



Clover

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Category: Erotic, Romance

Description: Clover: He took me. That son of a goat fucker took me. Now I'm his. To do with as he pleases, and it's not all tickle fights and cuddles. All I can do is try and keep my sanity. Pray that Nix cares for me enough to come for me. Enough to fight for me. Kill for me. Because he may not know it yet, but I love him. With my luck I'll never get to tell him. I'm sure as hell am going to try. First, he has to find me. Trapped in my gilded cage.

Nix: Being away from her, knowing he has her is like having my flesh chewed off by angry beavers. I don't sleep and I inhale cocaine like oxygen. If I can't find her soon, I may do that which I'm immensely talented at. Killing. One person in particular, in slow and gratifying ways. Nothing and no one will stop me from getting to her. Not locked doors, not Braxton Shaw, and certainly not my fear. Because she is everything and I will not lose her now.

Total Pages (Source): 57

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

Chapter 1

Phoenix

If I could scoop out Braxton Shaw's eyes with a spoon and feed them to him, I would. But I can't, so I don't. Instead, I have to allow him to treat me like his little lackey boy and make his oh so fucking precious delivery for him. I would so much rather be with Clover instead. Yet here I am in my truck with Zander driving two large duffle bags full of whatever the fuck pills Braxton put in them to Marco's. The restaurant is run by Marco Valentino III, one of the higher-up dealers in our organization. We've dealt with him before. He's not that bad, little on the sleazy side, but most dealers are.

When Braxton showed up in town over a week ago, I knew he would stir shit up. I wasn't expecting him to stir shit up with Clover. Fucking with my family and me, making us run his little errands—Sure. Hitting on my girl? Never in a fucking million years did I expect to be defending the woman that's slipped in through the cracks in my heart. The strong, quick-mouthed woman I fucking love. Yeah, I love her, and I admit it. Now, if I could only find the balls to tell her. I can run into a gun fight with a dozen coked-up wolverines in a burning explosives factory and not be afraid. Telling the girl, I love my feelings? Utterly. Fucking. Terrifying.

The last month or so she's been living with me has been eye-opening, to say the least. Clover has ruined me for all other women. I want no one and nothing but her. To be honest, it's a little distracting when I'm working. Like now, as I'm driving, I normally think about security issues, cops, possible setups, etc. Instead, I'm thinking of what position I want to fuck my girl in tonight and tomorrow. Possibly what I'll make her for breakfast. How much I enjoyed tattooing her and how I can't wait to do it again.

See? Fucking distracting. And yet I can't bring myself to give a goddamn shit about anything else.

Except for her safety and what I'll do to Braxton if he tries anything. It would make the decision easier for me if he did try something because then I would have every reason in the world to fuck up his stupid cocky face. If he did try something, though, that might hurt Clover, and I don't want that, but I so want to fuck up Braxton. Shit. This is confusing. I want him to—I don't want him to. Damn it, emotions are so fucking confusing.

"You're awfully quiet over there," Zander calls, pulling my attention to his presence in the passenger seat. I guess I had zoned out a little bit thinking about Clover.

"I just want to get this delivery done, is all."

"So, you can get back to Clover?"

"What? No, that's not it. She just needs to have one of us around right now while Braxton is still lurking around town."

"Sure. And I'm a prima ballerina. That's not the only reason, cuz, and you know it."

Of course, there are other reasons, but the only people who know about those are Magnus and Arrow. Pretty sure Beau knows, as well. Neither Clover, nor I, have outright told him, but he knows. It is too obvious for him not to. Zander is a good guy; he did see me carry her out of the club, and I'm sure he would love to hear that I am going steady with one woman. The whole family would love to hear that. I just can't tell them all, not yet. Clover and me, it's all still too new. We haven't talked about what we are. Being a lifelong bachelor, I don't really know how to proceed from this point. Plus, most of my focus has been on keeping dick head Braxton away from her. And getting into her pants as often as possible.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I lie.

“Sure, you don’t. That’s why you carried her out of the club like a caveman. Why you watch her like a hawk at the bar, and why I haven’t seen you with any other woman in at least a month.”

“My sex life is none of your concern, Zander.” Since when did he watch me so carefully? Are they all watching me? Were they always watching me? Should I be concerned or flattered?

“It used to be everyone’s business. You never cared who knew about your sexual conquests before. Not until Clover moved in.”

I grunt in response. Not wanting to admit he’s right. Before, I never cared who knew about all the chicks I fucked. It never mattered because I only ever took a woman home once. None of them meant anything to me. They never did, but now when a woman throws herself into my line of sight trying to catch my attention, I don’t even notice. I only ever notice Clover. My hunger is something only she can satisfy.

“So, what’s it to you?” I honestly want to know now.

“I just want you to know that we all love Clover and completely approve of you and her. She’s a great girl, and everyone would love for you to stop whoring around and be with one woman.”

“Gee, thanks, Pop. I’m so glad you approve. I didn’t know the whole family had a meeting regarding my sex life. Maybe next time, you can invite me, and I can offer up some explicit details for discussion.”

“Joke all you want, Nix, but we can all see how much she’s changed you. We’re all happy for you. Clover is amazing, and even though you may think otherwise, you do

deserve her. You deserve to be happy.”

“No, I don’t.” The words are barely audible. My family thinks way too highly of me. I don’t deserve Clover. She’s too good, too perfect. Yet, I can’t stop myself from having her. She’s mine, and I’m hers. I can only hope that she accepts me for who I am because there’s nothing in this world I want more than her. She is my hope for the future.

“Yes, you do, Nix. You’re a good man, even if you are a stubborn ass. I have a feeling if there’s any woman in the whole fucking universe who can handle you, it’s Clover.”

“Huh. Thanks, Z.” My cousin’s praise of my relationship with Clover warms my heart. Knowing my family hasn’t completely given up on me finding someone means I’m not a complete lost cause.

Zander simply grins and nods at me. He knows he’s not going to get anything else out of me tonight. I am, as he said, a stubborn ass.

We arrive at Marco’s restaurant, and I pull my vintage powder blue chevy pickup around back and park near the rear entrance. Pulling the two duffle bags from the hidden compartment in the bed, we each carry one toward the building. Although it’s prime dinner time, the parking lot of the restaurant is oddly empty. Only a few cars sit quietly in the lot.

Entering through the back entrance, used mainly for kitchen staff, it’s just as quiet on the inside as on the out. Strange, I would have thought they would be bustling at this time of night. Marco’s is usually a pretty popular restaurant. Perhaps they shut down for the night. Just for this delivery? Seems a little overkill, if you ask me. But it’s not my business to run. Not my choice to make.

Situated in the back of the building is a minimally furnished office where we find Marco sitting behind his large wooden desk. Four of his men stand around the room, acting nonchalant. Relaxing on the small couch or leaning against the wall. They don't seem to be doing anything in particular other than waiting for our arrival.

Shooting a quick glance to Zander, he too has noticed the men and their apparent indifference. Which is a big fucking red flag in my book. Whenever a person is acting too uninterested, it usually means they are very interested. We both know to keep our eyes peeled for any movement from them at this point. Because the only way anyone can get a jump on us is by outnumbering us. One on one, these fuckers would go down like flies. Even two or three on one, we can mostly handle ourselves. That doesn't mean I'd like to test my theory of who has the faster draw.

"Phoenix, Zander. So good to see you, boys, again," Marco greets us without standing.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

“Marco,” I nod in response. Zander takes his place next to me, and we both set the duffle bags on top of Marco’s desk.

“Is this my new product?”

“Yes, sir.”

He begins to open one bag and pull out the new pills the Shaw’s engineered. Apparently, it’s similar to Oxy but mixed with elements of ecstasy and THC to create a completely unique trip. I’m not particularly a huge fan of psychotropics or hallucinogens and have yet to partake in this new brand of drug. Seeing talking pink elephants isn’t really my thing. Not to say I haven’t tried it a few times in my life.

The pills Marco is inspecting are brightly colored pink and blue capsules. Nicknamed Harley. The story was when they were testing it, someone started acting suspiciously like Harley Quinn, and the reference sort of stuck.

The small baggies of brightly colored pills roll around in Marco’s hands as he continues to play with them. Seemingly taking his time admiring his new product.

“If that’s all, we’ll take the payment and be on our way.” My impatience was obvious in my flat tone. I want to get paid and get gone.

“Yes, of course.” Gesturing with one hand, the four men who were casually lingering around the room reposition themselves behind us, blocking our exit. Marco doesn’t move from his spot in his chair behind the desk. Nor does he move to pay us.

A pulse of unease shoots up my spine, and I straighten, defenses on high alert. We have never had any issues with Marco and his men before. This is extremely unusual. Preparing myself mentally and physically for whatever may come next as I side-eye his men in my peripheral. I don't have time for this bullshit.

"Braxton and I have negotiated a special price for this shipment."

"We don't care what price you have negotiated as long as you make payment promptly," Zander states flatly. I second his opinion. We don't handle the price or the production. We are simply the muscle paid to deliver the shipment safely and collect our fucking money.

"Give him their payment, boys."

At Marco's command, his men encroach closer on us, trapping us in. I knew there was something suspicious about this whole situation. Marco's men draw their guns, but before they can aim any of them at us, Zander and I take action. Drawing out our own weapons from belt holsters and turn them to the four men advancing on us. They've decided to take the two on one approach. Two of them for each one of us.

The first guy coming at me is a decent-sized man. Well-built from what I can see under his dark blue dress shirt. The barrel of his pistol looks to be a Glock, possibly a Smith & Wesson, most likely a .40. not really something I want blasting through my skull at this moment. As his first shot echoes out of the chamber, I manage to grab his hand, holding the gun, and angle it just enough to my left that the bullet misses my head. Thank fuck. But hold goddamn shit, I can't hear a fucking thing out of my left ear now. A nice high pitch ring is now the only sound coming from my left as I twist the man in my arms and use him as a shield from the spray of bullets coming at me from his back up.

The bullets riddle my human shield, his head lulling and his body growing heavy in

my hold. Soon it'll be more of a hindrance than a help to hold him up.

Aiming my gun at the second guy's kneecaps from around my sagging shield, I pull the trigger. He goes down just as I drop the first man, who is now literally dead weight, in my arms. The second one drops to one knee like a man proposing to his girlfriend, holding his blown-out knee crying in pain. Now armed with my Desert Eagle 50 cal in my right hand and the dead goons Glock 40 in my left, I aim both at the kneeling man and fire. His shoulders, head, and torso jerk back with each bullet that makes contact. Red rimmed holes appearing where each of my shots land.

The man twitches and gurgles something incomprehensible until his lifeless corpse drops to the floor with a heavy thud. A thick puddle of dark red blood seeps from underneath him, merging with the already steadily growing puddle from the first guy. His still pumping heart slowing as his blood loss grows.

I'd known that man for at least three years. He's been with Marco for a while and always part of his security detail. He wasn't a bad guy—made small talk every now and then when I wasn't in a particularly shitty mood. I think his name was Steve or Stephan or some shit like that. Didn't stop me from putting a dozen bullets in him when the time came to make a choice. That's the lesson they have to learn. It doesn't matter who the fuck you are or how long you've been in the organization. We will take you down ourselves if and when it becomes necessary.

When I turn to assist my cousin, I find Zander has already disposed of the other two men as effectively as I have my own. At our feet lay all four, dead or dying. Small droplets of splatter flecking Zanders cheek mirror similar blood splatter on my own face. Now to take care of the source of the problem, at least the problem at hand. I know Braxton is at the center of all this, but currently, Marco is the lucky recipient of my wrath. One that has been growing every second since Braxton arrived in my bar.

Raising the barrel of my Desert Eagle 50 magnum, Zander and I square off shoulder

to shoulder with Marco. Now standing trying to protect himself, he wields two gold-plated Springfield 1911 45's Each pointed at one of us. He makes no move to fire. Fear and deep contemplation twist his face into uncertainty.

"Interesting form of payment."

"Like I said, special price." He states plainly.

"So, Braxton paid you to kill us." It's more of a statement rather than a question from my cousin at my side. We both know what's going on here.

"More like a trade," Marco answers coyly, still hiding behind his desk.

"And what happens if you don't deliver on your end?"

"That's not an option, and you know it." His nervousness at his current predicament starts to show through his mask. Cracking his resolve to go through with this risky execution.

"Well, that leaves us in a sticky situation. Doesn't it?"

"Indeed, it does." He says shakily.

"From where I stand, it doesn't look good for you in any outcome. Whatever choice you make, you end up dead. Except one. One gives you the opportunity to keep breathing."

My words sink in as his eyes dart back and forth between myself and Zander. Deciding if he should take the escape I've dangled in front of him, like a golden carrot, or attempt to kill us and most likely die trying.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

“Which is?” Good, he’s not as stupid as I thought he was.

“You lower your guns, and we won’t kill you for this little misunderstanding. You can even keep the pills. I don’t care. We all leave, alive and breathing. Giving you the opportunity to run and hide before Braxton gets word that you failed and comes after you himself. Or you pull the trigger. You might hit one of us, but we will most definitely hit you. And you end up in pieces in a trash bag thrown in the nearest dumpster and set on fire. Even if you do manage to kill both of us, do you really think the rest of our family will let you off so easily?”

