap decision that my mother would have to live with. "Yes, but because I'm giving you what you want, you should give

me what I want and tell me where."

"Trust me, I'm giving you what you want."

And then he was gone and I was left with every set of eyes in the room staring at me with the same horror that had been in my mother's eyes a moment ago.

"Are you out of your mind?" Monroe asked. "You think we can all get ready in a fucking hour?"

I grinned. "It's tradition for the bride to be late. It'll do King good to wait for something for once in his life."



Kick and Devil arrived right on time, one hour from when King called. I only made them wait half an hour.

"Fuck, Lily," Devil said with a shake of his head, "I like your style of keeping King on his toes, but I'm the fucker who's gonna have to listen to him lose his shit over this."

Hailee snaked her arm around his waist with a smile. "I'll make it up to you tonight."

He brushed a kiss over her lips before saying, "If it rains, we're all going down for this. Kick and I aren't copping the full force of his wrath."

"Devil," I said as I put my jacket on, "No one but me will cop the full force of King's wrath over this, and I'm pretty sure when I whisper in his ear and tell him what I have planned for him tonight, there's not going to be any wrath."

Monroe grinned. "There's my girl."

Kick came into the house and eyed me. "You're gonna need to swap those shoes for the gumboots." Then, looking around the room, he said, "There's enough pairs for everyone."

"Are we wading through flood waters?" I joked.

The look he gave me told me it wasn't so much of a joke. "Something like that."

As he turned to go back outside, I grabbed his arm and stopped him. "Honestly, why do we need the boots? I don't want to be wading through water in this dress."

"We are *not* wading through water, Lil," Brynn said, joining us. "I mean, that dress cost a fortune. Surely King understands that brides

do not walk through muddy, dirty floodwater."

I looked down at the soft floaty tulle of my skirt. It had sparkly stars scattered over it and was the prettiest skirt I'd owned in my life. I'd layered it over a tea-rose slip dress and felt like the most beautiful woman in the world. Brynn was right; there was no way I was walking through floodwater in this dress.

Kick held up his hand to quieten us. "You won't be wading through water. The boots are just for getting in and out of the dinghy. And the grass is pretty waterlogged so the gumboots will be best for that, too."

"A dinghy?" Mum looked horrified. "Dear God."

I didn't even bother to quiz him on the need for a boat. He was being as freaking cagey about details as King. "And I guess you won't tell me where this grass is either, will you?"

He chuckled. "King will have my ass if I tell you that."

I rolled my eyes. "Figures."

"Okay," Devil rounded us all up. "We need to get on the road."

Everyone piled out of the house and into the two vans they had outside. I sat in between Zara and Holly, holding their hands.

"You look beautiful, Mum," Holly said, squeezing my hand. "King is going to lose his shit over your beauty, not the fact you're late. And he's gonna lose it in a good way. I'm pretty sure we're going to see a whole new side of King at this wedding."

I leaned over and kissed her cheek. "Thank you, baby. I'm not as sure, though. I think we've seen all the sides of King there are to see." And if I knew my man like I thought I did, he wasn't wowed by beauty in the way she thought he would be. King was wowed by actions. And he sure as hell had never softened simply by seeing me in a pretty dress.

"I think she's right," Zara chimed in.

I let go of their hands and spread my arms across their shoulders. Pulling them close, I said, "You girls are good with this, right? I mean, we've talked about me marrying King a lot, but I just want to check in with you both one last time."

Holly shifted in her seat so she faced me. "You need to stop worrying so much about us. We love him and how happy he makes you, and how he pulls your crazy back in line most of the time. And Robbie"—she glanced to the front of the van where Robbie sat talking excitedly with Devil—"well, clearly he loves being around all this

testosterone. I've never seen him take to someone how well he took to King. The kid is coming out of his shell thanks to your man so stop freaking worrying. We clear?"

"Oh God," I laughed, "Stop saying that." Holly had taken to speaking like King with her "we clear" bullshit. She used it on me as often as she could. Half as a joke, but half not. She'd also taken to learning as much about bikes from him as she could. And she was right: all three of my kids loved hanging out with King. Especially Robbie. It melted my heart watching King's patience with my son. The man had little patience for me most of the time, but he had all the patience in the world for Robbie.

"Okay," I said, "I'm officially not worrying over this now. You've all given your blessing and I'm marrying King."

I grabbed my phone and sent him a text.

Me: The good news is I'm on my way. The bad news is I have underwear on.

Me: But I made sure there are bows...

Me: That you can untie...

Me: And then for later, I have some other things for you...

He called while I was in the middle of another text. "Stop fucking texting me and tell whoever's driving to drive fucking faster."

I love my man.

"Where's the wedding, King?"

He turned silent for a beat. "Remember that block of land we found by accident that you loved?"

My breathing slowed.

"You didn't?"

"I did."

"Oh my God, it was so expensive."

"Yeah."

"You said there was no way you'd pay that much for a piece of fucking dirt." They'd been his exact words.

"I also said, years ago, that I'd never get fucking married. And here we fucking are."

I blinked furiously, trying to stop my tears from falling. "I love you, King." My words choked out.

"I love you, too, woman, so hurry the fuck up and get your ass here so I can make you mine."

"I'm already yours."

"Yeah, but I want my last name next to your first one so the entire fucking world knows it."

My tears fell.

"Shit, shit, shit," I muttered through the tears. "My girls were right about you and today, and you didn't even need to see me in a dress to give me this side of you. But stop talking; otherwise, my face is going to be a mess by the time you see it."

"Who's driving you?"

"Devil."

"Put him on."

I handed the phone over to Devil and took the tissue and mirror Tatum held out for me. Dabbing my tears carefully, I did my best to fix my face. By the time I finished, Devil had passed my phone back. My heart had almost returned to normal function when a text came through.

King: There better be fucking bows.

And there went my heart again.

King was a hard man, but for me, he had some soft. It only peeked through occasionally, but it lit my world like nothing else.

CHAPTER TWELVE

King

Lily was fucking beautiful.

Not that I needed to see her in a sparkly fucking dress to know that, but Christ, I'd never seen a woman more beautiful than my wife.

She'd put up with my shit this week.

She'd managed to get everyone ready earlier today, with little notice; she'd made her way across floodwaters in a fucking dinghy, without complaint; she'd trudged through mud in gumboots while hiking that sparkly dress up, without complaint; and she'd promised to love me forever, in spite of knowing how fucking hard I was to live with.

My wife would have the world.

And I would be the one to fucking give it to her.

"Whoever organised this wedding and reception deserves a raise," Hannah said, taking the seat next to me in the clubhouse bar where I'd decided to hold the reception. It was Lily's seat, but she was up dancing with my sisters while I kicked back and enjoyed the show.

Hannah hadn't said much to me all day, but that was only because she hadn't had the chance yet. I'd known this conversation was coming and had looked forward to getting it out of the way. Lily's mother didn't tend to hold grudges for long, but she always had to have the last fucking say.

"I don't disagree with you," I said, eyeing Tatum who sat talking with Nitro at the next table. She'd come through for me, but I hadn't

expected anything less. And I knew I'd pay a fuckload for it at some point.

We sat in silence for a few moments before I said, "Hannah, you need to say whatever it is you came to say and then you need to move past it. I'm not revisiting this again."

Not one to be hurried, she took her time, before finally saying, "The first man my daughter married let her down. I watched as she fought for that marriage; I watched as she struggled to find herself in all that mess; and I've watched as she's battled worry over repeating those mistakes again." She held my gaze firmly while she continued, "I don't think you're anything like that man who let her down, King, but I wouldn't be the first woman to believe a man to be something they aren't, so I'm here to tell you that if you do let her down, you'll have me to answer to. And you might think I'm a silly old woman with a brain on the fritz, but do not underestimate me. I'm a woman who has had enough of watching her daughter drown in life thanks to a man. You make my girl happy and you keep doing that for the rest of her life, and you and I won't have a problem."

If there was one kind of person I respected the hell out of in life, it was a parent who cared enough about their child to stand the fuck up for them. Hannah Bennett might have been a pain in my ass at times, but fuck, she'd earned my respect after that speech.

"We won't have a problem, Hannah."

She nodded slowly. "I hope we won't."

Lily's arms came around my neck and she pressed her lips to my cheek before saying, "What are you two sitting over here discussing?" She'd had a few drinks and was more relaxed than I'd seen her in weeks. But then, she'd been relaxed from the minute she'd stepped foot on our land for the wedding, which had made my fucking day, because seeing that kind of happiness and peace in my woman was what I lived for.

Hannah stood. "I was just welcoming King into our family, darling."

As she left us, Lily whispered into my ear, "Why are you laughing?"

Reaching back, I pulled her around onto my lap. "I'm not laughing."

She ran her fingers through my hair, pushing it back off my face. After brushing her lips across mine, she murmured, "Yeah you are. I

can feel the chuckle in your body.”

I ran my hand down her leg. “Your mother amuses me sometimes.”

Reaching for my hand, she stopped my progress down her body. “I know where you’re going with that hand, and you need to stop. My kids and mother are in this bar.”

“Well, we’re gonna need to get the fuck out of this bar then, because there’s no fucking way I can keep my hands off you for another minute.”

Her eyes searched mine. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“More fucking serious than I’ve ever been, Lily. This is the longest I’ve gone without you.”

She moved off my lap and headed in the direction of my office without waiting for me. Sashaying that sweet fucking ass of hers like it was her job.

I caught up to her as she walked past the table with the cake on it. Slowing, she turned and said, “If Tatum organised this cake, you owe her big time.”

“I owe Tatum far too fucking much for today,” I muttered, “But for this cake, I owe her nothing.”

She frowned. “Who then? Was it my mother? Or Brynn? Not many people know of my love for that cake, King.”

I spun her around and said, “Keep fucking walking and think about who else knows of your love for that cake.”

After taking only one fucking step, she turned again and, eyes wide, she said, “It was you, wasn’t it? You organised our cake.”

I lifted her and threw her over my shoulder and stalked out of the bar. Carrying her to the office, I said, “I’ve never seen anyone love a cake more than you love that six-fucking-layer chocolate cake. I’m pretty fucking sure that if push came to shove some days, you’d choose that cake over my dick.”

We hit the office and I sat her on the desk after I kicked the door closed behind us.

Without wasting a second, she reached for my shirt and lifted it over my head. “That might be true,” she started, but stopped abruptly when her eyes landed on the new tattoo on my chest that I’d had done in Brisbane. “Oh my God.” Her gaze cut to mine. “This is beautiful.”

The tattoo had been inspired by Lily and featured a skull with roses, with elements hidden amongst the design that only she and I would find meaningful. I had no intention of telling her what they were since the tattoo was for me, not her, but I knew she'd spend time searching it and find them.

"I see a bow! Oh my God, and the number 5!" Her eyes shined with happiness, hitting me fair in the fucking chest. Taking hold of my face, she kissed me. Long and deep and fucking fierce, *that* hit me fair in the fucking gut. When she pulled her lips from mine, she said breathlessly, "I will love you until the day I can't love you anymore. You have no idea how you've changed my life, King. How you've made it the life I wouldn't trade for anything."

I wrapped my hand around her neck and kissed her again, my mind, body, and soul consumed by love for her. "I thought I knew what love was before I met you, but I had no fucking clue. You make me a better man, Lily, and I'll spend the rest of my life making you a happy fucking woman."

That sexy mouth of hers spread out into the kind of smile I'd work hard for. "That would be Mrs King to you."

"Fucking hell," I growled, reaching for her skirt. "Nothing sounds better on your lips than that. Fucking nothing."

Love had always been something I'd struggled with. It had been a cruel bitch at times, and had turned me into a ruthless bastard at others. But I'd finally found the person who didn't make me think love was hard. Because loving Lily was the easiest damn thing I'd ever done.

I hope you loved this novella as much as I loved writing it. You'll note there's some unfinished club business in this story. You'll see more about that in coming books.

Now I have some chapters for you featuring King & Lily, as well as some of the Sydney Storm couples. I've written these chapters over the years of writing this series. You may have read some of them, but there is one that is completely brand new. They take place at various times throughout the timeline of the series. I've noted where they fit at the beginning of each chapter. The ones that take place four years

*after the wedding take place after the epilogue that was in King's
Reign.*

Enjoy!

*PS If you love reading bonus scenes, make sure you [join my VIP list](#)
so you can get access to my Alpha Vault where I store all my bonus
scenes! Catch up with Storm couples you love!*

ONE MONTH AFTER THE WEDDING

King

“King! Are you listening to anything I’m saying?” Lily demanded while she shimmied in an effort to get her dress into place.

I’d heard every word she’d said, but I was more interested in what she was doing than what she was saying. Stepping closer to her, I placed my hand on her hip while running my gaze over her tits. “This dress is far too fucking tight and way too fucking short,” I said.

She looked down at her dress. “You never care what I wear. Why now?”

Curving my hand over her ass, I pulled her flush against my body. “I don’t care that you’re wearing it; I’m only concerned it’s not gonna stay on you for long.”

She sucked in her breath as desire flared in her eyes. Pressing her palms to my chest, she attempted to push me away but I kept her firmly in place. “King, you promised me a date night and you’re making good on that promise.”

“I am making good on it, but you wanna wear shit that gets me hard, you need to accept where that leads.” My voice dropped to a rough gravel as I added, “And tonight, I’m pretty fucking sure that’s gonna lead to me fucking you while we’re out.”

Skylar’s voice sounded from outside our bedroom. “Lily, can I borrow that navy dress of yours? You know the one you wore to Robbie’s award ceremony last week?”

“Fucking hell,” I muttered. “How fucking hard is it to get you to myself for fucking once?”

Since our wedding a month ago, life had been hectic and I hadn't had my wife to myself for even a day. My time with her at night had also been cut into because she'd been exhausted from work and family stuff.

Lifting up onto her toes, she kissed me before saying, "I'm going to sort everyone out and then we're leaving. And you're going to play nice with your sister or I'm going to withhold husband privileges tonight."

Gripping the back of her neck, I growled, "Like fuck you are." Reaching my other hand down, I roughly slid it under her dress and up to her panties. "I haven't had you for two fucking days; there's no fucking way I'm not having you tonight."

She moaned as I circled her clit and pushed two fingers inside her.

Skylar knocked on the door. "King, stop whatever you're doing to Lily; I need to talk to her."

I watched Lily wage a silent war over wanting me to finger fuck her versus giving my sister what she wanted. In the end, she said, "King, stop. I've barely spoken to Skylar this week. You're going to need to give me a little time with her."

With a fuckload of regret, I gave her what she wanted and let her go. Stalking to the door, I yanked it open and looked down at my sister. "You—"

Pushing me out of the way, she cut me off. "Yeah, yeah, I get it. You're shitty and I only have one minute with Lily, blah, blah, blah. Go take a chill pill and gimme some time with my girl. I've hardly seen her all week."

She was raving to Lily about some shoes she'd seen yesterday before I had a chance to get a fucking word in, so I left them to it, calling out over my shoulder, "Five minutes, Lily."

I ran into Robbie as I headed into the kitchen. He rounded the corner and collided with me. "Sorry!"

Steadying him, I said, "What's the rush, mate?"

His eyes blazed up with excitement. "Zara said she'll play Monopoly with me while you and Mum go out for dinner!"

Robbie loved board games; Zara not so much. I'd pulled her aside earlier today and asked her to help Skylar look after him tonight while we were out. The kids at school had been giving him a hard time lately, and I knew that some time with his sister would be

good for him. Holly usually came through for me when I asked her to look out for him, but she was at a sleepover with a friend tonight, so I couldn't rely on her. Zara had surprised the fuck out of me when she'd said yes with no arguments.

I followed him into the lounge room where Zara sat on the floor setting up the game. She glanced up at me with a smile. "Did Robbie tell you his plan for all of us for tomorrow night, King?"

"No."

"For family night, he wants us all to eat tacos for dinner and then do a marathon of Harry Potter movies." She was fucking grinning at me because she knew I didn't have it in me to watch those movies one more fucking time. Hell, Robbie could watch Harry Potter every day he loved it that much. I'd already sat through all the movies with him three times since moving in.

Robbie nodded enthusiastically as he sat across from his sister. "It'll be fun!"

Fuck, I couldn't say no. Not when it lit him up like this. "I'll grab the stuff for tacos in the morning while I'm out."

"Don't forget Grandma's coming for dinner tomorrow night, too," Zara said, that grin still in place. She also knew I'd reached my limit of Hannah time this week after spending almost a full day with her fixing her car and doing some other odd jobs around her house.

"Smartass," I mouthed at her while Robbie had his head down. Then, out loud, I gave it back to her. "Don't forget you said you wanted to play Battleship with Robbie tonight."

Her eyes widened, but before she could say anything, Robbie's head snapped up and he said excitedly, "This is the best night of my life!"

Lily's arm slid around my waist as she stood next to me. "Wow," she murmured, "You've got the kids all sorted and happy by the looks of it."

I stretched my arm across her shoulders. "Yeah. Zara's made Robbie's night by agreeing to play games with him for hours."

Zara hit me with a dirty look before shaking her head and getting back to the game.

"I'm playing, too," Skylar said, joining them on the floor.

"Don't wait up for us," I said to her.

She looked at me. "Breakfast is at seven in the morning. I'm making pancakes and waffles. And I'm waking your ass up if you're still

sleeping. You promised to come with me to help me get a good deal on new tyres."

"Fuck," I grumbled. My plan had been to get the kids to all their activities they had on tomorrow morning before coming home to fuck Lily. "I can't in the morning. We'll go in the afternoon."

"No, I'm busy all day tomorrow. The only time I have is first thing."

Lily squeezed me and said to Skylar, "He'll do it in the morning." Then to me, she said, "We need to leave or we're going to miss our reservation."

Once I had her out of the house, I reached for her and said, "Change of plans. We're skipping dinner and—"

"No, you are not changing our plans, King. I've been looking forward to dinner at that restaurant all week."

Wrapping my hand around her throat, I growled, "And I've been looking forward to burying my dick inside you for fucking days, so I've changed the reservation for later and booked us a hotel room. If that pisses you off, feel free to take it out on my body, but there's no fucking way I'm waiting to strip you and fuck you." When she looked like she was going to argue with me, I added, "I warned you about wearing that dress. You chose to wear it."

"Fine," she said with the kind of attitude that made me want to slam inside her right fucking now. "But there will be dinner later and you will be sitting through two desserts with me. I checked out their menu and I can't choose between lemon meringue and cheesecake, so I'm having both. If you get to change our plans, I get to have two lots of dessert. And you also have to walk along the river with me after dinner. Oh, and when we get home, I really want you to watch Lucifer with me."

Taking my time at dinner was not something I was good at, and walking anywhere was not something I enjoyed. And I fucking hated that TV show. I did my best to avoid doing any of those things, but hell, it turned out loving Lily meant I was doing shit all over the place I'd rather not do.

"Get on the back of my bike before I bend you over it and make your ass red," I rasped.

Christ, this woman held my fucking heart in her hands and she had no idea how much power she had over it. No fucking idea at all. I loved her like I'd never loved anyone and I'd go to my grave trying

to make her happy. Even if that meant eating two fucking desserts, watching a show I couldn't stand, and walking along a fucking river.

FOUR YEARS AFTER WEDDING #1

King

I took one last drag on my smoke and then stubbed it out as I contemplated the fact I had to head down to Melbourne again. In the last month, I'd been away from home nineteen days. Days I didn't want to be away from Lily and the kids. The only thing that put my mind at ease was that she'd finally stopped working and could rest. Her nausea and vomiting had eased, however her energy levels hadn't picked up much. I didn't like leaving her like this.

"I thought you said you'd try to quit from today."

I turned at the sound of Lily's voice. She exited the house to join me out on the back deck. I took note of the tone in her voice and her body language; she was in a mood and coming my way with the look of a woman ready for an argument.

Fuck.

After a long hard day handling club business, I knew I didn't have the patience to deal with her pregnancy hormones tonight, especially if this was her choice of argument. She'd been on my case about giving up smoking for a couple of months. It was the last thing I wanted to think about right now.

Ignoring what she said, I asked, "Are the kids down?"

She moved next to me at the railing and scowled. "Don't do that, King. Don't ignore me when I say something to you."

Scrubbing my face, I muttered, "Fuck, Lily, can we not get into this shit tonight? I just want one night without an argument with you."

Her eyes widened. "I don't argue with you every night. I just—"

"It sure fucking feels like it lately."

"Well lately you're hardly home, so I don't know how it sure fucking feels like it."

"Jesus, is that what this is about?"

"No, this is about you doing what you said you'd do."

"I never fucking said I'd quit smoking. I said I'd think about it."

"And let me guess, you've thought about it and—"

"Fucking hell," I snapped, "Enough! I didn't come home from a shitty fucking day so I could cop more shit from you."

Her eyes flashed with anger. "You should go back to the clubhouse then." With that, she pushed off from the railing and stalked towards the door to go back inside.