His eyes are twitching every which way processing his options. He knows I’m right, and if he values his own life, he’ll fucking drop his guns.

“You know they’ll come after you so fucking hard. They’ll take out every single fucking person in your family. They’ll burn down your restaurant, your house, and your family’s homes with everyone still inside. They’ll erase every evidence that the Valentino’s ever existed.” I’m not lying. After they physically remove every blood line of his, the Smith’s will get to work scrubbing their digital lives. Deleting birth certificates, removing social media accounts, and every picture online will disappear overnight. Even their arrest records and taxes. Gone. Like they never fucking existed. Sometimes I really love my job.

He ponders my offer momentarily, his fingers twitching at the trigger, deciding to fire or not. My cousin and I do not falter. We do not twitch or sway in our resolve. I have no qualms killing this man for trying to kill us as payment to Braxton for his drugs. My blood boils in my veins as my grip tightens on my gun. Killing Marco for his betrayal sounds rather satisfying now, and I struggle not to shoot him this very

instant.

However, killing him could create a rather large cluster fuck if I want to use him in taking down Braxton and putting him in his place. The joy of Braxton knowing his assassination attempt was a complete and utter failure and that Marco is out there. Where he could tell someone about his execution plans for my cousin and me. It warms my motherfucking heart.

Fortunately for Marco and his face, he decides to lower his guns and chooses to keep breathing.

“Good choice.”

Both Zander and I lower our guns but do not holster them. Just in case he decides to take a dirty shot at us on our way out. Backing out of the room, I drop the Glock while stepping over the lifeless men on the ground. I keep my eyes on Marco the entire time. Deciding that he doesn't deserve all the pills we brought him at the last moment, I grab one of the bags before leaving the way we came in. Neither of us speaks until we are seated in my truck and peeling out of the parking lot.

“That didn't go as planned,” Zander says what we're both thinking.

“No, it didn't. And if Braxton is trying to take me out, I can only think of one reason why.”

“You don't think?”

“Yes, I do,” I growl out in between clenched teeth. White knuckling the steering wheel as I press down on the gas harder.

“Clover?”

Yes, Clover. If Braxton is trying to remove me from the equation, it's because he's making a play for her. He told me he wouldn't give up, and I knew he meant it. I just didn't think he would take it this far. Does he want her so badly because she's mine? Is he doing this just to spite me and take the one thing I actually care about?

Well, if he is, he has another thing coming to him. Because now I will not hesitate to shoot him straight through that black heart of his when I find him.

This feeling of dread and heart-racing fear for Clover's safety grips at me, twisting my insides. Another foreign feeling flushes through my veins: panic. Adrenaline fueling my rage and feeding the fire in my heart. One thought racing through my mind over and over. I will kill him if he touches her.

"You okay to drive, man?" Zander asks from the passenger seat. Understandably since I'm literally shaking with rage and panic.

"I'm fine. I just need to get back to her," I bark out at him.

"She's with Beau and Rosie at the bar, right? So, she should be fine." He tries to comfort me with his logic, but somehow, I can tell that even with his reassurance, something is wrong.

"Until I see her in front of me. Safe. I'm not stopping."

Pulling my cellphone from my pocket, I call Clover's number. It rings and rings, but she doesn't answer.

"Dammit, Clover, pick up the phone," I mumble into the receiver. Willing Clover through the connection to answer her phone and tell me everything's all right.

"FUCK!" I roar into the cab of my truck, thrusting my phone on the dash. It clatters

and tumbles across to Zander's side.

"It doesn't mean anything, Nix. She could be behind the bar and not have her phone on her."

"Yeah, or Braxton got to her."

"Don't think like that, man. I'll call Rosie, and you'll see. Clover will be just fine."

His words are meant to soothe my anger, but it does nothing for the growing anxiety I feel with every passing second I don't hear her voice.

Dialing our cousin, I hear Zander's one-sided conversation with Rosie.

"Hey, Rosie.—Yeah, we were. Things went a little sideways—Listen, is Clover with you?" He pauses as Rosie speaks on the other end.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

“Where’s Clover, Rose?” His voice was sterner this time and another pause. His change in tone causes my blood pressure to spike.

“Is she with Beau?”

“Where is she, Z?” My patience is completely lost at this point as I speed a good twenty miles over the speed limit, heading back the way we came.

“I’m finding out now.” He says to me before turning his attention back to the phone in his hand.

“She’s not?”

“She’s not what, Zander?” I demand. He can’t keep saying things like that and not explaining what the hell is going on.

“She’s not at the bar or with Beau.”

“What?!” His words send me off the deep end, and my restraint snaps. Causing me to jerk the steering wheel and veer onto the shoulder of the road momentarily. He got to her. Braxton has her, and I know it. Screeching wheels accompany the abrupt sharp turn I make onto the highway as I swerve around car after car. Knocking Zander into his door with the force of the movement.

“Then where is she, Rose? What? Why did you let her do that?”

“Do what?” I all but scream in the confined space of my truck cab.

“Clover was going to drive herself to the bar in the Camaro. Why didn’t Beau drive her?” He asks into the phone again. I can hear Rosie’s voice rising from across the cab of my truck. I can’t make out what she’s saying over the loud roar of the engine as I race down the freeway.

“Goddammit. I told them not to leave her alone. Why the fuck did they leave her alone?” My cousins and I will have to have a serious talk between their faces and my fist when I see them. Disobeying my orders regarding her safety will not be permitted. They know why they needed to be with her. The fact that they allowed her to be alone, unsupervised, causing her disappearance, I may never forgive them for it. If we can’t find her or something happens to her, I don’t know what I’ll do.

“No. We can’t get ahold of her either.—Yes. Yes. Good. We’ll meet you there.”

“What is it?”

“Beau and Rose are going to go to your house to look for her. I told them we’d meet them there.”

“If she’s not there, Zander.”

“I know, Nix. Don’t worry. We’ll find her. I promise.”

“Can you, though? If he’s taken her, we may never find her.” A heartbeat catches in my throat and sticks there, causing me to exhale sharply. Being with Clover has made me fall in love with her, and if I can’t find her, I don’t think my heart will survive.

Pulling into my driveway, I throw my truck in park and don’t bother with the keys. Leaving them to dangle in the ignition as I sprint up the front stairs and throw open

the front door.

“Clover!” I yell into the silent house. Beau and Rosie greet me in the foyer.

“She’s not here, Nix,” Beau informs me. My anger and sheer panic are in control now, and I can’t stop myself from grabbing the collar of his shirt and lifting him. Bringing him nose to nose with myself.

“Why weren’t you with her?” I growl into his face. He scowls at me, brows knitting together.

“I was at the bakery. I asked Rosie to pick her up. Clover convinced her that she could drive herself in the Camaro.” Speaking quickly, Beau knows if he doesn’t explain himself, I will snap his neck. Not that I want to kill Beau, but my instincts tend to take over and make me do things when I’m pissed.

“It’s not his fault, Nix. Let him go.” Rosie’s hands land on one of mine, clenching Beau’s t-shirt. Softly and calmly, she talks me off the edge of beating the ever-loving shit out of my best friend and cousin. Releasing Beau, he takes a healthy step back out of my reach.

A roar breaks from my throat, erupting from my lips. I slam my fist into the wall, creating a crater in its place. Drywall and paint flake off onto the floor in a dust cloud that floats in the longest moment of my life. I can’t breathe. I can’t think.

What do I do know?

Raking my hands through my hair, I pull at it, trying to figure out my next move. I know what my next move is—to rip Braxton’s heart from his chest with my bare hands.

Turning, my feet start to carry me back to my idling truck to do just that. Zander stands in the doorway and puts a hand on my chest, blocking my exit.

“Where are you going?”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

“To find Braxton and tear out his spine.” And I mean it. I will rip him limb from limb in the state I’m in, and I’ll enjoy it.

“Maybe we should put a pin in that idea for a moment.”

“If you kill Braxton, we’ll never find Clover.” Rosie’s sweet voice reaches me through the fog in my brain. A fog that sank in the moment I found out Clover wasn’t at the bar and was left alone by my two idiotic cousins. The fog coats my insides, causing my body to shake with rage. A fog that blinds me to the concerned faces of my cousins and the constant flow of tears streaming down Rosie’s cheeks. Showing that they too care about Clover and want to find her. I had forgotten how close she and Rosie have gotten and how she treats Beau like a brother. All I can think of is he took her from me. Mine. My girl. My Clover. It never occurred to me that they could feel the same as I do.

“She’s right, Nix. We have no idea what happened. We can’t just go around killing people. Not yet, anyways. Trust me, I want to hurt whoever took her too. But if we just go around killing people, we won’t get anywhere.” Beau, my now dead-to-me best friend, hollers at me from a healthy distance away. That’s right, you better keep out of my reach, or I might finish what I started when I got here. This is his fault anyways. If he had just done as I said, none of this would have happened, and Clover would be safe in my arms right now.

“Watch me. I don’t care who he is. I’m gonna fucking kill him.”

“No, you aren’t, Nix. You’re going to sit your ass down, and we’re going to take a breath and figure this out.” My ex-best friend, Beau, continues.

“You’re lucky I don’t break your legs for leaving her here alone.”

Pointing my finger at him, I take a large step in his direction. To his credit, he doesn’t back away.

“Look, I’m sorry, okay? Trust me, I hate myself just as much as you do right now for leaving her alone. I thought she would be okay until Rosie came to pick her up.”

“Well, she’s not okay now, is she?” I yell back at him. Advancing a few more paces in his direction. This time he does back away from me. Yeah, you better be afraid.

“We don’t know that yet. She could be just fine.” His voice has grown soft and – sad?

“You better hope she is, for your sake.”

“We all care about her too, Nix. You’re not the only one, ya know?” Raising his octave back to irritated as fuck at me as much as I am at him.

“Do you, Beau? Cause if you did, you would have been here to drive her to protect her.”

Our argument has reached a loud crescendo, echoing in the entryway. Beau no longer cowers away from me but has stepped into my personal space. Anger and hurt as prevalent in his features as I’m sure they are in my own. My hands are so tightly fisted, I can actually feel my knuckles whitening at the strain to try and turn them into blocks of concrete. My body shaking with barely controlled rage.

Before, I hadn’t really looked at Beau, but now face to face, really looking at him, I can see it. His pain and fear. He’s just as much a wreck as I am inside. I just can’t control what comes out of my mouth. Whereas he’s actually thinking and trying to be calm about this. While I’m over here spewing hate-vomit and blaming everyone.

Everyone except the person who's really responsible for this mess. Me. In all truth, I'm the one to blame, I'm the reason Braxton set his sights on Clover, and I'm the reason she's gone now.

"Easy now, boys. We all just need to calm down and take a moment."

Zander physically places himself between us. Hindering us from dismembering each other where we stand.

"No one is to blame. We're all worried about Clover. So chill the fuck out, sit the fuck down, and let's talk this through like adults. All right?" He asks me before turning to face Beau. "All right?"

Neither of us says a word, but we both grunt begrudgingly. He has a point. I may be pissed beyond belief at everyone at the moment for leaving her alone, but that's not going to help find her right now.

"You guys are as bad as a couple of roided up jocks." He mutters at us. Accepting our grunts as agreements, Zander backs off and makes his way into the kitchen, where we all follow and find seats at the dining room table or couches. Zander sits on the arm of the couch, obviously trying to decide what to do next. He tries, but he's not the one we usually turn to for direction or ideas. The fact that he's the sane one right now is not lost on me.

A pregnant silence falls as we return to a reasonable level of calm before speaking again. Which is a good thing because my patience, or lack thereof, has me on edge. I still want to strangle someone, but that someone being Braxton. Not my cousin.

"What do we do now? Do we call Uncle Faust?" Rosie asks, breaking the long silence.

“No. We’re going to handle this ourselves. We don’t need to bring Pop into this unless absolutely necessary.” It comes out more like a bark than anything else, and I don’t mean to do it intentionally.

The last thing I need is to get the whole family involved in my love life. A love life that none of them even know I have. Granted, I’m sure they would all be more than happy to assist in finding Clover as she has grown to become an integral part of our lives.

“We need to call Faust, Nix. Or at least Griffon. It’s the smartest move right now.” Beau leans his elbows on his knees, pleading with me. Eyes digging into my flesh compelling me to comply. Like I’m gonna listen to him right now.

“What? You don’t think I can do it on my own?”

“Oh, I’m sure you can. You can just do it a hell of a lot faster if you use every tool at your disposal. We are a family of highly connected criminals. With strings in many places, we could pull. Why wouldn’t we use that to our advantage to find Clover?”

He may be right. I could be acting a little impulsive at the moment. I know in reality that neither Griffon nor Pop would have any issues helping. Even though Griffon doesn’t know Clover very well, he knows me and knows Pop loves her. Mulling it over while grumbling to myself, eventually, I give in to Beau’s stubborn logic.