I stalked after her, my own anger flaring, ready to lash out. Grabbing her arm, I yanked her to me. Eyes glued to hers, I growled, "No fucking way am I going back to the clubhouse. I'm leaving first thing in the morning for Melbourne and I have no clue when I'll be home, so this is not a night for me to be away from you. I don't fucking care if I have to carry you kicking and screaming to bed, you will be sleeping right fucking next to me tonight."

She slapped me away, fighting me in a way she didn't usually do. Lily often got worked up, but not this much. When I caught her wrists in an effort to stop her, and pulled her into my embrace, she lost her shit completely. "King! Let me go! I'm not in the mood for your bossy asshole shit tonight. I'm just here trying to look out for your health, but honestly I don't know why I bother because you don't seem to give one shit about it. You want to bring children into the world, but you don't care enough to do everything in your power to ensure you live as long as you can for us."

I tightened my grip on her instead of loosening it. My temper was close to breaking point, and while I worked hard to keep it from spilling over, I wasn't gentle with the way I held her. "Are you fucking finished?" I demanded.

She jerked in my hold, a storm of fury and passion. "No I'm not fucking finished! I hate nagging you. Like, I really fucking hate being that woman, but I've had four years with you and they've been the best four years of my life, so I don't want you to die anytime soon. That's why I'll keep nagging you about this. And you can keep being the same old King you've always been when it comes to our arguments, pushing and bossing your way into whatever you want, but I'm not ever going to stop fighting you on this."

The anger coursing through my veins collided with the kind of urgent and fierce need only Lily caused in me. A violent wave of it crashed into me, leaving me unable to stop myself from taking what I wanted.

Letting go of her wrists, I gripped her face. "I'm not fucking dying anytime soon," I rasped right before my lips smashed down onto hers.

Fuck she was fire. Hot burning fire. And she was exactly what I craved even if it didn't fucking feel like it when she fought me.

She kissed me back, completely consumed by the kiss, but not for long. Her hands came to my chest and she pushed me away as she dragged her mouth from mine. When she spoke, her fire still raged hot. "I want to talk about this, King, not screw our way into getting distracted from it."

I hooked my arm around her waist and pulling her tight against my body again. Wrapping my free hand around her neck, I growled, "You wanted a fight and now you've got your fight, but we're gonna do it my way."

Her breath quickened as desire blazed in her eyes. I was right; this was exactly what she wanted.

Backing her against the railing, I kissed her again. This time, she didn't challenge me on it. This time, she gave me back what I gave her—heat and fury and raw fucking need. We abandoned ourselves to the lust, ripping each other's clothes off and clawing for more of everything we had to have right fucking then.

When I finally pulled my lips from hers, I met her gaze. "I'm a fucking asshole, Lily, but I do my best not to get into shit with you when I know it's your hormones—"

"Don't blame this on my hormones," she snapped. "This isn't because of them."

I spun her around to face the railing and trapped her in front of me so she couldn't go anywhere. Taking a handful of her hair, I pulled her head back and bent my mouth to her ear. At the same time, I reached for her cunt. She was wet. Ready for me. Pushing two fingers inside, I said, "You can't fucking tell me you didn't come out here looking to get into something with me. This is what you've been doing lately and I've been fucking tiptoeing around it. I've made allowances for your pregnancy but I'm not doing that any-

more. You come looking for a fight in future, you'll get a fight. We clear?"

She moaned as I worked my fingers inside her, but she continued to argue with me. Wrapping her hand around my forearm, she dug her fingers into my skin and said, "I didn't—"

I pulled her hair, jerking her head back more and cutting her off. As I grazed her neck with my teeth, I said, "The answer is yes." My tone was dark. Warning. Before we were done here, she would understand where we stood. "We're equals, Lily. You come at me, I'll give it right back to you."

She let go of my arm and pushed it away. She then spun back around to face me, those beautiful eyes of hers full of wild angry energy and heat. Taking hold of my face, she kissed the hell out of me before raging at me, "Fine! But if we're equals, I'm giving all your shit back to you, too. You wanna come at me with that bossy bullshit of yours, you should expect it right back. We clear?"

Jesus fucking hell, she really was worked up tonight. And that only worked my dick up more. I was hard as fuck now.

Before she knew what was happening, I lifted her and carried her to the table. I bent her over it and wrapped one hand around her neck holding her down while I thrust hard into her.

"Fuck," I roared. *Fuck*. I was going to need a few hours with her tonight to get my fill. I knew she'd need just as long to work her shit out.

Her moans filled the night air as I pounded into her. Lily might have been pregnant but that didn't stop me fucking her the way I always had. Not yet anyway. As she got closer to her due date, I'd tone it down, but she wanted it like this just as fucking much as I did.

It didn't take either of us long to come, and when we were done, I bent over her and said forcefully, "We're clear."

We both stood and she caught my lips in a kiss, fingers stabbing into my waist where she held me. When she was done, she said, "I love you, but goddam it's hard some days."

My eyes ran down her body, appreciating the hell out of every curve and all her beauty. The sight of her baby bump caused my gut to tighten, and her earlier words came back to me. Meeting her gaze again, I said, "I'll work on cutting back." Fuck knew I wasn't sure how with all the stress I was under, but for her and the kids, I'd try.

A small smile settled on her face. "Really?"

I kissed her roughly before saying, "This discussion is done. Forever."

That smile of hers stretched a little and she nodded. She fucking knew she'd won this battle. It mightn't be for months or maybe longer, but she'd won. "We're clear."

I jerked my chin towards the door. "Inside. I've got plans for the rest of the night." Plans that included shutting the world out and getting lost in my woman. She could fight me as much as she wanted; I was never going anywhere. This was right where I was meant to be.

FOUR YEARS AFTER WEDDING #2

King

I took a deep breath and rested my hands on the bathroom vanity, staring into the mirror. Fuck, this trip to Melbourne had been hell. I'd almost lost five of my men in the bloodbath we'd been dragged into with the fucking cunts down there. Winter had his hands full with them, and while we'd taken back control of the city, neither of us was convinced that was going to be easy to keep hold of. At the rate we were going, I'd have to make another trip down there soon. And that pissed me off because Lily needed me home at the moment. This pregnancy was kicking her ass. When she wasn't vomiting, she was fighting exhaustion.

"King." Her voice came from behind me and I met her gaze in the mirror as she moved closer. "I didn't hear you come in."

"Yeah." I turned to face her, sliding my hand around her waist so I could pull her to me.

Narrowing her eyes at me, she said, "Were you a mess?"

My woman knew me well. I'd had blood on my clothes and body after Fury and I dealt with some assholes on the way home, so I'd come in quietly to clean up in case I saw the kids.

Shifting one hand to rest on her ass, I wrapped my other around her neck and nodded. "You look tired." I hadn't spoken with her in the last twelve hours so I had no idea how she was today. The only thing I knew without a shadow of a fucking doubt was that I was about to put my fucking foot down and tell her she was taking at least a week off work. And if Jackson didn't like that, he could deal with me.

Smiling, she reached for my face and angled it down so she could kiss me. It wasn't the kind of kiss either of us wanted after not seeing each other for a week, but it felt like she was just getting warmed up. Her lips lingered on mine and she pressed hard against me as if she was trying to get as close as possible. "*I am* tired," she murmured before kissing me again.

This time she deepened the kiss and gave me her tongue. Within seconds, we were clawing at each other desperately. A week was too fucking long to go without her. I needed her naked. And I needed my dick inside that sweet cunt of hers.

Letting go of her neck, and pulling my mouth from hers, I removed the T-shirt she was wearing. *One of mine*. I fucking loved it when she wore my shirts, and she always seemed to be wearing one when I came home after being away.

My gaze dropped to her tits as my fingers worked the button and zip on her jeans. It didn't take me long to get my hand in her panties, and as I slid my fingers through her wetness, a moan fell from her lips. I'd kept a rein on my desire to turn her around, bend her the fuck over and slam into her, but that sound was all I needed to lose any ounce of control I had.

However, as I spun her around, she heaved, vomiting into the sink. I caught her hair and held it back while she continued vomiting. When she finished, I grabbed the washer and wet it.

She took it from me and wiped her face. She then brushed her teeth before looking back up and grimacing when our eyes met in the mirror. "Sorry about that."

I shook my head. "Lily, you're having my baby. You don't ever fucking apologise for anything, least of all throwing up." I paused for a beat. "You're still vomiting every day?"

"Yes, but I think it's getting better, so you don't have to worry about it."

I raised a brow. "You *think*?" She was bullshitting me. This was the kind of thing someone knew for fucking sure either way.

She sighed. "I know what you're going to say, and I don't want you to say it."

There was no way we weren't going down this path today. "I'm calling Jackson and telling him you're taking a week off work, if not longer. And you're not gonna argue with me over this. We clear?"

Turning to face me, she hit me with a glare. “No, we’re not clear. I told you there’s no way I can take a week off right now. We’re just too busy.”

We’d discussed this over and fucking over. Hell, we’d had some arguments over it that ended in her trying to force me out of our bed. She’d learned pretty fucking fast that nothing, not even an argument that had her struggling to look at me, would keep me from our bed. This time, though, she wasn’t getting her own way.

“I’m not arguing with you over this again. Just accept it’s a given. Now, are the kids in bed already?” I expected they were; it was almost 9:00 p.m.

Her eyes widened and she pushed me away. “You don’t get to decide whether there’s a discussion or not. And besides—”

“Fuck, Lily, you’re sick and you’re tired. You need some time off. And as your husband, I do get a fucking say in it.”

She stared at me for a long few moments, anger flashing in her eyes. Then, without a word, she scooped up her T-shirt and pushed past me, muttering, “God you can be an ass.” She exited the bathroom and then the bedroom, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

After deciding to give her some time to cool off, I headed to Cade’s bedroom. I wouldn’t wake him or any of the kids, but I needed to get eyes on them to see for myself they were all okay.

Lily met me in the hallway outside his bedroom. Anger was still clear in her eyes, but it softened a little when she found me looking for our son. “None of the kids are here,” she said.

I frowned. “Where are they?”

“Having a sleepover at Brynn’s. I wanted tonight to just be us. Turns out that’s a good idea, because you’re being a dick, and I—”

I cut her off again and forced her back against the wall, demanding, “You wanna get this shit out now? Do it. But once it’s done, we’re not going back and forth all fucking night.”

The thing I fucking loved about Lily was her fight, and she didn’t hesitate to give it to me now. And although I could have done without it, I couldn’t help loving it at the same time. Hell, it got me hard fast.