“Fine. Call Griffon and Pop only. I don’t want to drag the entire family into my problems.” Trying to avert my eyes from my cousins, I keep them downturned, watching my clenching hands in my lap.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

“Even if we have to, you know none of them would hesitate to help. We love you, Nix. And we love Clover too. She’s already like a sister to me, and I would do anything to keep her safe. As I’m sure, you would too. This is what families do. We help one another. Even the asshole self-absorbed ones.”

I can’t bring myself to laugh at Beau’s joke, but he does get me to calm down. Looking up at him sitting in the chair across from me, a little bit of my initial hate and panic subsides. Unfortunately for my pride, he’s right.

While Beau has been talking me down, Zander has pulled out his phone and is now talking with Griffon or my Pop.

There is another person who knows about my feelings for Clover who is very resourceful and doesn’t ask questions. Pulling out my phone, I dial.

“Who are you calling?”

I ignore Beau’s question and wait for Arrow to answer his phone as I stand and pace the room.

“Yellow?” Arrow answers on the other end.

“Arrow. I need info, and I need it now.”

“Yeah, boss. Whatcha need?”

I can always count on Arrow to do what I need, when I need it, without question.

“I need to know where Braxton is right now. And I need to keep eyes on him until further notice.”

“Sure thing, boss. Is there something goin’ on I should know about? Why you keepin’ eyes on captain douchebag?”

“Clover’s missing, and I’m one hundred percent sure Braxton has something to do with it.” My voice breaks a little with the growing anxiety in my heart. I’ve never felt more useless and helpless in my life than I do right now. And I need to remedy that. I need to know what Braxton is doing and where he is at all times. Maybe he’ll get arrogant and lead us straight to Clover. It’s not completely out of the realm of possibility.

“Why that worthless sack of shit. You need me to soften him up a little, boss?” Arrow, already ready and willing to beat down the bastard, and as much as I want to let him and join in, we can’t just yet.

“More than anything, but not yet. We need to know what happened to Clover and where he took her. If we touch him now, he won’t tell us a thing and will probably go to the council. We need to hang back first and see if he leads us to her.” The words come out through clenched teeth. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would say no to beating the shit out of Braxton motherfucking Shaw. But finding Clover is more important. If that doesn’t show the level at which I am severely in love with this girl, I don’t know what does.

“Are we bringing the rest of the fam in on this?”.

“We’ve called Griffon and Pop for now. I’ll let you know if we need to call anyone else. For now, just get eyes on Braxton and report back to me.”

“You got it, Nix. Whatever you say, man. I’ll call you when I have something.”

“Thanks, Arrow.”

Hanging up, I stuff my phone in my pocket and take a deep breath. The first step is finding out where Braxton is. Then we can start the hunt for Clover.

“What do we do after we know where Braxton is?” Zander asks from his spot, perched on the couch arm with his phone still pressed to his ear. Probably informing them on everything we know so far.

“We can follow him, for starters. See where he goes. Possibly leading us straight to Clover.” Continuing to pace, I make my way around the room, shaking off the adrenaline pumping through my veins. It’s helping my nerves, which is keeping me from punching another hole in the wall.

“Then what?” Rosie asks on a soft sob, still wiping away remnants of her tears from her cheeks. She’s always so tough on the outside that sometimes I forget she has soft spots inside her too. It’s rare to see Rosie emotional, and it only hurts me more seeing her tears. Knowing Clover could be crying similar tears at this moment. Or not. More than likely, she’s pissed the fuck off right at this moment. I can only hope her anger keeps her from being scared.

“Well, depending on if he leads us to Clover or not, we call up a few others and go get her. If he doesn’t lead us to her, well...Then we strip search every property he owns till we find her. Then I rip out his spine through his throat.” Anger laces my words as I practically spit them out.

“Griffon says he’ll send some men to check Braxton’s places outside of town. See if he took her there.” Zander calls to me from across the room.

“If he’s still in town, I doubt he took her anywhere too far,” I say while I pace in front of the living room window.

“Better to check everywhere just in case.” Zander returns to talking to Griffon on the other end of his phone. He’s right. If I were thinking clearly and not through a thick haze of rage, I would be saying the same thing. I’ve dealt with situations like this before. Not an abduction per se, but tracking down someone who doesn’t want to be found. It’s not my specialty, but I’m no first-timer. If Hunter were in town, he could find her in a matter of hours, I’m sure. If this goes on too long, we might have to call him in.

Heat boils in my veins. The confines of my house driving me stir fucking crazy. I need to get out. I need to do something, break something or someone. Rage has built up inside me to the point where I need a release. My body responds to my brain's autopilot to search out and destroy, leading me towards the front door again. Before I reach the nob, Beau is there, grabbing my hand and redirecting me to the den.

“I need to hurt someone.”

“I know.” He agrees. Still leading me away from the door and any possible chance I have to actually do just that.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

“I can’t sit here and wait, Beau.” Entering the den, I circle the pool table. My hands automatically picking up two billiards balls. They’re smooth and firm in my grip. Allowing me to tighten down on them. I feel the crack before I hear it, as the pressure from my fists is too much for the balls to handle. Before they break in half completely, I let out the pent-up energy inside, bellowing out a howl of frustration as I wind back my arm like a pro pitcher and release the ball. It flies across the room, embedding itself in the wall, knocking a painting off its hook. It lands on the floor with a crash, the glass shattering just as I release the second ball. Lodging it right next to the first. It’s not enough. I need to do more. Walking over to the pool queue rack on the wall, I pull one from its resting place and crack it over my knee. Splintering it in two. Grabbing one more from the wall this time, I use only my hands. Snapping the hard stick like a toothpick.

Calm is not something I do. At least not without Clover in my arms. No matter how many times Beau and Zander tell me to calm down, I can’t. I do stop breaking shit, however. That only hurts me since it’s all my shit, after all. The veins in my arms trying to make their way out of my skin as I clench my fists. But my heart rate has slowed, and I’m not fuming from my nostrils anymore.

Ten minutes later, Arrow calls to inform me he has eyes on Braxton at a club he owns. The Jewelry Box is a very exclusive posh strip club that offers a variety of off the menu options for its wealthier, more discrete clientele. A few of my cousins appreciate the services offered there on occasion. Some more than others.

After Arrow hangs up, Pop calls and tells me to get my ass over to the CCS office. The CCS or Colton Coverage Security is our “legitimate” security firm in Charlotte, North Carolina. About thirty minutes from my home. When I get an assignment to

guard a member of the Syndicate, one of its associates, or even some rich bastard that doesn't know anymore who we are, then we do him. It's CCS that pays me to do it. I even get a fucking W2 from them to file my taxes.

We do as he instructs because he's my fucking Pops and the big boss. He tells me to jump. I sure as shit jump. I've never questioned him or his orders. They're always right, and he's always right. Griffon, on the other hand. I question his shit all the fucking time. Which is probably why Pop called me instead of him.

We load up into a few cars and head to CCS. But not without making a little pit stop first.

Chapter 2

Phoenix

Against the advice of my cousins, I drive Beau and myself to CCS in the Camaro. I need a little more power for this drive than my chevy truck can accommodate. The need to press my foot to the floor and e-brake slide around every corner, tempting and very satisfying. I don't fast and furious it around town, but I break the speed limit on every street we drive down. When I make a left turn instead of a right, I can feel Beau's scowl from the passenger seat.

"Where the hell are we going?"

"Pit Stop." Is all I say. He'll see when we get there.

"Faust won't be happy if you keep him waiting." I could give two fucks right now if he's not happy with me being a few minutes late to his office. He can wait. This can't.

Pulling into a parking lot, the elegant gold sign reads “The Jewelry Box” above the double door guarded entrance. The Jewelry Box is located in a trendy part of downtown Charlotte not far from my Pop’s office. The three-story building is constructed of red bricks so dark they’re almost black. Encrusted with gold accents with a modern flare.

The first floor has no windows, and the top two floors’ windows are blacked out. You can see out from the inside, but nothing can see in. And yes, all three floors are the club. The first floor is the common area. One main stage and a few side stages with poles, lots of low sitting chairs for lap dances, and two bars. The second floor holds another full bar and all the private dance rooms. Filled with a variety of mini-stages behind plexiglass. The girls only come out from behind the glass for a certain amount of cash. It is not a small amount either, usually in the four-digit range. The top floor is even more exclusive than the second. Requiring a membership and secret code to enter. Filled with private rooms made for more intimate encounters, allowing the very specific clientele the privacy to do as they pay for. As well as one main stage for special performances.

When I park at the front door, Beau literally lunges at me to try and stop me from getting out. He’s too slow, and I’m already standing by the time his hands make contact with the leather of my vacated seat.

“Nix!” He yells at me as I circle the car towards the valet.

“Keep it here. I won’t be long.” I call to the young valet waiting for my keys that I toss into his hands. I say young, but he’s at least twenty-two.

“Yes, Mr. Colton, sir.” I don’t think I’ve ever seen this kid before, but he knows who I am. Anyone who works at a Syndicate club, especially one as exclusive as The Jewelry Box, knows every head family member. Kinda learned it was best to educate our employees after a certain blowout between a James and a receptionist. It was

messy, don't ask.

Beau is close on my heels, and I see Zander pull up behind me, and he and Rosie hop out and follow me in. I don't wait for any of them. The bouncer opens the door to the club. Not one of ours, since this is a Shaw establishment. They rarely use our men or us for their special businesses. Like I said before, we hate them. They hate us. The only reason we deliver their drugs is that it's literally part of the agreement between the families. We don't have to be their bouncers for their public businesses, but we sure as shit have to be their muscle when delivering product.

Stepping in through the glittery beaded curtain onto the main floor, I take large strides into the center so I can see the entire floor. Searching for the piece of shit himself. I know he's here. Arrow's guy said he was. A scattering of customers and dancers fills the main floor. Two on the side stage poles and a couple more giving lap dances on the floor to very satisfied customers. Since I don't see Braxton at either of the bars or any of the tables, that must mean he's upstairs on the third floor. Turning, I head for the hidden elevator banks down a hall to my left. Punching the code into the panel for top floor access, we all step into the glittering gold elevator when the doors open.

Arriving at the top floor, my three cousins and I step out of the elevator mere moments later. They didn't even try to talk me out of it on the short ride up. Just accepting whatever is going to happen is going to happen. Braxton deserves everything coming his way. And I plan on getting as much information out of the asshole as possible without actually touching him. Again, angry, not fucking stupid.

The top floor has fewer people than the main floor, and all these men and even a woman or two are dressed in business suits and high-end retail. Us in jeans, Colt 45 logo shirts, and a few stray blood drops on my black fitted tee stand out like a piece of coal in a pile of diamonds.

The man of the hour is lounging comfortably in a low leather chair, watching the main stage performance. From the corner of my eye, I see that it's the Jewelry Box's star gem, Blue Diamond. Or Blue, as she's called. Hanging from a hula hoop looking contraption from the ceiling twirling and stripping at the same time. She sparkles under the lights as her blue iridescent diamonds glitter with every twirl.

I stop dead in my tracks when I see him, and a half-second later, I feel a large body bump into me from behind. Turning, I see it was Zander. His eyes flash to me and then to the stage and back to me.

"S-sorry, cuz." Is all he says, nothing further.

My attention turns directly back to Braxton sipping his drink not twenty feet from me. He hasn't even noticed us yet. Fucker's gonna know I'm here real quick. Closing the distance between us, my legs eat up the floor in a few quick long strides. My towering height makes my presence known quickly as I stop inches from his chair. The cocky bastard cocks his head, inclining to glance at me before returning to watching Blue.

"Nix. To what do I owe this pleasure?" Cocky fucking bastard's gonna die by my hands one day.

"Where have you been all night?" Clover's only been missing a few hours at this point, so if he had anything to do with it, his whereabouts this evening will tell me.

"Not that it's any of your business, but I've been here for the past few hours." He answers before sipping his drink again. Fuck do I want to slap that drink from his hands, drag him up by his lapels and throw him out a window. Restraining myself mainly because of the presence of Rosie behind me. I don't want to start a brawl here on his territory with only Zander and Beau as backup. We're seriously outnumbered and outgunned here. Plus, mom would kill me if I let anything happen to Rosie. Not

that she can't protect herself. Still, I am a southern gentleman. Sort of.

“You sure about that? No quick trips to Colt's for any reason?”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

“Of course not. Why would I need to go there when I have this here?” He gestures to the stage, and Blue, now down to a G-string and sheer diamond-encrusted bra, is back on the ground.

“So you’re telling me you haven’t seen Clover tonight?”

“Not at all. Haven’t seen her in a couple days. Why? Did she run away from you and your imbecilic misogyny?” his eyebrow lifts at me as he sips from his glass and I’m gonna fucking kill him.

“You motherfucking cock sucker.” I lean down and grab on to both of his dark blue suit jacket lapels, lifting him out of his chair. “When I find out what you did to her, I’m going to enjoy killing you.”

Braxton doesn’t try to wiggle free or strike back. He just grins wickedly at me. “I have no idea what you’re talking about, Colton. But if you’re going to come after me in my own establishment, you better come prepared.”

Looking around, I see half a dozen men in black suits have stepped out of the shadows and are primed to move on me. Braxton holds a hand out low, gesturing for them to hold.