“I’m not taking a week off, and you’re just going to live with that”—she held a hand up at me when I worked my jaw—“because I’m going to be taking a lot of weeks off in three week’s time. And if you’d given me the chance to tell you that before, we could have

avoided getting shitty with each other, but no, you had to come home and start laying down your freaking law." She drew a long breath and exhaled it loudly. "I love you, King, but some days I just wanna smack the hell out of you!"

"How long are you taking off?"

"I quit my job. Now, you need to move out of my way so I can go have a bath and have some time away from you. You've got me all freaking worked up when all I wanted was calm and peace tonight."

I gripped her wrist while curling my other hand around her neck. "You give me that news and expect me to leave you alone? You can get your ass in that bath, and you can stay there for hours, but no fucking way are you doing it on your own. Not when I haven't had your cunt for a week. And sure as fuck not when you tell me the one fucking thing I've wanted you to tell me for months."

Her breathing slowed while we watched each other silently for a few moments. Then, she snaked a hand out to grasp a handful of my shirt. "How do you always manage to say the exact right thing when I most need it?"

There was no anger left in her voice. All that was there now was raw emotion. And need. The same need I had. And that's what made us work. We could scream at each other, fight all fucking night or argue for days over something, but we always, *always*, came back together with that need. That urgency for the other.

My mouth crashed down on hers and my hand tightened around her neck. When I finally let her go, I growled, "You can have your bath after I fuck you. And don't even think about arguing with me over that."

She smiled, and for once in her life, she did what I fucking said.

CHAPTER FROM KING'S WRATH IN KING'S POV

King

This was originally written in Lily's POV in King's Wrath. I hope you enjoy seeing it with King's thoughts.

I knocked back half the glass of whisky I'd just poured and placed the glass on the desk. The burn of it against my throat was what I was looking for tonight. Bronze weighed heavily on my mind, as did Skylar. Fuck, I hadn't seen her this anxious for a long time, and the fact it was because of me and the club ate at me. I hoped like fuck Lily could talk her down because I sure as hell hadn't been able to.

A sound at the office door alerted me to someone's presence, and I looked up to find Lily watching me with a look I couldn't quite place. Concern perhaps.

"What?" I barked. I didn't need her concern. Didn't need to drag her into my shit. The sooner Lily stopped worrying over me, the better. And I sure as fuck didn't need her hands on me again.

She entered the office, not taking any notice of my mood, and sat her ass on my desk of all fucking places.

Fuck.

"You should pour me a drink," she said, her gaze locked to mine.

I threw the rest of my whisky down my throat. "You don't need another drink." I could smell the booze on her from here.

Her brows arched. "How do you know what I need?"

"I don't, but I know it's not that," I said, placing my empty glass down. It sure as fuck wasn't any more alcohol she needed.

Her gaze darted to the bottle of whisky beside me, and before I could stop her, she leant across me to swipe it up.

"Fuck," I muttered, trying like hell to ignore how fucking good she smelt. My efforts proved futile, though. My dick was already hard from the minute I took in the red dress she wore that barely covered her ass. Her scent only intensified my desire.

She poured whisky into my glass and drank some while she watched me. The heat blazing from her eyes—hell, from her entire fucking body—told me she hadn't come here just to talk. Lily wanted to fuck me. And while I wasn't a man who ever cared enough to push a woman away when it was clear we weren't a good match, fucking Lily was not on my agenda.

"Skylar took a pill. She should sleep all night."

"Good."

She took another swig of whisky. "You're a man of few words, King. Normally I like that about people, but I kinda wish you'd say more."

I clenched my jaw.

Fuck.

What the hell was it about this woman that made me want her? I had no business wanting her, but I was so damn hard for her I wasn't sure I'd be able to say no if she continued pushing this.

I couldn't take my eyes off her, however I refused to lower my gaze to her body. That shit would break my resolve; I knew that much.

Lily had to be the most beautiful woman I'd ever met. But my attraction was more than that; there was something else about her that had captivated me. She cared about people and gave of herself in ways not many women I knew did.

I wanted to fuck her, but I also wanted to protect her from me. A woman like Lily didn't need anything I had to give, because let's fucking face it, I just wanted to take from her.

I wanted to spread her the fuck out and use her to ease the shit from my mind.

I had nothing of value to give her in return.

I picked up the bottle of whisky and gulped some down. "I'll get one of the boys to take you home."

She shook her head. "No, I don't want to go home. I want to stay here with you."

Every fibre of my being tensed. No fucking way could she stay here with me. "No," I said with force. I'd carry her out of here myself

if I fucking had to.

She ignored me, placing her glass down so she could shimmy herself across the fucking desk towards me. I couldn't stop myself—I dropped my eyes to her legs. Hell, any man would have. Those legs of hers were long and fucking spectacular, and I couldn't get the image of them spread wide, out of my mind.

"King," she said as she swung one leg around mine in an effort to place it between my legs.

I cut her off as I placed a hand on her thigh and held her leg in place, stopping her from succeeding with her goal. "I said no."

She narrowed her eyes at me, a confused expression on her face. "Are you gay? Or do I just not do anything for you?"

Fucking hell. My restraint came close to breaking point, and within a second, I'd stood and wrapped one hand around her throat. Fuck it felt good there. *Too fucking good.* "You don't wanna go there with me, Lily. I am not the kind of man a woman like you fucks."

My actions and words were meant to send her running, but they didn't. Instead, they seemed to bring her body to life more than it already was. She angled herself toward me, eyes alight with the kind of need I wasn't sure I could walk away from. "No, you're not. But I can't get you out of my mind. Just give me one night. I just need one night where I don't think about all the shit I have to deal with in my life." She gripped my wrist. "And I think you do, too."

Jesus, she wasn't making this easy. I inhaled sharply and then exhaled while taking a moment to look at everything I'd be saying no to. Lily's body was made for sin. My kind of sin. There was no fucking doubt about that. She had curves everywhere a woman should have curves. And while I knew they could handle the kind of shit I wanted to do to her, I wasn't convinced her mind could. And if she were sober, she wouldn't be in here begging me to do anything to her.

I was so fucking engrossed in her body that she managed to undo my belt and get my fucking zip half way down before I stopped her.

Fucking hell, she needed to fucking leave. I was this close to losing myself in her and demanding every dark thing I wanted from her. "This isn't fucking happening, Lily," I growled, stepping away from her. "You need to get off that desk and go the fuck home."

She moved off the desk and came my way. "Why?" Her eyes demanded just as much from me as her words, and I felt my control slipping further away. "I felt you, King. You want this as much as I do."

My mind fractured. The part of me that had accepted my depravity years ago roared to life, ready to give her what she wanted. The other part of me fought to stay in charge, fought like fuck not to go there with her.

I backed her up against the desk and gripped her throat again. "You have no fucking idea what I want. If you did, you'd run and never come back." I glanced down at her chest, trying like hell to get a handle on the warring parts of my mind. When I looked back up at her, I said, "You need to leave before it's too fucking late for both of us."

She curled her hands around my biceps. "I don't know what you mean, but I don't care. I'm not leaving."

Fuck.

My body thrummed with want. I fucking wanted everything she offered. And then some.

I dropped my head and rasped, "Fuck," while my mind raced. I couldn't fight myself any longer. I couldn't continue saying no when all I wanted was to consume her.

I lifted my face back to hers, meeting her gaze. Spinning her around, I pressed her hard against the desk while grabbing her waist roughly. Sliding my other hand around her neck, I pulled her head to one side and growled against her ear, "Do you know what I like to do to women, Lily?" I paused, waiting for her response. When the only one she gave was a gasp, I gripped her neck tighter. "I'm rough in every way you can imagine. I'll strip you and fuck you without a fucking care for your comfort. I'll take what I need, over and fucking over, until you're raw from my hands, my mouth, my dick." As the words left my mouth, the darkness raging through me threatened to take over completely. Both Lily's lust and her naiveté over what would truly go down between us fed that darkness in ways it hadn't ever been fed. I'd never fucked a woman with the kind of innocence blazing from her. My voice dropped lower, as I added, "And when I'm finished, you won't hurry back for more."

She didn't respond except to moan. It was that fucking moan that finally shattered my restraint.

I yanked her dress up and slid my hand inside her panties. When I had my fingers deep inside her, she moaned again. "Oh God."

Fuck.

With my mouth still to her ear, I demanded, "Do you like pain, Lily?"

She quivered under my touch. "I don't know."

I circled her clit with my thumb while working her cunt. She was wet as fuck, and hell if that didn't fuck with my mind some more. "You've never had it while being fucked?"

"No."

"Fuck," I hissed. Grinding against her, I pushed her harder against the desk. "I *will* hurt you if I fuck you. Are you ready for that?"

She didn't answer me, though, so I spun her around to face me. Grabbing her face, I said, "Answer me. Are you ready for me to hurt you?" With every passing second, I was losing myself to this.

She panted as she nodded. "Yes."

I searched her eyes. She was saying yes, but it had to be the alcohol talking. Lily was too good, too pure for my filth. My dick was harder than it had ever been, I was fucking sure of that. And yet, I wouldn't touch her. Not in the way I truly wanted to. I'd give her what she thought she wanted, and then I'd send her home and never fucking lay a hand on her again.

"You have no fucking idea what you're asking for," I growled before dropping to my knees and yanking her panties off.

Holding her legs, I buried my face in her cunt and ate her like a fucking starved man. I allowed my dark need to take over while I worked her towards the orgasm she desperately wanted. I wasn't gentle with her in any way. And yet, her moans filled my ears, encouraging me closer to the edge I didn't fucking want to go near.

My moves became rougher.

More demanding.

My touch was relentlessly harsh.

And she loved every fucking minute of it.

She came hard, and I had to claw myself away from her.

She was pushing me towards the fucking brink, and I had to get her the fuck out of here.

I stood and met her gaze. "You'll never be ready for me." I shoved her panties at her. "Get dressed. I'll take you home."

Without waiting for her response, I stalked out of the office. I needed a fucking minute, and I needed to put some space between us while I took that minute. Otherwise, I wasn't sure I'd be able to stop myself from taking what I truly wanted.

CHRISTMAS WITH SYDNEY STORM

These chapters take place at Christmas time which in the timeline of the series occurs between Nitro's Torment and Devil's Vengeance.

CHAPTER ONE

Evie

Staring at the empty Tupperware container on the kitchen counter, I worked through the various options of what I could do to my husband in return for him eating all the rum balls I'd made. If my out-of-control hormones and the heartburn and backache our baby was causing me weren't enough to turn me into a raging bitch, this would do it.

Drawing a deep, barely controlled breath, I exited the kitchen and made my way into the laundry. Flinging the washing machine open, I jammed as many dirty clothes in as I could fit before slamming the door closed. I then reached for the detergent, still working hard to get my emotions under control.