“Because unlike the women you fuck, I won’t lie down and take it.” He finishes whispering in my face. The thought of him touching Clover, my woman, of him taking her, fucking her, hurting her almost breaks me then and there. My grip tightens on his jacket, and I hear a few stitches pop under the strain.

“Trust me, I’ll be very fucking prepared.” Annunciating every last goddamn syllable deep in my throat, so he knows just how fucking serious I am. Releasing him, I step back as he straightens his jacket with one hand, the other still holding his drink. “Watch yourself, Shaw.”

His low, amused chuckle almost compels me to reach out and strangle him. Rosie’s soft hand on my forearm is the only thing that stops me. She looks up at me with stern but soft, deep ocean blue eyes.

“Not now, Nix. Soon.” She whispers only for me to hear. I let her lead me back to the elevators. Noticing as we walk, Zander lingering behind us, watching Blue as she sits back on her hula hoop, and it lifts her a few feet off the stage. That’s when I notice her eyes are glued on Zander as well. What the fuck is that about? I didn’t know Zander had ever been to the Jewelry Box before. At least not as a patron. He’s had an assignment or two as a private bodyguard for someone important or another that ended with him here working. Considering his semi-celebrity past, I didn’t think he would dare come here for fear of the gossip rags. Guess he found a way to attend without even us knowing he was here. There is so much about my family I realize I don’t know.

This time when I slide into the driver’s seat of the Camaro, it’s not Beau sitting next to me but Rosie.

“You know you shouldn’t have come here.”

“He needed to know I am not going to let him get away with this.”

“I get that, but you could have made it much worse. That could have gone down way differently, and you know it.” She’s right, of course. If Braxton hadn’t waved off his goons, it could have been much messier for everyone. My temper tends to get the better of me at times. Especially when it comes to the girl I love.

Panic and fear like I haven't felt since Robin died starts to twine its way through my veins. Bringing me crashing down from my adrenaline high, forcing me to sag in my seat.

"I can't lose her, Rosie." My words are weak and broken when they come out barely on a breath.

"I know, Nix. None of us can. She's one of us now, and we will find her. Even if I have to kill Braxton myself." Her smile is weak but filled with promises I hope she can keep. In this quiet moment of vulnerability, I decide I need to tell someone about us. Me and Clover. Someone has to know how serious I am about her.

"You know, me and Clover—"

"I know." She interrupts my confession. "We all pretty much know."

"Wait. How?"

"It's kind of obvious, Nix. Plus, Clover is my best friend. She tells me everything." She admits with a wink, a little more upbeat now, as I start the car and pull out of the Jewelry Box's parking lot.

"So she told you about us fucking?"

"What?! No. She only told me about the kiss. When did you sleep with her?" her voice is almost a shrill shriek finding out that Clover actually didn't tell her everything.

"The first time was that night I took her out of the club that you so thoughtfully took her to." Revving the engine, I tear down the street headed for the CCS office's only a few minutes from here.

“The first time?” Rosie slumps in her seat and pouts. “You guys have hooked up more than once, and she never even told me about it?” She sounds disappointed and a little hurt that Clover didn’t tell her.

“Ya know it’s really new to us, and I don’t think she knew what to make of it. Hell, I didn’t know what to make of it at first either.” I sure as hell know what it is now. When I find her, which I will, I can’t even think about the possibility of not finding her. I will tell her. Tell her how much I fucking love her and that she’s mine now.

“But you do now?” Rosie asks softly from my passenger seat.

“Yeah. Yeah, I do.”

Chapter 3

Clover

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

Soft silky fabric covers my skin. The bed beneath me is plush and large. The fog in my brain makes me sluggish, and it takes every ounce of my energy to force my eyes open. Expecting to see the bright white walls of my bedroom, I'm surprised when I'm met with dark grey and rich blue curtains. This isn't my bedroom.

A soft throb thumps at the back of my head. I need some aspirin. First, I need to figure out where the hell I am. Sitting takes more effort than opening my eyes did. Eventually, I make it to an upright position and take a better look at the room around me. Rubbing at my temple, trying to ease the pain lurking behind, my vision clears enough to take in everything around me.

I'm in some sort of apartment? Lush blue draperies hang from the floor-to-ceiling windows lining the corner unit. A crisp white state-of-the-art kitchen fills another corner of the room. The bed I'm lying in is situated on a platform, overlooking the entire space. Tacky and probably super expensive white couches face a ridiculously large flat screen tv hanging on the wall. Soft golden light filters in through the sheer fabric covering the windows. To my left, I spot two doors. Maybe one of them is an exit.

Standing, I take my time to make sure the throbbing in the back of my head doesn't cause me to fall flat on my ass. Luckily, I'm able to stand without wiping out. My feet are bare, and the wood floor is cool against my skin.

What the actual fuck happened? How did I get here?

I was leaving for work and then...Braxton. He was at the house. He took me. But where did he take me? Is he here now? Shit, shit, shit.

Panic flares in every pore of my body and soul. Finding an exit has now jumped to the top of my to-do list, just above pissing myself in sheer terror.

Reaching for the first door along the wall, I fling it open. The pit of my stomach almost falls out my ass at the site of a large walk-in closet. Filled to the brim with expensive men's clothing except for a small section along one side. Dresses and lingerie line the right wall of the closet. Moving on quickly to the next door, I'm not optimistic about the outcome. And my fears are immediately confirmed when I come face to face with the bathroom. A rather amazing luxurious spa bathroom that I wouldn't mind taking advantage of in a less life-threatening situation. Right now, I couldn't care less about the heated floors and fluffy towels. I need to find a way out.

There has to be a way out. I got in here somehow. There has to be a freaking door. The hot sting of tears fills my eyes, the salty evidence of my fear rolling down my cheeks in thick drops. This cannot be happening.

Searching the apartment, I tear through the pristine kitchen and find a narrow stairwell in the back corner. This has to be it. I don't have time to think about anything but escaping this place, this beautiful prison.

Bounding up the stairs as fast as my short legs can carry me, I find a door. A door with no handle. Just a keypad asking for a ten-digit code. Who the hell uses a ten-digit code? Apparently, Braxton. Dammit. He may be an egotistical psychopath, but he's a smart egotistical psychopath. I rack my brain, trying to think of what the code might be. But I got nothing. I don't know him well enough to even begin to guess what it could be.

The tears are coming in rivers now. I can't stop them. What am I going to do? Every nerve ending in my body begins to vibrate and hum with awareness. I'm trapped in this place. No knowledge of where I am, how long I've been here, or what Braxton will do to me when he returns.

The tiny hall begins to close in on me, threatening my sanity with its mocking grey walls. I have to get out. Running down the stairs and back into the main space of the apartment, my eyes shoot around, trying to latch on to something, anything to make sense of it all. Grasp onto some sense of sanity before I go mad trapped in this room.

A glinting ray of setting sun catches my eye through the window. The window. Maybe I can figure out where I am. Signal to someone outside to help me. My feet can't move me fast enough to the windows—to my perceived escape. Looking out, I'm greeted with a long drop down to the street. I must be a good thirty stories up. It looks like a downtown area. I've never been in this city. It doesn't look like anything in Huntersville. Where did he take me? How far have I gotten from my new home and family?

Cars file down the streets, looking like toy matchbox cars so far below me. Banging on the glass, I try to scream, which is useless at this level. No one will see or hear me up this high. But buildings are surrounding me. There must be people in there that might see me. Frantically I search the surrounding high rises. A few curtains and blinds are open, shadows of people shifting around inside. My heart nearly stops when directly across from me, I see a group of suit-clad people entering what looks like a conference room.

“Heeyyyyy! Heeellllpppp!” I scream and pound on the glass. My lungs burning with the exertion.

“HELP ME, PLEASE! HELP!”

They don't hear me. Don't even flinch. Then a man in a grey suit with blonde hair walks up to the window and looks out directly at me. I wave and jump. He might not be able to hear me, but he sure as hell should be able to see me this close.

While I jump and wave frantically like a madwoman, he still doesn't react. Just stares

off like there's no one and nothing. Rubbing his hand across his stubbled face. How can he not see me? I have bright fucking red hair and am doing jumping jacks, for fucks sake.

A realization dawns on me, and I'm pretty sure I die a little inside. Not only is the building soundproof, but apparently, the exterior of the windows is coated in reflective film, making this a one-way window.

He can't see me.

The thud of my body hitting the floor echoed through the silent space as I drop to my knees, completely drained. I barely feel the sting of pain.

I'm trapped here.

There's no way out, and no one can see or hear me.

I'm going to die here.

That thought is what sticks with me for the next hour or hours. I don't really know. The sun has set, and all the city lights below twinkle in the dark moonless night. The pit of my stomach feels hollow and empty. It probably is. Unsure of what day it is, I haven't the faintest idea how long it's been since I ate last. But I can't move. I haven't moved since my realization. Curled in a ball, sitting on the floor pressed up against the window, watching and hoping for something to change—for one of the dozens of businessmen in the office complex next door to see me and call the police. They never do. Never once does someone do a double-take in my direction or try to call out to me. No one waves at me or points. Nothing. No one knows I'm here, and no one ever will. Hiding in plain sight. Braxton is good. This is the last place anyone will look for me.

During one of the many pity parties I have sitting on this floor, my pondering is interrupted by a faint beeping and a swooshing noise. Like, a door sliding open and closed. Someone's here. Braxton is here. The fear that had subsided into sadness and longing has returned in full force. Stark panic pushing buckets of adrenaline through my veins, giving me the energy to jump to my feet and position myself behind the couch with the windows at my back. There's not enough time to try and run for the bathroom or the closet before the devil himself enters the room.

"Well, it's nice to see you awake. I hope you've made yourself at home." Braxton's cocky condescending arrogance rattles my nerves. He's all casual conversation, with his hands in his pockets, nose tilted up, not a care in the fucking world. Like, abducting a woman in broad daylight is an everyday thing for him.

"What do you want, Braxton?" I spit out while keeping poised to shift one way or the other to keep the couch between us. My only barrier against the beast in front of me.

"I've made it abundantly clear what I want, Clover. I want you."

“Well, the feeling isn’t mutual.”

“It didn’t appear that way when we first met. Why, for a while there, you seemed rather interested in me.”

Braxton’s voice is all vile arrogance as he slowly steps toward me. For the first time, his shirt is unbuttoned at the collar, and I can see his collarbone and part of his chest. The edges of a tattoo peeking out. Tattoos on men are usually hot, but on Braxton, it’s just wrong. He doesn’t deserve the honor of having ink on his skin. I make sure to counter his steps keeping him far away from me with as many obstacles as possible between us.

“I changed my mind. Women tend to do that, you know. Change their minds. We’re kind of famous for it,” I quip back.

“You know what I think? I think Phoenix and his little cousins got in your head. Telling you I was the big bad wolf, and you should stay away from me.” His steps are measured and slow as he circles the couch stopping directly behind it. With me on the other side, almost pressed against the wall.

“Are you not?” I ask bitterly.

“Oh no, I most certainly am. But only to those who oppose me. If you had come willingly, I would have been a perfect gentleman. As it is, that’s no longer an option.” Leaning forward, he grasps the back of the couch, digging his fingers into the material and grinning like he’s about to devour me.

Yeah right, I don't think Braxton has been a gentleman a single moment of his life. He may dress the part, but he most certainly does not play the part.

"What are you going to do to me?" The words come out shaky and raspy.

"See, that's why I like you, Clover. You're smart. No begging or pleading. Just acceptance. Knowing that no matter what I want, I will always get it in the end."

His words are a menacing taunt. He knows he has me and unless, by some miracle, Nix comes running through that door right this moment, he at some point will take me. Take me by force and break me. And when he's done, dispose of me.

Checking the giant gold watch on his wrist, Braxton sighs and turns back toward the kitchen and the exit.

"For now, though, I have business to attend to. I just wanted to welcome you and assure you that this apartment is completely sealed. No way in or out except the one door locked with my code. There's food in the fridge. Don't worry, it's not poisoned. Why would I do that now that I've gone through all the trouble of getting you here? Where would the fun in that be? I haven't even played with you yet."

A malicious and devious grin spreads across his perfect lips. This is one sick twisted bastard. Who knows what he has planned.

"Get comfortable because you aren't going anywhere." The pure joy at his conquest of me evident on his deceptively handsome face.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

Does he really need any further explanation of the question? He just kidnapped me and is holding me hostage, and he doesn't know why I'm asking why?

“Whyme?”

“Why not? You struck my fancy.” Is all he says.

Seriously? That's his only reason. Seems like a stupid reason to abduct a person and keep them locked away in your penthouse prison. Because that's what this is. A prison created for beauty, concealment, and his amusement. Who would ever question it?

Nix had warned me against Braxton, and I believed him to an extent. But this? I never would have imagined him going to these lengths. Most people don't. They're aggressive in their pursuit or stalking, taking pictures from the bushes. This is on a whole different level. Sadistic and unreal. Most people would only ever dream about taking a girl as a sex slave. No one ever really does it. Not against their will, at least. Some people are into some sick shit, but at least it's consensual. This is far from consensual. I do not agree to the terms of this arrangement. If I had a safe word, I would be screaming it right now.