Pregnancy wasn't for pussies, that was for damn sure. If my marriage survived this pregnancy it would be a fucking miracle because most days I wanted to reach for Kick's balls and twist them as hard as I could so that he had to endure some kind of suffering, too.

"Fuck, what have I done now?"

I turned to look at Kick who stood in the hallway just outside the laundry, but I didn't answer his question because I didn't want to fight with him on Christmas morning.

He took a step closer to me. "Evie, you doing washing right at this moment means that I've pissed you off. After six months of this, I know that washing is your way of trying to deal with your mood swings. And usually those mood swings are because of something I've done."

"Unless you have a container full of rum balls stashed somewhere in this house, I would pretend you never came in here." I

knew I was being irrational, but I couldn't help myself. *Damn you, pregnancy.*

His lips twitched, but he realised his mistake when my brows lifted and my mouth flattened in annoyance. He then did what he always did in these kinds of situations—he ignored everything I said and reached for me. Pulling me close, he said, “I’m not taking the blame for this by myself. Braden came over after you crashed last night and got stuck into them.”

I pressed my hands to his chest in an effort to move out of his embrace. “I don’t care who ate them, Kick. You shouldn’t have let him. You knew I made those for today,” I snapped. The heat only fuelled my irritability. I had a good mind to move to fucking Canada to escape the rest of this bloody summer.

His arms tightened around me, and he grinned. “Keep fighting me, baby, it only gets me hard for you. You know that.”

“If you think I’m letting you anywhere near me today, you’re living in dreamland. I’m hot, and grumpy, and this baby is getting so big I think I might explode.”

His grin disappeared and a softer expression moved across his face. “How long does it take to make rum balls?”

My irritation with him flared. “Kick, I hardly have time to make a new batch before everyone arrives for lunch!”

“Evie, how long?” His voice came out in a low rumble. It was the tone he took with me when he was about to lay down the law as he saw it.

I stared at him, taking in the determined look in his eyes. As much as I was pissed off with him, I knew that when he took that tone with me, there was no point arguing with him. Kick Hanson was one step away from making a “we clear” statement when he spoke to me like that. I exhaled a frustrated breath. “They don’t take long to make. In my current state of being hot and annoyed and slow, I’m probably looking at twenty minutes.”

“Right, give me the recipe, and I’ll take care of them. You go and do whatever it was you would have been doing rather than the washing.”

My eyes widened. “You’re going to make them?”

“You say that as if you don’t believe I could make them. How fuckin’ hard are they?”

Something he said or did, or maybe it was my dumb hormones, made me smile. And that in turn, made me laugh. Kick stared at me, waiting for an answer, and I did my best to get myself under control. "They're not hard at all."

"So you're saying that if I managed to knock you up, I should be able to make some rum balls?"

Still laughing, I looped my arms around his neck. Pressing my body against his, I said, "How do you always find a way to snap me out of my moods?"

His hands made their way to my ass. "I have to, otherwise you're fuckin' likely to do damage to me."

"What are you saying? That I'm a grumpy bitch?"

He grinned. "I would never utter those words. I value my balls too much for that." Brushing a kiss across my lips, he said, "I'm saying that I fuckin' love you being pregnant. The way you go to battle with me every day keeps my dick hard as fuck. I'm thinking that once this baby is born, we should start working on the next one."

"Jesus, Kick, settle down. I was thinking more along the lines of maybe we should reconsider the three kids you want. Pregnancy doesn't suit me at all."

"I'd argue with that, sweetheart. Have you seen the size of your tits lately?" His eyes dropped to my body as he ran his hands over my ass and around to my belly. "I'd say pregnancy suits the fuck out of you. These curves are something fuckin' else."

Desire pooled in my belly. Something he always managed to do to me, even when I felt like a waddling duck. And especially when I was in a mood. He'd swoop in after a long day with the club and listen to me moan and bitch at him before making everything all right again in my world.

Smacking his hands away, I tried to take a step back. He didn't let me go, though. "Kick, if you don't stop what you're doing, we're going to end up having sex, and then I'm going to be running late for lunch. And those rum balls might never get made."

He bent so he could kiss my neck. Trailing his lips up to my mouth, he said, "I'm mastering the art of fucking you fast. I figure we're gonna have to get good at it once we've got these three kids."

As he spoke, he flicked the button on my shorts open and pulled the zip down. Before I could catch up to what he was doing, he had

my shorts and T-shirt off. He'd slid the cups of my bra to the side and had one of my boobs in his mouth.

"Fuck," he growled, barely lifting his mouth from my breast. "Have I mentioned how fuckin' much I love you being pregnant?"

I threaded my fingers in his hair at the nape of his neck as I arched my back. "Only every day." I had to admit, there definitely were some good things about being pregnant. Kick's attention was one of them. He could hardly keep his hands off me.

He sucked my nipple while holding my breasts with both hands. He then alternated between the two of them, seemingly unable to get enough of me. "Evie, hands on my dick, baby," he rasped after lifting his mouth from one of my boobs.

"So damn bossy," I muttered as I unthreaded my fingers from his hair.

"You want rum balls made and the house ready for everyone, I'm gonna need to get inside you fast." He drew his mouth away from my breast so he could glance up at me. "I'm good with dragging this out, though. Your choice."

"Smart ass." I quickly undid his pants and reached inside to wrap my hand around his cock, eliciting a groan from him. I stroked him a few times, until he moved to crouch in front of me.

"Jesus, woman, I'm not sure how I ever lived without you," he said as he kissed a line down from my breasts to my stomach. His movements slowed as he reached my belly. "Hello, baby girl," he murmured as he took hold of me and kissed all over my stomach. "Your mother's shitty with me today, so do your dad a favour and don't give her any hell, okay? I wanna be in her good books for at least a day."

I stared down at him, my heart swelling with love. Kick could switch from sex fiend to daddy with the flip of a switch, and it never failed to cause me butterflies. I loved the way he already doted on our daughter.

"You should stop talking and start working that tongue of yours," I said.

His head snapped up and he met my gaze. The heat in his gaze almost made my legs buckle. *Oh, God.*

Moving swiftly, he stood and turned me to face the washing machine, placing my hands on it as the front of his body molded to the back of mine. His hand wrapped around my throat and he angled

my head back, pressing his face to mine. "Do you know what I'm going to do to you tonight, Evie?" His voice was a low growl, hitting me in all the right places.

A little breathless, I said, "No."

He dipped his face so he could kiss my neck and lightly bite it. "I'm going to tie you to our bed, blindfold you and work my fuckin' tongue in ways you can only imagine. I'm gonna work it so fuckin' good and for so fuckin' long that you'll be begging me to hurry up and use my dick instead."

Every inch of my skin came alive with need, and my breathing slowed as my mind exploded with images of him doing what he'd just promised.

His grip around my throat tightened. "But I'm not gonna get my dick out for a long time. I'm gonna drag you to that fuckin' edge over and over, until you think you can't take it anymore. And just when you start to lose your fuckin' mind to the bliss—like I do every damn day just being around you—that's when I'll slam my dick inside you and make you scream like you've never screamed."

I moaned. I wasn't sure what was coming out of my mouth, but something was. His words had jumbled my thoughts completely, and I was barely standing on my own.

Kick reached his hand down into my panties and ran his fingers through my pussy. "Every fuckin' time," he said as he discovered how wet I was for him.

He slid my panties down and took hold of my hips. Positioning me how he wanted me, he then pressed his cock against my pussy. I bent a little more than I already had and waited for him to fill me.

He entered me with one hard thrust, and I cried out my pleasure.

Oh God, yes.

Keeping a firm grip on my hips, he then showed me how well he was perfecting the art of fucking me fast. He thrust in and out, driving his cock deep inside me. The angle was divine and it didn't take me long to come. After he orgasmed, he bent so he could growl in my ear, "I'm fuckin' addicted to this sweet pussy of yours, Mrs Hanson."

I tilted my face to catch his lips in a kiss. He practically devoured me, and when he finally let my lips go, I said, "I'm fucking addicted to *you*, Mr Hanson."

He pulled out and turned me to face him. After reaching for my clothes that were on the floor, he said, "Even when you're pissed as fuck at me?"

I fought the smile dancing across my face. "Yes, even then."

He passed me my clothes. "Thank Christ."

I was about to force my way out of the laundry so I could hurry to clean up and get dressed before getting back to my lunch preparations, but something in his tone stopped me. "Kick, I love you. I know I've been the world's worst bitch during this pregnancy, and I'm sorry, but I'll never stop loving you."

He smoothed my hair away from my face, and his tenderness caused another rush of butterflies in my tummy. "You could be a bitch to me forever, and I wouldn't give a shit so long as you were still by my side."

Guilt crawled all over me, and I silently pledged to do better. To not be such a bitch. Holding his gaze, I lifted his shirt over his head. He didn't question me; he knew what I was doing because it was what I always did when my hormones went wonky and I felt guilty. He took the shirt from me and let me do my thing.

Placing my hand to his chest, I ran my fingers over his scar. When he'd been shot a few months ago, I'd thought I was going to lose him. It had been the scariest time of my life. The waiting to know if he would survive had almost killed me.

I let his gaze go while I kissed his scar. My hands roamed his chest while I did this, and then I wrapped my arms around him and rested my head against him. His arms circled me and he pressed a kiss to the top of my head.

"Baby," he said, his voice all gruff, "I'm not going anywhere."

I inhaled a deep breath and squeezed my eyes shut as my emotions consumed me. *Damn hormones*. I was helpless to control my tears, so I simply let them fall. And because he understood, or maybe just because he was the best kind of man, Kick simply stood there holding me tightly, letting me know I was okay and that we would be okay.

He waited patiently for me to get myself together. When I finally lifted my head and stepped away from him, I said, "I can't wait for our baby to be born. You are going to make the best daddy."

Nodding his head slowly, as if he was deep in thought, he said, "I'm gonna do better than our parents did, Evie."

"Yeah," I whispered, "I know."

He stood quietly for another few moments, just watching me, deep in thought, and then he said, "Get dressed and meet me in the kitchen so you can direct me with these rum balls."

I smiled, all my earlier fight gone. "Okay."

As I moved past him to exit the laundry, he said, "And Evie? For the record, you are nowhere near exploding. I fuckin' love your baby curves."

I glanced back at him to find his eyes glued firmly to my ass. It took all my willpower not to say to hell with making sure our home was perfect for when our families arrived. The way my husband loved me was something else, and against all my better judgement, I suddenly felt the urge to get pregnant again just as fast as he wanted me to.

CHAPTER TWO

Tatum

Although it was only eight in the morning, the sticky heat of the day wrapped itself around me as I made the short trek up the path to the front door of Nitro's house. *My home*. I'd been living there for about six weeks, and was slowly getting used to thinking of it as my home, too. Nitro had asked me a few times if I wanted to find a house that would be a new home to both of us, but I didn't. I loved his place. Even when I was home alone, I could still feel his presence. No way was I leaving that behind.

I quietly unlocked the front door and slipped inside. Walking so as not to wake Nitro, I'd almost made my way to our bedroom when his voice sounded from the lounge room.

"Vegas." Deep and rumbling, it hit my gut the way it always did, coiling desire there.

I stopped and turned towards the entryway of the lounge room. He sat on the couch facing me with an expression I knew well—it was the unreadable one he often wore. "You're awake early," I said as I moved towards him.

He lifted a brow. "Not as early as you."

I ignored the dark tone in his voice and sat on his lap. His arms moved easily around me, one hand resting on my thigh, the other on my waist. Holding his gaze, I said, "Merry Christmas, champ."

He let me kiss him before saying in a warning tone, "Tatum."

I knew what he wanted, but I didn't want to give it to him. Not today. Today I just wanted to enjoy our first Christmas together. But the determined glint in his eye told me I wasn't getting out of this. I sighed. "I went to see Billy."

He took that in and didn't say anything until a few moments later when he muttered, "Fuck."

My body stiffened, and I attempted to move off his lap. He had other ideas, though, and tightened his hold on me. "See now, this was why I didn't tell you I was going to see him. I knew it would piss you off." Billy had been a sore point in our relationship. Pretty much our only one. We'd been tiptoeing around him since I'd moved in. Hell, he'd been an issue since we'd first met.

His jaw clenched. "It doesn't piss me off that you went to see him. I'm frustrated that you didn't feel like you could tell me."

"I just didn't want to cause an argument today."

"Fuck, I'd never tell you that you couldn't see him or argue over it. What makes you think I would?"

"Let me count the ways. You don't like him and I get the impression you'd rather I have nothing to do with him outside of work."

"That is true, but what is also true is that I don't control you. You wanna see Billy, you go right ahead." His tone turned bossy. "But, you don't keep that shit from me. You and me, we're one hundred percent honest with each other, Vegas."

My man never failed to surprise me. I should have broached this subject weeks ago, but I hadn't wanted to cut in on our loved-up time. Looping my arms around his neck, I pressed a kiss to his lips, loving the way he deepened it and took control. By the time he was finished with me, I was breathless and ready to move this to the bedroom.

His heated gaze found mine again. "We good?"

My belly fluttered at his question. He'd always asked me if I was good, and he still did, but lately he'd started asking me if *we* were good. It wasn't a question he ever asked lightly; it always came from a deep desire of his to make sure all was good in my world. I nodded. "Yeah, we're good. Except for the fact we're still clothed and sitting out here."

His nostrils flared and he did exactly what I hoped he would do. He stood, taking me with him, his powerful body hardly straining to do that. He surprised me, though. Instead of taking me into the bedroom, we ended up in the bathroom.

After he deposited me on the floor, I said, "You want some shower sex?"

His eyes held mine as he closed the door. "No, I wanna fuck you while I watch you."

I followed his gaze as it locked on to the back of the door. He'd installed a mirror. "When did this happen?" I asked standing in front of it, already turned on for what was to come.

He moved behind me, his arms coming around me and then making their way down to the hem of my dress. His warm breath floated across the skin over my collarbone as he dipped his mouth to it and said, "When you were out with Monroe last night."

I watched him sink his teeth into my skin while also pulling my dress up so he could find my underwear. The sight of Nitro's large hand sliding inside my panties was hot, but nowhere near as hot as when he ran his finger through my wetness while taking hold of my breast with his other hand.

"Fuck," I moaned, keeping my eyes firmly on his hands.

His eyes met mine in the mirror as he slid two fingers inside me. "You like your Christmas present?"

Biting my lip and holding my breath for a beat, I said, "God, yes."

He reached deeper inside me, his fingers working their magic. Moving his lips along my skin, kissing, sucking and biting as he went, he made his way to my ear. "How much do you like it?" His voice was raspy and gravelly, and I swayed a little.

"I fucking love it," I managed to get out before he switched up what he was doing.

He let go of me and quickly removed my dress, dropping it to the floor. He then took hold of my hands and lifted them so they rested against the mirror near the top on either side. This meant I was leaning forward with my face close to the glass.

Running a hand down my back, his gaze shifted to what he was doing. A moment later, he crouched behind me and slowly removed my panties. I stepped out of them and waited for his next move, my breathing all over the place.

I just about came out of my skin when he gripped my ass, his fingers digging in. "Fuck, Vegas," he growled, "your ass..." His voice drifted off, but I knew what he thought of my butt because he always told me what it did to him. Nitro loved long legs and a tight ass, and he never failed to tell me he loved mine.

"Fuck," I cried out when his teeth sunk into one of my ass cheeks. He bit me hard, and I dropped my head, panting through the pain. Between his fingers still grasping me tightly and his teeth marking me, his touch burned right through me. He knew I loved the pain, though, so he kept going.

"Are you dripping for me yet?" he asked when he'd finished with my bottom.

Meeting his eyes in the mirror again, I nodded. "I need you inside me." I tried not to beg, but I was pretty much ready to get down on hands and knees and plead with him for his cock.

He pushed his fingers inside me again and hissed. "Yeah, you are." He then stood and removed his clothes as I watched every piece drop to the ground while his body was revealed to me. I'd never grow tired of Nitro's body. He kept it in amazing shape, his muscles a visual masterpiece.

When he was naked, he flicked my bra at the back and pushed it off my shoulders. It fell to the floor at the same time that he took hold of both my breasts. "You ready?"

My core practically sang at those words.

Was I ready?

I was more than ready.

"Yes." I didn't even care that my answer was practically a whimper. I needed Nitro inside me *now*.

Keeping one hand on one of my breasts, he shifted his other hand to my hip. Moving closer, so we were skin-to-skin, he positioned his dick at my pussy. His gaze was drawn there for a moment before coming back to meet mine. He pushed his cock inside a fraction, teasing me, while dropping his eyes to roam over my body, spending extra time watching himself massage my breast.

A deep growl came from him as he stilled for a beat. A second later, his eyes found mine again, and as his grip on me tightened, he thrust inside me hard.

"Fuck," he roared as his body pressed against mine, forcing me forwards against the mirror.

He pulled out and thrust back in, his mouth near my ear as he watched me in the mirror. I knew from the dark desire in his eyes that he was about to bring his fury to this, and that excited the hell out of me. Every nerve ending of mine fired with anticipation.

"Hold on tight, Vegas," he rasped against my ear as he pulled out.

I had nothing to grip, but I did my best to steady myself right before he slammed back inside of me and kept on going. There was no holding him back, not now that he'd let go and allowed his need to take over completely.

He fucked me with the ferocity I loved from him. The mirror heightened the experience, giving me a sensory experience like no other.

Not only was he inside me, he was also all over me with his eyes and his mouth. It was the hottest sex I'd ever had. The sight, the sound, the taste, the feel, the scent. It all collided in my mind, sparking one of the most intense orgasms I'd experienced. My legs turned to jelly as my eyes fluttered closed and I drifted away with the pleasure. I was vaguely aware of Nitro holding me up, still pounding into me, but it was like a distant sensation.

When his orgasm shattered through him, and my name thundered out of his mouth, I blinked my eyes open just in time to watch the beauty of him coming apart.

His body leant against mine while he recovered, pressing us hard against the mirror. "Jesus, woman, I should have put that mirror in weeks ago."

"Yeah, you should have," I agreed, breathlessly. "But I have to say, it's the best Christmas present I've ever received."

He pulled out of me and took a step back. Smacking my ass, he jerked his chin towards the shower and ordered, "I want you in that shower now. I'm gonna clean you up and then you're gonna suck my dick."

"Really? You think that bossing me around today is going to get you what you want?"

"Yeah, I fucking do. You're getting what you wanted today, and I'm gonna need my dick sucked to get through it."

I suppressed a laugh. Placing a hand to his cheek, I said with a little sarcasm, "Poor baby. The things you do for your woman." He'd come through with the goods, though. I'd requested that we invite everyone over for lunch—his family, Monroe, Fox, Posey and Devil—and I knew he didn't really want anyone but his family over, but he'd said yes to make me happy. And on top of that, he'd made sure the place had been tidied up and that we had all the food I wanted.

His eyes darkened. "In the shower, Vegas. And get ready to get on your knees."

I did as he said, smiling as I moved. Christmas this year was going to be the best one I'd had in years.

CHAPTER THREE

King

“You gonna fuck that one or can I have her tonight?” Jacko asked as my gaze trailed after the hot piece of ass I’d been watching all night.

My eyes cut to him. He sat opposite me on the couches in the middle of the clubhouse bar. He’d had a long day and he was fucking wasted. Lifting my beer to my mouth, I tipped it back and took a long slug. I then said, “You’d be lucky to get your dick hard enough to show her a good time, brother. But be my guest.” It wasn’t like we had a shortage of whores to choose from.

He frowned as he leant forward. “You got a piece on the side, King? It’s not like you to share like that.”

I scowled at him. “You want her, go fucking get her now, otherwise she’s off the table,” I barked.

He didn’t hesitate another second, leaving me alone. Fucking finally. I rubbed my neck as I tried to relax. Trouble was, I was hard as a fucking rock. Had been for months. Usually, sex eased my tension, but even that wasn’t working lately.

Fuck.

I pushed up out of the couch and left the bar to head into my office. Being Christmas night, it was quiet at the clubhouse. Even at just after nine p.m. The few members around were either drunk or busy with pussy, which suited me because I craved some peace and fucking quiet after the rowdy day I’d been subjected to.

I found what I was looking for in the office fast, grabbed my shit and headed out to my bike. It was time Kree Stone and I had a talk.

"King," Kree said hesitantly after she opened her front door to me.

My eyes dropped briefly to take in the tiny denim shorts and the loose-as-fuck white top she wore. The shorts revealed long thin tanned legs that went on for miles while the top hung so low I copped an eyeful of tits and a lacy pink bra, as well as a collarbone that revealed how thin she really was. Her hair was piled messily on top of her head and her face was bare of makeup. She was missing all the jewellery she usually wore at the clubhouse, which also meant she was missing the fucking jingle-jangle noise that followed her throughout the place.