With Braxton's money and means, he can do whatever he wants. Apparently, he does just that. Even after all of Nix's warnings and their history together, he risked taking me. Once Nix finds me, he'll regret that decision. That is if Nix ever finds me. Or if he's even looking for me. If he even cares.

How long have I been missing? One day, two?

Has Nix already given up looking for me? Assuming I ran off on my own.

What if no one knows that Braxton has me? Am I really Braxton's possession now?

Is there a reason he was so confident when he told me I wasn't going anywhere?

Unconsciously, my fingers run over my tattooed arm, feeling the still healing area Nix tattooed less than a week ago. No. Nix would be coming for me. He would. He cares about me and knows I wouldn't run off without telling anyone, especially since Braxton has been in town and lurking around.

Lurking like he's doing right now. Taking in a good long look. Memorizing his captured prize. Planning the things he's going to do to me once he is good and ready. When he has time to leisurely take full possession of me. A cold chill runs up my spine, thinking about him touching me, kissing me, sliding his cock inside me. The cold chill turns into a full-body shiver. Goosebumps run across my skin. He sees them and smiles. He likes me scared. He wants me afraid of him. He gets off on it. I try not to be afraid, but I am. I can act tough when I'm behind a bar, wielding a shotgun. But here, stripped-down, defenseless, trapped, I am afraid. Not only of the things he wants to do to me but of what comes after. When he's no longer interested and wants a new toy. What does he do with the used old ones?

Shutting out the dark thoughts that spring to life in my mind, I try to think of something else. Something that will calm my racing heart and panic. Someone, Nix. His chiseled features appear in my mind. Enchanting golden hazel eyes, thick, soft dark chocolate brown hair. The feel of the short-shaved sides fuzzy against my hand. His soft voice in my ear. The pounding that threatens to burst through my chest calms to a quiet thudding. Still fast, still fearful, but less panicked. Thinking of Nix finding me and teaching Braxton some manners calms me enough to not pass out from hyperventilating.

He will find me; I know he will. I just have to hold out till then.

Chapter 4

Phoenix

We've been in my father's office for hours now going over everything that's happened with Clover, Braxton, and me. The sun crept up on us and is now burning through the sky. Too much time has passed. We should be out there looking for her, not in here talking. The bastard knows we're on to him. We have to follow him. All this talking and sitting is fucking infuriating. My father won't allow me to do anything until he has all the facts and information to make an "educated well thought out plan." Fuck his plan. I'm a take-action kind of guy.

Griffon joined us about half an hour after we arrived, only prolonging this meeting. The fucker's not helping either. He's even more calm and reserved than Pop. They've finally arrived at the important part, Clover's abduction. We also, of course, had to tell them about my little encounter with Braxton at the strip club. Which only extended the already long fucking story. When can we get to actually doing something? I'm about to flip a table when I tune back into their conversation.

Pop is sitting at his desk again, the large imposing dark oak desk a physical representation of his authority. In his perfectly pressed suit and tie, Griffon has positioned himself behind our father just to the left and back one step. Also, a physical representation of his authority. He is my older brother, my superior in every way. At least he thinks so and makes sure to remind me of it every chance he gets. The arrogant bastard.

We get along well enough. As well as we can, which really isn't much. Not many people 'get along' with Griffon. He doesn't have friends or come out with us to the bar or clubs. At least not anymore, he used to when we were younger. Now all he does is work in his fancy high-rise office next to our fathers and possibly strangle puppies and kittens in his spare time. That's how unfeeling he is. Okay, fine, I've never seen him strangle a puppy, but I wouldn't put it past him if one of his rich new clients paid him to. He probably would. I guess it's a good thing he's the eldest and being groomed to take over CCS and the next position on the council for the Colton family. All that responsibility and lack of fun would drive me nuts.

He stands tall, almost as tall as me, with his hands clasped at his front with that ever-present flat and yet disapproving scowl on his face. How does he manage to make that face all the fucking time? His eyes are the same hazel color as mine and our mothers. We got her eyes, but our fathers build.

"And you're sure it was Braxton who took her? She didn't leave of her own accord?" I almost growl at my own father for suggesting such an offensive thing.

"No, she didn't just leave. I know Braxton took her. He all but told me he was going to." Another silent pause from my father as he ponders this. "So, what are we going to do to get her back?"

"You know we can't do anything until we know for sure it was Braxton. At least nothing officially. I like Clover too, Nix. But I'm not starting a war with the Shaw's if it turns out she left on her own." Griffon nods a silent agreement with my father, signifying his position on the matter. He's not going to be any help to me. All I have is Rosie and Beau, Zander, Arrow, and maybe Magnus. Once I tell Magnus. I haven't called him yet, but as soon as we get out of this meeting from hell, I'm going to. He can help and will help. Especially if it means going after a Shaw. He may be more responsible and more logical than me, but he craves the violence just as much as I do.

“She wouldn’t do that. Not without talking to me. I spoke to her right before I left, and she was getting ready for work. Not to run away without a word.” I’m now standing, tired of sitting and letting them decide everything. My nerves are frayed, I haven’t slept, or eaten and the urge to break something is growing again.

“I know you’re involved with her Phoenix, but she is a woman living with you. Perhaps she just needed some space.” Griffon states flatly from behind our father.

“Look...” I swivel on my heels and give my all-knowing brother a death glare that would cause most people to wet themselves. Griff just shifts his eyes under an uninterested glare.

“She’s not the type to just leave without a word Griffon. I had just spoken to her on the phone, and she was getting ready to drive to the bar for her shift. We’re friends, and even if Nix was driving her nuts, she would have let me know if she were leaving.” Rosie stands from her leather chair as she speaks and makes her way directly up to Pop’s desk. Her eyes were like daggers trying to pierce the thick unfeeling skin of my brother.

“And she left her phone and purse behind. If she were just getting some space, why would she do that? And how would she get very far on foot without any money or ID?” Beau, my now best friend again, steps in and speaks up. Standing across the room from my father’s imposing desk. Keeping his distance, no doubt for the same reason I am. Because we may accidentally let our inner nature take over and lash out if Griffon says something we don’t particularly like.

I have begun pacing again. Circling the corner office my father spends most of his working hours in. It’s neat, clean, and organized, just like him and Griffon. They’re both always so put together. Makes me wonder if they ever have any fun. All they do is work in these offices, making phone calls, having meetings. I don’t think either of them has gotten their hands dirty in years. I know they can. They were the ones who

taught me, after all.

There's a tufted coffee brown leather couch against one wall where my mother sits. Her strong but delicate tattooed hands resting on her crossed legs. She hasn't said much, keeping quiet while we all ramble on and argue. I know she likes Clover, so it surprises me that she hasn't spoken up yet. We could really use her right about now. Pop will always listen to her.

I pass by a shelf filled with meaningless books and statues. Put there to look good and nothing else. No family photos or awards. Nothing personal or connected to anyone. We like it that way. The clients he brings into this room don't need to know who we are or our families.

Stopping near a globe that doubles as a minibar, I fill a glass with whatever he has in his decanter. I don't even care what it is. I fill my cup to the rim and down it all.

"She wouldn't just leave. I know it was Braxton." My voice is calmer and steadier than I thought it could be. The tightening pain in my chest dropping to my gut.

"The only way to prove that -- is to find her." My mother's voice is soft and commanding as she stands and makes her way to my side. Placing a reassuring hand on my shoulder, squeezing briefly before stepping away. Placing herself directly in front of my father, who remains sitting behind his desk. "So let's go find her."

She speaks to my father calmly and seriously. He watches her for the briefest moment. No anger or irritation and being told what to do. Just contemplation and then acceptance, nodding once as to say, very well dear. Like I said before, he listens to her when she speaks. They have a partnership not only in marriage but in life and business. Looking to one another and listening to the other.

We've all been told the stories of their torrid love affair and the blood bath that

spawned their relationship. It's a respect that was earned, not given. The love part that happened whether they wanted it to or not. Sometimes you can't fight it. I can't fight it with Clover. Our story seems to be turning into one born from blood as well.

After my father gives his approval to move forward, Griffon does as he always does. Steps forward and takes control. Speaking to the rest of us, me more specifically.

"You are going to look for her, no hunt down Braxton. You will search every location you think she might be held at, including all buildings and clubs owned by the Syndicate. I will inform the others so you will not be obstructed in your search. Do not torture or interrogate anyone protected by the accords. Am I understood?" his demanding voice booms out in the quiet office. I've already made my way to the door. Poised with my hand on the knob.

"Fine." I grit out. "Can I go now?"

"Not yet." What the fuck else could he have to say? He's said everything he needs to. I know not to kill any of the Shaw's and have been given the green light to search Syndicate property for her. "You'll need a few more people to effectively search everywhere in a timely manner. At least three more. Who shall I call?"

Shit. I didn't think he would care that much to want to help.

"Magnus and Arrow." I offer. Before I can think of the third, Rosie interjects.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

“And Lily. She’ll want to help too.” She looks at me sternly but also pleading with those eyes in a way only a woman can. I don’t disagree and nod, giving her a weak smile.

“Very well, Magnus, Arrow, and Lily.” Griffon echoes.

For the next five minutes, I’m held captive, unable to leave as Griffon assigns us search areas. Beau and I are taking the downtown clubs. Arrow and Lily will be checking office buildings and restaurants. Zander and Rosie will be checking in the residential areas, apartment buildings, and houses that are known to be used for recreational purposes. Magnus is going to the north warehouses. Finally, Griffon states he will contact a few informants and put feelers out to see if anyone has seen her.

Once the plan is set, I can finally leave. And set out to find my girl.

Our first stop is The Jewelry Box. Since that’s where I found Braxton last night, it seems as good a place to start as any. We bypass the first floor. There’s nowhere for him to hide her there. Making our way to the second floor. Since it’s now late morning, the place is empty. Good. Makes it easier for us. Not having to deal with seeing two dozen overpaid lawyers, fat hairy politicians, and unsatisfied married men’s dicks trying unsuccessfully to please one of the many women who work here is a bonus. It also means I’m less likely to walk in on one of them trying to fuck my girl. Lucky them, cause they wouldn’t see me coming. I wouldn’t put it past Braxton to whore her out once he’s had her. Hopefully, we find her quickly enough that

neither of those happen.

With every door, I open and empty room I find, my heart rises and falls with anticipation and disappointment. The same happens when we search the third floor. Only finding a few daytime security guards and cleaning crew. Deep cleaning and sanitizing all the surfaces, and I do mean all. The things that go on in this club are by no means clean. I'm sure everyone appreciates a good bleaching.

My insides war as I knock open every door and survey the private rooms. One side of me thinking of how I'd like to have Clover in some of these rooms one day could be rather fun to see her on the stage spinning on a pole, the other sick to my stomach that Braxton has her in a room like these.

The Jewelry Box is a dead end. Nothing here—no one here. The security doesn't know who she is, and most weren't even here last night. They're useless. At this point, I'm useless. But I'm not done. Not by a long shot. This is only one of many clubs. I will tear each and everyone apart looking for her.

Chapter 5

Clover

Twelve hours have passed since I woke up in this luxury hellhole. Since Braxton welcomed me to his dirty den of debauchery. Since I last saw my jailer. He hasn't come for me yet, not that I'm complaining. I'd rather he didn't come for me at all. But the longer I'm here, the more panicked I become that no one will find me. I can only hope that Nix is the reason Braxton hasn't shown his face yet. Maybe he won't get a chance to return. Maybe Nix will find me before he gets time to play with me, as he put it. Although I highly doubt that. Like he said, he always gets what he wants. Right now, he wants me for some unknown reason.

I wish I'd never met Braxton Shaw. I wish I wasn't working that night he came into the bar. I wish he'd never even come in. I wish...I can't even think of wishing I'd never worked at the bar or come to North Carolina. Because that would be a lie. I love it here. I love the bar. I love the Colton's and everything they've brought to my life. They've filled that hole created when I lost the last of my family, creating a new family in their place. Not replacing them but filling in for them now that they're gone. Giving me something I never really had. Community. Acceptance. I can't wish to never have found them and come to North Carolina. Braxton Shaw will not interfere with the new life that I've made here. I won't let him. Hopefully, neither will Nix.

Resolving myself to not allow Braxton to take advantage of me in any way, I sit up straighter on the king bed. Swearing to myself that I will do whatever it takes to protect myself until Nix arrives. Because he will. He has to.

Until then, I have to keep my strength up, and I'm actually really hungry now that the adrenaline has worn off. No matter how much I bolster myself up, I'm still really freaking scared. My nerves are like the electric edges in a game of operation. Every time anything brushes against them, my whole body buzzes in protest. My mind may be solid, but my heart and body are a hot mess.

The need to move is like ants crawling through my veins. Standing, I make my way to the kitchen in the far corner. Rays of morning sun shine in through the wall of windows overlooking the city. A city I don't know. The kitchen is like any other kitchen. Stainless steel appliances, white granite counters, oversized farm sink, and food. Sadly, no knives. I checked. But there are forks, could work in a tight spot. Choosing some fresh fruit and cheese and crackers, I eat standing at the counter, facing the hall that leads to the only exit. I will not be taken by surprise if Braxton shows up. Death gripping the fork in my left hand. It's easily sharp enough to stab through his throat.

Wondering around my new personal hell, I take an inventory of the space. Large and luxurious. A few months ago, I would have killed to live in a place like this. After meeting Nix and the Colton's, I could care less that the couch cost five thousand dollars, and the sheets are pure silk. I'd gladly take the worn-in used grey sofa and basic white cotton sheets over them any day.

There's nothing out here of use. Maybe I'll find something in the bathroom or closet?

The bathroom produces even less than the kitchen. He's removed everything, even nail clippers. Only toilet paper, towels, and soap remain in the cabinets. Not even a toothbrush I could sharpen into a shank.

Taking a closer look in the closet, I inspect the small section of women's clothing. Cocktail and evening dresses in a varying array of luxurious brands and fabrics, as well as sizes. Nothing over an eight. Apparently, Braxton doesn't like curvier girls. Prick. The only casual clothes I find are silk pajamas. I'll stick with my jeans and Colt 45 tank top, thank you very much. I'm not going to put on any of these glittery momentums. A pair of shoes would be useful, though, if I plan to escape. The only ones I find have heels half the height of my leg. Not practical for running.

A horrid thought occurs to me as I run my hands along the beautiful gowns. What happened to the women who wore them last? The various sizes and styles. He must have purchased them for his previous conquests. Where are they now? The shiver that radiates through my body reaches all the way to my toes. I don't want to be another dress on a hanger in his closet of trophies.

Everything spins around me when the panic causes all the blood to drain from my brain into my feet. Every part of me is heavy, and I don't have the strength to hold myself up. Slumping against the wall, my back slides down, ass hitting the floor with a soft thud on the plush carpet. He's done this before. Gotten away with it before. There's no way out of here. No way out but through that door with the ten-digit code

that I'll never in my lifetime be able to hack. I couldn't hack a toaster.

The rest of my body goes as heavy as my heart, and I fall to the floor, laying on my side, curling my knees to my chest.

Nix will find me. The Colton's will find me. Braxton will not kill me. Not yet. He hasn't gotten what he wants yet.

I still have time. Time that passes in a blur. I have no idea how much time has passed as I lay on the soft carpet of the closet. When I hear the sound, that will forever be a trigger. Beep. Beep. Beep. Swoosh. It's the door. Braxton is back.

The panic that weighed me down before is now pushing me into action. I need to move and hide. Hide? Where the hell am I going to hide? What a stupid fucking thought. I do need to be prepared. Because I have no idea what he wants to do to me.

Getting to my feet, I race towards the door. I need to find my fork. I sat it down somewhere while looking around. There's no time to find it, though as Braxton Shaw stands at the center of the space, a devilish grin on his lips. Fuck.

His crisp white dress shirt is partially unbuttoned again, and his sleeves are rolled up. He did not come here to talk. This time he's going to take action. We don't speak. We don't have to. The game of cat and mouse has begun. Lucky me, I get to be the mouse. Running as fast as my short legs can carry me, I cross the room, leaping over the bed and rounding the couch. Braxton's footsteps are heavy and loud in the quiet space, echoing closer and closer. I try to lunge over the couch, but he catches my ankle, and I drop. Landing on my stomach hanging over the back of the expensive sofa. Knocking the air out of my lungs for a moment. Sucking in a rough gasp, catching my breath, I kick my feet wildly, trying to shake him off.

The motherfucker is laughing. He's enjoying this. I kick harder. Not willing to allow

him the satisfaction of capturing me for a second time. This time I manage to break free and slide headfirst off the back of the couch. Landing awkwardly. Feet over head, almost kneeing myself in the face. Scrambling to my feet as fast as possible, I slip a little on the hardwood floors. Catching myself before I return to my previous position tangled on the floor. The momentary pause to gain my footing just long enough for Braxton to catch up to me. From behind, Braxton's large body presses to my back, and his strong arms wrap around me. Pinning my arms to my side.

“Oh, sweet thing. I love it when you run. Makes it all that more enjoyable when I catch you.” His hot breath coats my neck and ear. It makes my skin crawl. I take the opportunity and snap my head backward. Missing his precious face by mere inches, and only because of his fast reflexes. Instead, the back of my head whacks into his broad chest. It's enough of a distraction for him to stumble back, loosening his grip just enough. I slip free, but it's short-lived.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

Braxton is back on top of me before I can blink. This time at my front and pushing me to the ground flat on my back. Grabbing both my wrists in one of his large hands, locking my arms above my head. His knees are at either of my sides, squeezing around my body hard enough to secure my legs tightly together.

I scream bloody murder. Hoping beyond all hope that someone in another unit below or around will hear me.

“Scream all you want, sweet cheeks. No one can hear you. And I like it when you scream.”

“Don’t you dare call me that, you fucking psychopath!” I spit in his face for good measure. He only chuckles. Enjoying every goddamn minute of it as he wipes my spit from his cheek.

Leaning back on his haunches, he places his groin right over mine. He’s hard, and I think I’m gonna be sick. He rubs it into me and moans. With his free hand, he grabs onto the collar of my tank top and yanks hard. Ripping the cotton from top to bottom. Exposing my bra-covered breasts.

“I fucking hate that shirt.” He growls as he slides the same hand that just did the ripping across the swell of my chest. Sending a shiver straight up my spine. Never in my life have I felt smaller and weaker than I do now. Not when I was high, not when there was nothing I could do to save my mother, not even when I was living under a bridge like a troll.

His muscles are too big, and mine are too small. I never thought I was too small for

anything. Not even when facing off with Nix. His large size comforts me, fits me. It's not imposing and intrusive like Braxton's is. A stray angry tear rolls down my cheek without my permission. I buck and twist under his hold, trying to break free. Failing miserably.

His body covering mine in ways I never wanted to feel him. There's no doubt his intentions. I can handle whatever he does to me. I've been through worse than a little smacking around. He can try to break me, but he won't succeed.

Leaning down, he licks between my breasts all the way up to my neck. Sending the most disgusting feeling through my bones. His cock pressing harder into me. He smells like expensive cologne, and it burns my nostrils. When I try to fight back again, wiggling under his body, his grip tightens. Digging my wrists into one another. Stifling the whimper that it causes, I bite down, clamping my mouth shut.

"Mmmm. You taste like strawberries. I wonder if those pretty nipples of yours taste the same."

Yanking on my bra, he pulls at the lace enough for my breasts to spring free. Braxton licks his lips before leaning down and pulling my pierced nipple into his mouth. He doesn't suck hard or bite, just suckles until the peak hardens in his mouth. Again, he grinds his cock into me. This time I thrash my entire body about trying to knock him off. He only laughs at my pathetic attempts, moaning in delight as my thrashing mimics the motion of fucking. Perhaps not the best idea in my current predicament.

"Keep that up, little strawberry. It only makes me harder." He presses his body down onto mine to still me and emphasize his point. From this angle, I can see down his shirt, and the black swirling in of his tattoo mocks me again from under the crisp white cotton. His rock-hard erection is all the proof I need that he's fucked up in the head.

“Fuck you, asshole.” I spit out.

“Gladly”

Unzipping his pants with his free hand, he pulls out his dick and fists it. Rubbing it up and down my denim-covered pussy.

“Get off of me, you piece of shit.”

“I have been waiting a long time to get off on you. Very patiently, in fact, to have a taste of your sweet pussy.”

“If that’s your idea of patient, you’re gonna have to try harder. You’re not getting that sad excuse for a dick anywhere near my pussy.” I try to sound hard, but a waver shakes my words.

“It’s cute that you think you have any control here. I am in control.” Sliding up my body, he runs his cock along the plane of my stomach. Groaning when his skin touches mine. “I’m gonna fuck your sweet pussy until you bleed, and then I’m gonna fuck you again and again and again. Until you break, and when you’re broken, and I’ve had my fun. I’ll kill you and leave the pieces of what’s left on the doorstep of your precious Nix’s house.”

His words are venom and fire, and I know he will do as he promises. He will fuck me. I don’t have the power or strength to stop him. But he will not break me. I can’t let him. The longer I fight, the longer Nix has to find me before he does as he threatens and kills me. Men like Braxton don’t deserve the air they breathe and yet always have more than anyone else.

“You’re a pathetic excuse for a man, and your tiny dick couldn’t please a ten-dollar whore.” My words have bite but come out quiet. The strength in my voice lost—for

now. Even with the weakness in my words, it pisses him off, and he swings. The back of his hand smacking me across the face. The sting is not immediate. The blow taking me by surprise. I didn't know he was into giving pain. Sex I could deal with. Being beaten and hurt, I don't know if I'm strong enough.

"That felt fucking fantastic. I'm going to make you scream with my tiny dick when I rip you in two from inside of your, uhh, tight pussy." He groans as he presses his dick harder into my stomach. No matter how many times I call it tiny, it is not. Not as big as Nix, but still larger than average. I don't know if he actually could rip me in two, but I can tell he's definitely going to try.

He begins to do just that, reaching between us and unzipping my pants. Pulling them open. He can't pull them down without loosening his hold on me, so he settles for exposing my panties. Rubbing the head of his dick down as far as he can before hitting the bottom of the zipper.

"I am looking forward to feeling your pussy wrapped around every inch of my cock." Still leaning over me, I can feel his breath quicken as he strokes himself while pressing into me.

"When Nix finds me, he's going to kill you." I try to threaten him. It only makes him grin. He doesn't believe me.

"He'll never find you." Another of his sadistic chuckles slips through his parted lips. For a moment, I think he's going to kiss me, and I pray to whoever the fuck is out there that he doesn't. Braxton begins to shift on top of me. Probably prepping to remove my pants. Before he can, the beep, beep, swoosh noise comes again as someone else enters my cage.

"Boss?" A deep male's voice calls out from the kitchen. From around the corner, a hulking brute steps out, stopping a mere ten feet from us on the floor. "Sorry to

interrupt, boss.”

“What is it?”

“We have a situation.”

“Then handle it.” Braxton still hasn’t moved or turned to look at the man now looming behind him at a safe distance. Over his shoulder, I see the tall man, dark hair shaved short, basic black suit fitted to his large frame. Braxton’s righthand man and one of the asshats that helped him bring me to this penthouse prison. Braxton’s eyes are fixed on me, his cock still fisted in his hand but not getting any softer.

“It’s yourbird,sir.”

His body goes rigid on top of me. A sneer curling the edge of his lip, and his eyes narrow to slits. What the fuck does his bird have to do with anything? And why is it so important?

“Fine. I’ll be out in two minutes.” He growls out. The man turns on his heels and leaves the space without another word.

“Two minutes, huh? Little Braxton have performance anxiety?” Taunting is probably not the smartest thing to do now, but I can’t help myself. It’s that broken filter in my brain.

“I may not have the time to fuck you right now, sweet strawberry. That doesn’t mean I’m not going to leave you without marking you. You got me too hard to leave without coming first.”

Scooting up higher on my torso, he places his dick between my breasts and starts to stroke himself. Quicker harder. Tightening his hold around my wrists and squeezing my body with his powerful thighs. Thrusting the crown of his dick between my tits.

“I want to see my cum on your tits and rub it into your skin, so you smell of me.” I can see his erection growing, swelling as he strokes his shaft.

“You’re a piece of shit.” Turning my chin up, trying to convey any sense of dignity. It’s hard to do in this position, but I still try. Defying him is all that I can do.

“Keep talking with that dirty slut mouth of yours. Soon I’ll be coming in it. Uh, fuck yes.” He groans again as pleasure ripples through his body. His forearms flex, and the veins in his neck pop as his hips rock with the movement of his hand. Rubbing the crown across my nipples

If he wants me to talk, then I won’t speak. If he wants me to scream and fight, I’ll stay silent and still. It doesn’t stop him from stroking himself faster and continuing to rub himself all over me. As he said, it takes less than two minutes for him to finish, his climax shaking his body as he spills his hot cum on my breasts. His breaths are coming out in short, sharp exhales as he curses with every hot spurt streaming from his dick.

“I enjoy dirtying your pretty pink skin with my cum.” Releasing his cock, he uses his hand to smear his sticky seed across my skin.

“Don’t get used to it. It won’t happen again.” I promise him. His softening dick rests against my stomach, and he leans down to whisper in my ear.

“You may think your knight in black chrome Kevlar is going to show up and rescue you, but he’s not. Phoenix Colton doesn’t care about the women he’s fucked. He got what he wanted from you and moved on. No one’s coming for you, and you’re not going anywhere my dirty slut. You’re mine now.”

Ice, pure ice, runs through my veins where my blood should be. I’m frozen. A block of cold stone as Braxton finally releases my arms and stands. Tucking himself back in his slacks and zipping. He doesn’t say another word as he leaves. And me? I can’t breathe, I can’t think, I can’t move.

No one’s coming for me. No one cares about the ex-junkie stray brought home by the soft-hearted cousin. All I can do is crawl to the bathroom and turn the shower on hot. Letting the heat of the water wash away the remnants of Braxton and the hot tears

streaming down my face.