Our eyes met and I caught the flash of irritation in hers. I wasn't sure if it was because I'd come over so late on Christmas or whether she was pissed off that I'd checked her body out. Not that I gave a fuck either way. Taking a step towards her, I pushed my way inside her house. "We need to talk."

Without waiting for her to speak, I walked down her hallway towards what I figured was her kitchen. The door clicked closed behind me, and she muttered softly, "Sure, come on in."

When I reached her kitchen, I turned to face her, ignoring the glare she was sending my way. "Jesus, Kree, you'll burn your fucking house down with all these candles."

They lined her hallway on shelves higher than my head and filled her kitchen and dining area, too. As I glanced around the room taking them all in, I also noticed the plants she had lined up along the windowsill and scattered around the room. There had to be at least ten plants in there. I should have picked her for a fucking gree-nie, though, with the vibe she had going on. Kree was into herbs and crystals and talked in what felt like another language half the time with her discussions on star signs and moon phases and shit. Also, she'd been known to speak her mind occasionally, but usually she was too fucking soft as far as I was concerned. But fuck, she was the best damn bartender we'd ever had, so that was all that mattered to me.

"Haven't yet," she said, her voice firm. "What's so urgent that you need to barge into my home at nearly ten on Christmas night?" The hint of fire I heard in her voice surprised me, but it shouldn't have. With everything I knew about her, I knew she would go to the ends of the earth to protect her home and everyone in it. Someone

forcing their way in—even someone she vaguely knew through work—wouldn't be something she'd be comfortable with.

"I've been talking with Zane." *Her cousin.*

She stiffened at that and blinked once, but full fucking points to her for maintaining her cool. "And?" Even her voice didn't waver.

I reached into my pocket and pulled the envelope out that I'd brought with me. Dropping it on the kitchen table, I said, "He told me what's going on." Lifting my chin at the envelope, I said, "That's for you, and I don't want any of it back."

Frowning, she picked up the envelope. It was when she looked inside it that her carefully maintained composure finally shattered. "Fuck, King," she said as she looked from the envelope to me. "I can't accept this. It's too much."

I scowled as she tried to hand it back to me. Shaking my head, I said, "No, it's not. You need it. I don't."

She opened her mouth to argue, but a little voice carried through the air, calling out to her. "Mummy, I don't feel so well." A moment later, a boy entered the room, coming straight to her and wrapping his arms around her legs.

I knew his name to be Tommy, and his age to be four. I also knew his father to be a cunt who Tommy and his younger sister, Mara, needed protection from.

Kree crouched low and took Tommy's face in her hands. Concern etched her face as she said, "Do you feel like you might vomit, baby?"

He nodded his head. His face was so white I figured she probably had less than a minute before he made good on that. She figured it, too. Scooping him up in her arms, she hurried out of the room with him, leaving me alone while trying to soothe him with love.

My fucking gut tightened at the image of mother and child.

Fuck.

I raked my fingers through my hair.

Fucking Christmas.

If I could wipe this fucking season off the calendar, I fucking would.

Ten minutes or so passed before Kree came back to me. Anguish covered her face. "I can't accept that money, King."

"Why?" I challenged her.

"It's too much. There has to be at least five thousand in that envelope."

"Ten thousand," I corrected her, ignoring the way her eyes widened in shock. "And you still haven't given me a good reason."

She swallowed hard. "I don't want to owe you." Wrapping her arms around her body, she added, "I never want to owe anyone ever again." That was when her voice cracked. I knew the reason for that, too, but I didn't bring it up. Kree struck me as a proud woman; the last thing she needed was me throwing her past in her face when she was trying desperately to leave it behind.

I picked up the envelope and placed it in her hand. "Take it and don't fucking argue with me. We both know you need it. I'm not going to mention it again, and you don't owe me," I said with force. "And one other thing, I'm switching your shifts around at work so that you don't have to work as many nights anymore. Those kids need you at home."

With that, I stalked down her hallway, not waiting for her response. My body crawled with the need to get out of there as fast as I fucking could.

Good deeds weren't my fucking thing.

I rubbed the back of my neck again, feeling the beginning of a headache forming.

Motherfucker.

I needed to screw my way through tonight and fuck this tension out of my body.

Hell, I needed to fuck my way into oblivion and forget every-fucking-thing about Christmas.

KING & JEN / KING & KREE

This takes place during the time in Devil's Vengeance when King discovers Jen's betrayal.

Tightening my grip on the glass of rum I held to my mouth, I drained the last drop of alcohol as I watched Jen make her way towards me. The anger that had worked its way deep into my bones over her betrayal flared like fucking fireworks—loud, bright and fucking overwhelming. But then, this dance of anger and forgiveness wasn't new to us. Throughout the five years we'd been together, we'd fucking danced that tango almost daily. It had fuelled our relationship. Until it didn't, and we were left with wounds we'd never recover from, and a whole lot of fucking regret.

"You finally came home," she murmured as she inched closer to me.

I dropped my gaze to watch her close the distance between us, knowing her next move before she even made it. To most people, Jen was an unpredictable mess of chaos and bad decisions, but not to me. Probably because I lived and breathed chaos myself.

Pressing my hand against her stomach to stop her, I clenched my jaw and bit out, "You're not gonna like what I have to say."

She didn't surprise me when she ignored my warning. Pushing my hand away from her stomach, she took the last step she needed to ensure our bodies touched. When she responded to what I'd said, her voice held a smoky promise. "It wasn't what you said that kept me around for five years, King. It was always what you did that held me captive."

My eyes closed for a moment while I waited for her to take hold of my dick. This was all classic Jen. On the other hand, me allowing her to make her move was not my signature style. But then, this whole fucking situation was unlike any I'd ever been in before. And it was fucking with my head in ways I barely fucking comprehended.

Her warm breath fanned across my cheek as she moved her mouth to whisper in my ear while she slid her hand into my jeans. "You can tell me to leave all you like, or try to kick me out, but we both know that you and I have something special. Something that you're powerless to walk away fr—"

Rage swam in my eyes as I squeezed my hand around her throat and pushed her face away from mine. My breaths pumped furiously from me, and we stood staring at each other in silence, her eyes wide with shock. "What we fucking have, Jen, is something as far as fucking possible from special as you can get."

She attempted to pry my fingers from her throat, her efforts growing desperate when she realised I had no intention of loosening my grip. Sucking in the little breath I granted her, she begged, "King!"

Our relationship flashed through my mind, just like it had for the past few days while I'd contemplated the path forward. Her actions and disloyalty had carved the kind of hole in me that could never be patched or filled or fucking healed. This wasn't something that could ever be fixed. In one night, she'd managed to wipe five years worth of trust and love.

I walked her backwards and shoved her against the wall, finally letting her throat go. Ignoring her gasps for breath, I said, "I came home to tell you that you can stay here for the rest of your pregnancy if you need to. After the baby is born, you get your shit together and find your feet, and then I want you the fuck out of here and out of my life."

The way her body froze told me she hadn't expected that. Her strangled words confirmed it. "After everything we've been through, that's how you're going to end this?"

I tracked the tears falling down her cheeks before meeting her gaze again. "The tears don't fucking suit you, Jen. And they sure as hell won't make me change my mind. You should know that by now."

Her face twisted into an angry scowl as she scrubbed her tears away. "I can't fucking believe you! Five years ago, I cheated on you and you hardly blinked an eye. But for *this* you never want to see me again?"

I rubbed my hand over my face. Rehashing the past wasn't something I saw any point in, but she was forcing me there. "We both know why you cheated."

She moved her face closer to mine. The crazed glint in her eyes gave me a clear indication that this conversation wasn't going to end anywhere good. "Go on, King, tell me why I cheated. I want to hear the words from your lips."

If she were anyone else, pushing me like this, I'd put a fucking knife to her throat. My guilt over the shit I'd put her through stopped me from doing that. Instead, I worked hard to keep my temper in check. That, and the fact there was a child's life at stake here. "Jen," I cautioned her, my voice a low rumble. "Step the fuck back and think about what you say to me before you fucking say it."

"No. Tell me," she pressed, playing a dangerous game she knew all too well.

We were fucking swimming in heat and a toxic level of hatred and bitterness. A lethal combination. I took a deep breath as I did my best to ignore the way my clothes clung to my body. It was suffocating, but nowhere near as suffocating as Jen's insistence to dredge this crap up. "You do not want to go down this path. Not with me. Not tonight." With that, I stepped away from her and turned to make my way back to the bottle of rum sitting on the kitchen counter.

"You don't want to talk about your precious Ivy? Of course you don't. You never do, because you fucked her up more than you fucked me up, and you never want to think about *that*, do you?"

Her words were like venom spilling all over the place, infecting everything they touched. Unfortunately, they were the trigger that unleashed my anger in waves that could never be contained.

"There's a lot of fucking things I never wanna think about, but that shit? I think about it every fucking day of my life," I bellowed as I spun around and stalked back her way. With one swift motion, I had her pinned to the wall again. She recoiled as my fury thundered out of me. "I can't fucking escape it, because it's buried so fucking deep inside of me that I couldn't rid myself of it even if I tried. You

think I didn't love you, but you have no clue what love is. You don't know what it looks like, tastes like or smells like, and you sure as fuck don't understand how to give it. So don't fucking come in here and throw accusations around that you have no business even thinking about."

Wild energy engulfed us as we each dealt with the situation in our own way. My breaths came hard and fast while I watched and waited for her response.

"I hate you," she spat. "I hate that you still don't see me for everything I am and for everything I could give you. I hate you for thinking I don't love you, when all I ever fucking wanted was to love you. I was a naïve teenager when you dragged me into your world, and I fucking adored you. We could have had the world, King, but *no*, you were so fucking hung up on *her*. You couldn't see straight because of her, and you still can't. Well, fuck you. I don't fucking want you anymore. I deserve better than you."

"I fucking see you, Jen. And I don't like what I see. And I sure as fuck don't like what I now know about you."

Everything about her screamed hatred, from her ugly glare to the hard set of her shoulders. But for one quick moment, disappointment flashed across her face as my words dealt a blow. "I thought that you might be able to dig deep and find a way to forgive me. But no, you've proven once again what a cold and heartless bastard you really are. I made a mistake, King. A fucking mistake that I wish I could go back and change."

"That's the thing about mistakes, Jen. You can't go back, and you can't undo them." I sucked in a long breath. "And the thing I've learnt is to never fucking forgive them." Turning, I strode to the counter, grabbed the bottle of rum and threw over my shoulder, "Don't ever fucking mention us getting back together again because that shit is never going to happen." Without a backwards glance, I exited the kitchen and then the house. The murderous energy consuming me was demanding an out, and I knew I had to get the fuck out of there before the blinding rage took over and I did something I had no control over.