Chapter 6

Braxton

Clint couldn't have interrupted at a worse time. I was so close to sliding home in Clovers sweet pussy. So close to finally getting where I've been trying to talk my way into for weeks. The first time I saw Clover in Colt 45, the bar owned by Faust Colton, she was just a pretty face that I thought would be fun to play with. When I returned weeks later and discovered she was Nix's roommate, and he was obviously infatuated with her, it became my goal to take her from him. He didn't make it easy. At first, I tried to use my extreme good looks and charm to lure her, but it became evident rather quickly that the Colton's had informed her of my true nature and personality.

Shame really. It would have been so much more pleasurable for her if she had come willingly. As it is, I prefer her this way. Angry, scared, and fighting back. Perfection. The fire and spark inside her just turns me on every fucking time. It just does it for me, having the control and her not being able to do one damn thing about it.

However, my playtime was cut short today. I finally came home and tasted the fruits of my labors getting her here without the Colton's suspecting anything. I had to be careful not to change my routine too much since Phoenix and his inbred cousins showed up at the Jewelry Box mere hours after I took her. I knew he would know it was me that took her, but I didn't expect him to hunt me down so quickly. Thankfully I had the forethought to not go directly home and have my way with Clover while she was unconscious, no matter how much I wanted to. If I had, they might have figured out where she was. Then I wouldn't have the freedom to play with my new toy, my new pet.

I think I'll buy my new pet a necklace. Something of the leather strap variety. I wonder if she would like diamond-encrusted—no, she's a simple girl, so I'll get her something simple.

Taking Clover and locking her in my penthouse safehouse was so gratifying. Seeing Phoenix breaking down and losing his shit was well worth the effort. Since I'm not breaking any of the accords, I know he can't come after me. She's not a Colton or a protected asset, and she means nothing to the Syndicate. They couldn't care less about her. Meaning she is mine to do with as I please, and I please to do a lot.

First, I'll have to deal with my annoyingbird. A code name I told Clint to use when talking about Phoenix in front of Clover. I don't want her knowing he's looking for her. I need her to break, not have hope. I want her crawling and begging and forgetting all about Phoenix Colton.

Leaving my little pet in her cage below my penthouse, I exit the secret door in my bedroom. Knowing she is under my feet sends a surge of power and lust through my bones. I may have just gotten off on her, the memory of which will live in my mind long after she's gone and I've moved on to a new pet, but the thought of owning her makes me hard all over again.

I met Clint in the living room just down the hall from my master bedroom. Smoothing out my dress shirt while rolling the sleeves down and buttoning the cuffs.

“So what is the problem with the Colton's that was so important that you had to stop me from getting my dick wet in Phoenix's prized cunt?”

“A bunch of the Colton's are stirring up shit at the clubs. Tearing through each one searching forher.” Clint gestures with his head down to where Clover is locked on the floor beneath our feet.

Handing me a tablet to see a video queued from one of the security cameras at one of our many clubs. I hit play and watch as Phoenix and Beau, one of his trusty sidekicks, stalk through private backrooms and VIP areas, pushing people out of the way, threatening security and bartenders. No doubt asking if they'd seen Clover and getting infuriated when they have nothing to help him. No one he asks will. None of them saw her or know anything.

“Morons. They’re looking for her at the strip clubs? How stupid do they think I am?”

If this is my competition, I’ll have Clover as my pet for as long as I like. The safehouse is off every book and in numerous fake names and shell companies. Anyone who runs searches on the space will find it owned by a little old lady with no family and only a hearty bank account padded by a large life insurance claim from her long-dead husband.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

“Would you like us to remove them, sir?” Clint asks stoically. He’s standing at attention in the corner of the room, waiting for my order. My good little soldier and why he’s the head of my security team. Unlike the Colton’s and their cronies, my security is all ex-military and unlikely to sway in the presence of anything I do. They’ve seen worse shit than me having my way with hot women in a penthouse.

“No need. Just keep an eye on them to make sure they don’t stumble on to something they shouldn’t.” I could care less if they blunder around like the idiots they are, as long as they don’t stick their noses where they don’t belong. Their lack of brain cells for anything beyond punching and inflicting physical pain hinders their ability to do much more. Breaking legs is all they’re good for. Not finding missing girls.

“Yes, sir.”

Handing him back the tablet, I check the time on my watch. Suppose I could get to my meeting a little early since I’m now available.

Chapter 7

Phoenix

It’s day two of our search for Clover. Yesterday we hit all the large strip clubs and gentlemen’s clubs. Today we’re searching all the dance clubs and underground music clubs, along with any warehouses in the area. The others continuing their search in their respective areas. We’ve found nothing. Absolutely. Fucking. Nothing. How can there be nothing? No one has seen her. No one knows who she is. How can someone just disappear without a trace like this? Not in our town. We own this fucking city,

and we should be able to find one girl in it.

I've only slept for a few hours spread out in minutes here and there. Sitting in the car driving from one location to the other, when we reconvene at Griffon's office or someone's house to swap info and regroup. Lily forcing me to eat when she could. Only functioning because of the cocaine in my system that keeps me going. I can't sleep, not until I find her. Then I can crash, then I can relax. When she's safe. Until then, cocaine and coffee will keep me going.

With every door I look behind, and she isn't there, I lose a little more of myself. Lose pieces of me that I just realized she was putting back together. Somewhere along the line, it was no longer about just getting in her pants. I wanted in her heart. I wanted to be there and set up shop, claiming it as my own. Somewhere amid all the sexual innuendos, smart-mouthed comebacks, and teasing, I uncovered a woman full of hopeful optimism, unforgiving determination, and untapped devotion beneath her forced badassery. Then I promptly fell in love with her and just as promptly failed her. I cannot fail her again. Ever.

The rage that dwindled when she was around, the one she doused with her ocean eyes and calmed with her soft touch, fills every atom of my being. A rage that my stuck-up suit of a brother won't allow me to unleash on anyone. Our business is built on violence, and now I'm not being allowed to do my job.

That's why I can't stop myself from bulldozing my way through the guards at the warehouse where I picked up the Harley just the other day, before the fated delivery that set this shit storm in motion. This particular warehouse is not just for storing or distribution but also for production. A cookhouse is set up on one side of the open space of the warehouse. Shelves lined with jugs, bottles of ammonia, and sulfuric acid cover most of the wall space, while drums of kerosene are stacked along another. As well as drums filled with the pre-processed coca leaves used to make the cocaine. Brought over from the McKinney farms and ready to go.

You'd think knowing the chemical components and how this shit is made would discourage me from shoveling it up my nose, but it doesn't. Snorting a line here and there to make the party that much better has been a part of my life for so long it's normal. Doing a line off a perky pair of tits then fucking said tits is an amazing high that I think everyone should experience. The only tits on my mind at the moment are Clovers and getting my hands on her again before Braxton does.

Large tables fill the space with cooktops and large pots cooking the drug in its various stages, filtering and straining, filling and draining. No doubt corroding the pipes with all the chemicals we dump down them. The cooks are covered in what looks like biohazard suits with masks.

While on the other side is a counting station. The counters are the exact opposite, stripped down to their underwear, so there's nowhere for them to stash cash. Most of them women. I always wondered why it was always women counting the cash. It must be because they like to watch them in their underwear. Some of the women have track marks like they've been partaking in our products, others look like gangsters, and a few don't look like anything other than normal. The women either stand or sit on basic stools feeding bills into counting machines and rubber banding stacks together in predetermined denominations.

A large temporary plexiglass wall is built between them with massive ventilation overhead to keep the fumes from killing everyone.

Not that I really think Clover would be working here. I still check under every single face mask and red-haired girl I see. They're not her. I didn't expect them to be. Flipping open every crate and box to make sure she's not stashed inside, I come up empty again. Once Beau and I have finished with those cooking or counting, I head towards the only offices and closed rooms in the back of the warehouse. One of the offices has a window, and I see a head of red hair flash by.

“Clover?” I call out, trying to get her attention. “Clover!”

Slamming open the door, it bangs against the wall, no doubt making a hole where the knob hit.

“Clover.” My hopes are crushed the moment I enter the room, and the one that I stupidly thought could be Clover turns to face me. Wide brown eyes and a shocked open mouth expression on her face. She’s not Clover.

“Did you see her? Is it her?” Beau races up behind me, seeing the non-Clover girl in the room. She’s half-dressed, midway through either removing or putting on her clothes. The room I burst into seems to be an office for the workers to store their clothes while counting.

“C-can I help you?” the poor frightened girl stutters out, clutching a shirt to her chest.

“No, sorry. We’re looking for someone else.” Beau is as disappointed as I am. His shoulders slumping in defeat. The girl scurries past us and out the open door, still half-naked. “She’s not here.”

“I can see she’s not here.” Before I know it, my fist puts a dent in the old metal desk in the office. “So, where the fuck is she?” I scream as I pick up a desk chair and toss it through the window. Glass shatters and sprays all over the floor outside the office with a loud explosion and raining of pieces of glass, creating a cacophony of sounds like rain on a tin roof. Everyone counting money freezes and turns to stare at us. We stare right back at them.

Yelling comes from somewhere to the left. I can’t see who’s yelling from inside the office space. The male voice screams for the workers to get back to counting. Through the shattered window, I see they do as he says. Ignoring us once again like good little worker bees.

“What the hell is going on here? Who broke this window?”

“Hey man, sorry about that. My cousin’s just upset. We’re looking for his girlfriend. You haven’t happened to see her, have you?” Beau intercepts the guard before he gets to me. He knows I’m not in the mood to be polite right now. I’d probably kill the guy just for doing his job. I can’t hear the rest of their conversation as I pace back and forth in the small space kicking chairs and boxes. Knocking over anything and everything that gets in my way. The lack of sleep and progress is starting to get to me. I don’t know how much more of this I can take before I really snap.

“They haven’t seen here. She’s not here. Why don’t we regroup with the rest at Colt’s and—”

“And what, Beau? Sit on our asses and wait for Braxton to just call and say; Oh yeah, by the way, I took Clover. Here’s the address I’m keeping her at?”

“Ok, I get the point, Nix. But we need to take a break and regroup. We’re not getting anywhere this way.” Beau follows me as I storm out of the warehouse towards the car. Still talking about what we should do next and how I need to “rest.”

“It was a slim chance we would find her at one of these places anyways. He’s a self-absorbed asshole, but he’s not stupid. It’s not likely we’re going to just stumble upon her. We need to re-strategize.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

“He was stupid enough totakeClover. So maybe he’s conceded enough to think we won’t find her wherever he has her.” Which will be the last mistake he ever makes if I have any say in the matter.

“Maybe yes. But so far, that’s the only stupid thing he’s done. Let’s just meet everyone at the bar and see what we can do next. Ok?” he sounds almost as exhausted as I feel. I know he’s right, and I could use a little rest, but I just can’t allow myself to. Whenever I think of where she might be and what he might be doing to her, I feel panic and guilt. How can I be resting safe and comfortable when he has her?

“You’re not going to be any good to her or me in this state, Nix.” Beau’s final attempt to persuade me breaks through the cocaine and anger-induced haze, and I have to agree with him. What else am I going to do? We’ve checked all of our areas, and we don’t have any more information about her whereabouts now than we did before.

“Fine,” I growl out as I slip into the driver’s seat of my Camaro Beau in the passenger seat and peel out of the warehouse's parking lot.

Back at the bar Beau and I meet up with the rest of my cousins who are helping look for Clover. This time including Magnus, Lily, and Arrow, but Griffon remains in his precious office. Of course, he wouldn’t come to the bar. He only ever leaves that office of his when absolutely necessary or forced. I don’t have time to force him right now. If he doesn’t want to be here, then fine, he doesn’t have to be here.

I’m trying not to be angry at my family. I know they’re not the ones to blame here. I am. Me and my stupidity, not following my gut instinct that told me Braxton wasn’t

just going to leave Clover alone. Damn it, I wish there were no accords at this moment so I could take care of Braxton how he deserves to be. Without an avenue for my rage, I'm snapping at my cousins when I don't really mean to.

They all put their lives on hold to help find her. Not only did she slip between the cracks in my heart, but she managed to easily fall into theirs, as well. Rosie's eyes are rimmed red from crying, worrying over her and her safety. The two have become so close in such a short time. Rosie treating her like a sister, accepting her into our family as easily as the rest. Lily looks more furious than I've ever seen her. Her normal soft and sweet demeanor, replaced with a flat, somewhat devious glare. Not sure I've ever seen that look on her face, and I'm slightly perturbed by it. She's not looking at anyone and seems deep in thought while she mindlessly rubs Rosie's back.

Not to mention I've never seen Beau so distraught. He may act pulled together and calm, but I can see the guilt and pain beneath the surface right there next to his own healthy Colton-sized anger. He's just a lot better at keeping it in check than I am.

Clover's absence is seriously fucking with all of us. Beau was right. She does belong here, with us—with me. I will prove to her that I can keep her safe in my world of debauchery and violence. Even if it's with more violence. My only hope is that she is strong enough to fend off Braxton until I find her.