"I'm not sure why you think coming to my home so late at night is a good thing," Kree muttered after she opened her front door to me an hour later.

"It fucking beats me, too. But you calm me," I said as I ignored the scowl she gave me and entered her house.

"Yeah, well maybe you could text me first. That way I could have your favourite chair and a drink ready for you by the time you arrive," she grumbled sarcastically, following me into her kitchen.

Facing her, I held up the bottle of rum I'd brought with me. "No need, I brought my own," I threw back, waiting for her comeback. If there was one thing I'd learnt about Kree on my four visits to her place over the last couple of weeks it was that she was fast and liked to give as good as she got. It was probably the reason why I kept coming back—she was a breath of fucking fresh air.

Lifting her brows, she said, "So thoughtful. I'll find you a glass before I get your chair ready, shall I?"

Moving to the cupboard where I knew she kept her glasses, I said, "Sit. I can pour my own damn drink, and besides, you look like hell, woman. Like you could do with a drink, too."

"Just what every woman wants to hear, King."

I poured our drinks while watching her take a seat at the table. Narrowing my eyes at her, I said, "Are you fucking eating? You look like skin and bones."

She sat cross-legged on her seat and scooped her hair into a messy bun while hitting me with a dirty look. Everything about those moves only accentuated how thin she was. "You know, just because you gave me some money doesn't mean you can show up here any time you want. It also doesn't mean you should feel encouraged to comment on my weight or my looks or any part of my life."

I screwed the cap back on the rum bottle and passed her drink over. I took a long sip of mine and eyed her over the rim of the glass. "The cash is long forgotten, Kree. My concern for you is not. Do you need more money?"

"God no!" Her eyes widened as the words flew out of her mouth. She then downed half her drink, pulling a face as it burned. "Fuck," she muttered, staring at the drink like she was remembering something. When her eyes found mine again, she said, "I'd forgotten how fucking awful rum is."

A smile briefly touched my lips. Kree intrigued me because she was different to most women I met. She was a mix of feisty, brave, tough and soft, as well as a contradiction of wise and naïve. And as far as I'd figured out, she wasn't after cash, sex or help, which was unusual in my experience.

Taking a seat at the table, I stretched my legs out in front of me while almost draining my glass. When I didn't say anything, she said, "Now that you've told me how *I* look, do you wanna know how *you* look?"

I shook my head. "No." But I knew she would tell me anyway.

Placing her half-finished drink on the table, she leant forward. "You look like you just went a round with one of your worst enemies. Without the wounds, that is." She paused for a moment. "Did you come here to talk about that, King?"

I exhaled hard and scrubbed my face. "I don't know why the fuck I came here except like I said, you calm me, and I need some fucking calming right about now."

She held my gaze like I imagined she would with her kids when she was about to tell them something important. "You don't say much when you come here, but you say enough for me to know you need to talk. To be completely honest, I don't want to be the person you talk to, because quite frankly the last thing I want to know is the shit you've got going on in your head. But, it's late and I'm ready for a shower and bed, so if you need to talk, can you hurry it along?"

I stared at her for a long beat before skimming my gaze over her body. She wore tiny shorts that showed off her long tanned legs, and a tight red tank top that was glued to her tits. I hadn't been kidding when I told her she looked like skin and bones, but even that couldn't hide her beauty. The thing about Kree, though, was that her mind interested me more than her body.

Shifting in my seat, I rested my elbows on my knees. "I didn't come here to talk."

She watched me quietly for a moment before saying, "I'm not fucking you, if that's what you're after."

My mouth spread out into a smile, and the tension coursing through my body eased a little. Fuck knew how she did it, but every fucking time, without fail, she managed to help me get my shit under control. Standing, I said, "If I wanted to fuck you, Kree, you'd know. And trust me, we wouldn't still be sitting here fucking talking

about it." I lifted my chin at her. "Go take your shower. I'll see myself out."

I didn't wait for her reply. I simply left the way I came in. Minus the desire to take a knife to Jen's throat.



I hope you loved King & Lily's story as much as I loved writing it.

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HURRICANE HEARTS EXCERPT

WINTER'S POV

Birdie Beaumont had owned my heart from the moment she waltzed into my life the day I turned twenty. We met at a football match. I'd just won the game for my team, who happened to be her team, and she'd smiled at me as I ran off the field. I hadn't been able to get the sexy blonde out of my head all day, and when she'd turned up at my birthday party that night with one of my teammates, I'd made it my mission to get to know her. She'd tried to tell me she wanted to date my teammate, but that was bullshit, and she knew it. Our instant connection had scared her, and she did everything to avoid giving in to it.

But I had never been a man who gave up on what I wanted, and I'd pursued the fuck out of her. And here we were, repeating history. Birdie continued to deny her feelings while I decided she'd be mine again.

I held her to me firmly enough that she'd have to fight to escape. "If you think I'm going to let you walk away from me twice this year, you're seriously mistaken, Birdie. I'm not ever allowing you to do that again."

Hell, she wasn't a woman I could go on living without. I'd barely survived the last five years since she'd left me and fled Sydney. Since she'd ripped my heart out. She had no clue she still owned that heart. That my chest was a gaping hole of pain filled with nothing but memories that haunted my days and claimed my nights.

Her eyes found mine, and I saw everything I needed to see to know I hadn't misread this.

Birdie wanted this as much as I did.

"Winter," she said breathlessly, but the way she didn't make any attempt to wiggle out of my embrace betrayed any argument she might attempt. "We can't—"

I pressed a finger to her lips, silencing her. "I'm just asking for a few drinks. We can go for a coffee somewhere else if you don't want to drink anymore."

She remained silent, staring up at me like a deer caught in headlights. Still not moving out of my hold.

"You wanna go grab coffee?" I asked when she didn't respond. It was actually my preference. It'd be quieter, and I'd have a better chance at getting her talking.

Shaking her head, she stumbled over her words in her haste to get them out. "No, I'll stay here and have a drink with you. One drink." It seemed she wasn't confident about being somewhere quieter with me. That knowledge only confirmed my thoughts that she was trying to shut down her feelings.

I held her for a few moments longer, not wanting to let her go. But I eventually did and then motioned to the bartender for two more drinks.

She moved closer to the bar and placed her clutch down, still doing everything she could to avoid looking at me. I ran my gaze over her while we waited for our drinks.

Fuck, she was beautiful. I'd never found a woman who even came close to matching Birdie. With her blue eyes that captured me every damn time, flawless tanned skin, curves, and legs that went on forever, and those lips I'd spent too many fucking hours thinking about, she had everything that got my blood pumping. But it wasn't just her physical attractiveness that took my breath away. Birdie was the complete package with a soul that far exceeded any beauty she had on the outside. Everyone who met her was drawn to her in inexplicable ways. She was like that song you loved and couldn't get out of your head, but for the life of you, couldn't figure out why you loved it so much. Kind and thoughtful in ways many weren't, Birdie marched to the beat of her own drum, and I was powerless to do anything but hang off every vibration.

I paid for the drinks and slid hers across the bar, finally finding her eyes. I caught her off guard, and she quickly looked down. Before I could stop myself, I leaned in close and said, "Remember that night in Hobart when we got blind drunk and you ended up in that

water fountain half-naked before I could stop you? It was so damn cold that night and I—”

“You dragged me out of it, wrapped me in your T-shirt and jacket, and threw me over your shoulder so you could carry me to the taxi. And you froze your ass off—”

I held her eyes. “Because I loved you and I would have done anything for you.” I paused, my fucking chest squeezing with love for her. “I still would.” I didn’t need to remind her of the long night of sex we’d had that night. It had been the kind of sex no one would ever forget. But then, we’d always had that kind.

She took a deep breath and exhaled it slowly before taking a sip of her drink. “What are you doing, Winter?”

“Remembering the good times we had.”

“Yeah well, they’re just memories now. Dragging them up only hurts.”

“So you don’t ever think about us? I call bullshit on that.”

“You can call bullshit all you like, but it’s been five years and I’ve moved on.”

“You’re dating someone at the moment?”

She tensed like she used to when she tried to evade my questions. “I’ve just started seeing someone.”

The idea of another man’s hands on her tore me up, but it wasn’t anything I hadn’t thought of over the last five years. I pushed my displeasure down deep, locked that shit up because it wouldn’t get me anywhere tonight. “So he means nothing to you yet is what you’re telling me.”

“No, Winter. What I’m telling you is that we’ve been out a few times and I like him.”

I’d really fucked up our relationship when I hadn’t listened to her needs all those years ago. She had never demanded I walk away from the military, but if I’d stopped for just one moment and *seen* her and the struggles she’d been going through, I would have left a helluva lot sooner. And we’d still be together today.

This dickhead she was seeing had fucking nothing on what I could give Birdie. We had history, and that had to count for something. I knew everything about her. That her favourite singer was Eminem and her favourite colour was pink; that she reserved Sundays for family and meal prep; that she organised her clothes for the entire week on a Sunday night; that she always fell asleep watching

TV at night and never usually made it past 9:00 p.m. because she was always up at 4:30 a.m. to go running. I knew her heart, and who had trampled over it. And all the regrets she'd ever had.

I might not have known her for the last five years, but I knew more than this new asshole did.

"How's your mum, Angel?"

Her eyes widened a smidge, and she gulped down her drink. Placing the empty glass down, she picked up her clutch. "We've had our drink, and now I'm going home. My mum is good and no, she doesn't ask about you anymore."

My lips twitched at the attitude she threw my way. It was a low blow, me asking about her mother. Jennifer had always loved me and had rooted for me after Birdie ended our relationship. She'd kept in touch with me for a long time, keeping me updated on her daughter and the fact she was still trying to make her see sense.

Didn't hurt to remind her of my ties to her family, though. At this point, I'd use every weapon in my arsenal.

When she took a step away from me, I reached for her. The spark of our skin touching couldn't be denied, not even by her. I saw it in the flare of her eyes when they met mine again.

"You can run and you can try to hide, but eventually you will be mine again." I leaned in close. "I'm going to enjoy the fuck out of the chase, just like I did the last time we played this game."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nina Levine

Dreamer.

Coffee Lover.

Gypsy at heart.

USA Today Bestselling author who writes about alpha men & the women they love.

When I'm not creating with words you will find me planning my next getaway, visiting somewhere new in the world, having a long conversation over coffee and cake with a friend, creating with paper or curled up with a good book and chocolate.

I've been writing since I was twelve. Weaving words together has always been a form of therapy for me especially during my harder times. These days I'm proud that my words help others just as much as they help me.

www.ninalevinebooks.com



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