We've managed to keep him rather busy with our little hunting parties. Making him clean up behind us. Following him every opportunity we get. Arrow has kept one of his men on him at all times. He hasn't gone anywhere unusual. Spending the little time he has, in-between straightening out the whirlwind of shit we make for him, in his penthouse loft in downtown Charlotte.

There has to be something we missed.

"Did we check all his properties?" I bark as we sit in the empty bar. Not meaning to

sound so angry, but I can't help the unrestrained anger constantly flowing from me. Griffon, in his hidey-hole, has also been keeping tabs on the situation and helping to search in the areas not as easily accessible to us. He hasn't informed the council yet. Only because we haven't found actual proof that Braxton was the one to take Clover. The instant we do, he said he would involve them. But not one second prior.

"Yes," Zander replies sharply.

"Are we sure?" I don't expect Zander to lie to me, but I have to make sure we check everywhere.

"Yes, Nix. Everywhere except his private residence. And I highly doubt he's going to invite us over for a friendly dinner party." Magnus, the ever rational one, is right, of course. We have checked everywhere except his loft. Like Beau said, he's dumb but not stupid. He wouldn't keep her in his private residence even if that's the only place we can't search. Would he? No, that's too obvious. He wouldn't risk it. Or would he? I'm so fucking confused and lost right now. I don't know which way is up and which way is hotdogs.

The world is a massive jumble in my brain. I can't think—there's too much. Too much pain, panic, and overwhelming love for this girl that stormed into my life one night. Throwing her sass at me without a fraction of concern. Imprinting herself inside me and planting roots in my bones. There's no way I can go on with my life as it was. Not now that she's in it.

I need to focus. Focus Nix.

Reaching into my pocket, I pull out a small bag of white powder. Tapping a little onto the back of my hand, I snort the cocaine I let it rocket through my bloodstream. The chemical concoction shooting straight to my brain, sharpening the world and pulling everything into focus.

Better.

Now everything makes sense. I know what I have to do.

“I just need to beat it out of Braxton and then kill him.” Nothing ever sounded so right. This is exactly what I need to do. But the chorus of resounding no’s that come from all of my cousins makes me think they don’t feel the same. But they can’t stop me. I’m going to find out where she is, one way or another. My feet carry me toward the front door. My mind made up. It’s the only thing left to do now.

“No, Nix” Arrow steps in front of me, blocking my way to the answer.

“Out of the way, Arrow.”

“No.”

“I will move you,” I warn. Allowing my anger to seep into the words. He may be one of my closest friends and a blood relative, but that won’t stop me.

We stand and stare at one another, neither of us moving. Fisting my hands at my side, I am prepared to fight through Arrow if I have to. He’s nowhere near my massive size. It won’t take much to move him. Nothing and no one will stop me from getting to her. Not him, not the accords, or the other families. She’s more important than all of them. This tiny redheaded girl that I can’t deny I love means more to me than any of it. All of it pales in comparison. And if I have to risk it all to get her back, I will. And when I find her, I will make sure she knows it. Knows that the Syndicate and the job come second to her. That I will always choose her first. Choose us.

As we continue our staring contest, waiting to see who will flinch first, the bell on the front door chimes, and Raven, my sweet little sister, enters. Understandably shocked to see us all here in this position. She enters cautiously.

“Uh. Hey, guys. What are y’all doing here?”

No one answers her. What do we tell her? Should we tell her? She’s still young. No matter how much she understands about our world, she’s still only eighteen and the newest B.F.F. to Clover. The rest of us just look between one another, trying to decide what to say.

“Okay, fine, don’t tell me.” Looking around me, she searches the bar for something.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

“Where’s Clover? I was hoping she was here. I have more stories to swap with her.” Her smile is light and innocent. Arrow, the only one of us incapable of keeping a secret, is the first to speak.

“She’s not here,” He says.

“Where is she? When will she be in?”

“She’s not going to be coming in tonight,” Rosie offers cautiously.

“Why not?”

It’s at this point that she’s starting to catch on to the mood in the space. Realizing we aren’t smiling or laughing or joking around. Our silence and lack of eye contact are all she needs to know to connect the dots that something isn’t right here. Then she sets her sites on me. Eyes narrowing and lips pinching, she fists her hands into her hips and stands tall. For her, that’s a decent five foot ten inches. She still has to tilt her head back to look me in the eyes. The soft grey irises rimmed in black stare me down like she’s the older sibling between us. When I don’t break, she squints harder and steps forward, jabbing one strong finger into my chest.

“Phoenix Elvis Colton! What is going on? Where is Clover? Tell. Me. Now.” Punctuating each word with a jab to my chest. My too smart for her own good sister demands using my middle name. Which yes is Elvis. My parents were really into him at the time. I don’t know, don’t ask me. The fact that she’s using it, though like all women when they use middle names, means she’s pissed, and she won’t leave me alone till I tell her.

I keep my eyes averted, rubbing the back of my neck. Trying to think of some believable lie to appease her to get her off my back. All the heat and anger that was just welling inside has fizzled under her scrutinizing glare.

“You will tell me right now, or I swear when I see Clover next, I will tell her about your secret stash of Jane Austen novels.”

“Okay, okay. Easy. Geesh, why don’t you just tell everyone all my secrets while you’re at it?” Waving my hands in the universal ‘ok, I give up please stop talking now’ gesture, I take a moment to order my thoughts and calm the raging bull inside my stomach. Then I tell her the truth.

“Clover is missing. And we think that Braxton Shaw has something to do with it,” I mumble out.

“What! When? How? Where?” She’s too eager to know everything that’s happening that she can’t even fully form a sentence.

“Calm down, Raven. We’ll explain everything, but you have to promise to keep it quiet. We’re working on finding her, and until we know Braxton is to blame, we can’t involve the council.” At least not yet. If this continues any longer, I’ll be making decisions without their approval that they won’t like.

Sitting down on a bar stool, she sets down the paperwork she’s carrying on the bar. She obviously came into work on the books for the bar. Explains why she’s here. And we explain to her everything we know and have done over the past almost forty-eight hours since she disappeared. After the story is finished and she’s brought up to speed, she just sits there quietly. Chin in her hand and brow furrowed in deep concentration. Presumably going over the facts and hopefully coming up with an idea of what to do next. Because I’m completely lost at this point. My only option remaining is beating it out of Braxton. An idea which, when offered a second time, was

notcompletelydismissed. But rejected all the same. For the time being.

Damn politics.

“So, you’ve checked all his properties around town. And there’s no sign that she was ever at any of them,” She doesn’t ask a question but states the facts of the situation, pondering them.

“Have you tried looking into his digital footprint?”

“His what?”

“Digital footprint. Ya know, what he’s done online or on his phone. Tracked his transactions and phone calls. Hacked into his security system?”

What. The. Fuck!

Why didn’t I think of that? Why didn’t any of us? I was so blinded by rage. Apparently, I wasn’t thinking and following steps that we’ve always taken in the past when looking for someone.

“Shit, you’re right,” Arrow blurts out.

“But how do we do that without involving the Syndicate? We can’t exactly call up the Smiths. That’ll raise too many suspicions, and they’ll ask too many questions.” Rosie rambles on, obviously thinking out loud. But she has a point. We don’t know how to do any of that hacker shit. We’d have to call the others or find someone to do it. That would cause questions that we’re not fully equipped to answer just yet. Especially since it’s a Shaw, we would be hacking. Not to mention it could take up a lot of precious time we could be spending pulling out all of Braxton’s teeth until he told me where she is.

“Well, I know someone who might be able to help,” Raven offers quietly. Not sure who Raven could possibly know with the skills and discretion to do what we need. But I am suddenly very interested in finding out.

“Who do you know that could help?” I ask suspiciously, voicing my thoughts.

“Well, promise you won’t freak out, but I kinda ran into Blake Smith outside The Robin’s Nest the other day, and we got to talking. We’re kinda online buddies. He would do it for you. He’s not like a lot of the others, and he’s not going to go blabbing to the Syndicate.”

Okay, I really don’t have time to comprehend Raven, my little sister, being “friends” with Blake Smith. So, I’m just going to have to file that away under ‘things to freak out over later’ and to find out the whole story behind that relationship. For now, I give her a stern scowl. She just shrugs and brushes me off. She has way too much confidence for an eighteen-year-old college freshman.

“And what makes you think he would be willing to hack a member of the Shaw family?” Zander counters.

“Because he hates them almost as much as we do. We’re not the only family that has issues with them, ya know,” She states matter-of-factly. She’s not wrong. I know many people that don’t exactly have the warm and fuzzies for the Shaw’s.

“And he’s capable of hacking into Braxton’s private security cameras?” I ask hopefully. If we can get our eyes on the inside of his home and clubs, we might be able to find Clover.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

“Absolutely. He’s wicked smart. Way more advanced than some of his older relatives.” Raven boasts. Almost proudly. Is there something more going on between these two that I need to investigate? I can’t complete that train of thought as Raven continues offering me something new to focus on.

“I can call him right now. I’m sure he can do it today.” Pulling out her phone, she finds his contact and calls him. I don’t have the strength to stop her or play the big brother card. If enlisting Blake’s help will find Clover faster, I’m all for it.

Chapter 8

Clover

No matter how hard I wish and pray that he’ll come bursting through the doors, Nix doesn’t appear. He doesn’t rush in like a knight in shining armor. There’s no miraculous rescue, no singing birds and trumpets blaring like in fairytales. No. Here, in reality, I’m stuck, trapped in this shiny modern hellscape. Every second losing a little more hope that I’ll get out before Braxton returns. The inevitability of his return looming in the back of my mind.

His first real visit to me ended with him satisfying himself all over my chest while holding me down. I can only imagine what he has planned for me next. Sex is one thing. I learned with my drug dealer ex how to deal with getting literally fucked when you don’t want to. Creating a mental escape to separate me from what’s happening. It’s amazing the things you can teach yourself to do when you want to get high. Detaching emotionally during forced copulation is apparently my ability.

It's only sex, and sex can't break me unless I let it and I don't. What can break me? Mind games, the inability to leave whenever I please. Before, it was always my choice, and the door was always open. I could walk away whenever I wanted. Here I don't have a choice. There's no leaving or walking away. There is no saying no. The only way I leave this room is in a body bag. He's made that perfectly clear. That's what scares me. The lack of control, being trapped against my will. All my freedoms suppressed and replaced with sparkly shiny upgrades to distract me. They can't distract me. I'm not his pet like he thinks. There's nothing in this world that would convince me to let him have me.

Even with the hate and venom coursing through my veins, I can't muster the energy to get out of bed. Reality sinking in that Nix really might not be looking for me. That he may not care for me how I care for him. Once, he had told me I was the only girl he wanted, the only one that mattered. That seems like years ago when in reality, it was probably a week. Being here has skewed time.

I don't know what day it is, what time it is, even though there's a clock in the kitchen. I don't look at it. I don't want to see how many hours I've been here. I'm sure if I turned on the tv, I could easily discover the truth of time, days. But I can't. Seeing people happy, smiling, laughing. It'll only make it harder for every additional minute I remain here. Yearning for the ability to be like them. Free.

I'm trying really fucking hard, I swear I am. But the heavy weight of doubt and depression is a heavy bitch sitting on my chest, pulling me down deeper into the darkness. Normally at a time like this, I would crave the pills to numb the pain and quiet my mind. Right now, I'm already numb. No feelings, no thoughts beyond emptiness and pain. Just a black hole ripping its way through my psyche. Everything is already quiet and numb. I already can't feel anything and can't move. Who needs drugs when crippling depression can do it for free?

Braxton hasn't returned since yesterday. I can only hope that means Nix is fighting for

me and raining down a shit storm on his head. Or that he's dead. I prefer the latter if given a choice. Not sure if that would make it easier or harder for someone to find me. I just hope whatever is keeping him away from me continues to do so. I don't like playing Braxton's games. He enjoys the pain too much. The torture and panic fuel his twisted desires.

Fuck me any way you please. Play games designed to infect me with fear and panic while telling me the only man I've probably ever really loved doesn't care about me?

Unbearable.

Chapter 9

Phoenix

It only took Raven five minutes to tell Blake everything that I relayed to her about Clover's disappearance when he agreed to help. Apparently, she was right. He doesn't like the Shaw's any more than we do. I'm not sure what the story is there, but I don't really give a damn right now. We hadn't even gotten to what we want him to do, and he was already offering to do whatever he can to help. I've never been very good about trusting people outside my family. Maybe I should change that.

Standing outside an apartment door numbered 413, Raven knocks gently.

"I was kind of expecting more."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. A penthouse or fancy loft in some high rise. Not a fourth-floor walkup unit in a middle-class apartment complex in the burbs." The building isn't new, but it isn't old either. All very average and plain. Clean with working gates and locks. No

guards or cameras, though. Except for one at the main gate to record cars coming in and out. Just your average run-of-the-mill apartment complex.

“Don’t judge him on his choice of residence. Not all people like the large, flashy house and multiple car garage and covered pool with built-in water feature.” She scowls her bright grey eyes at me under her thick dark lashes. I am so lucky Raven cares more about numbers than boys because I’d probably have added to my arrest record with multiple ‘assault of a minor’ charges if that weren’t the case.

“Ha ha, ok, I get it.” She was jabbing at me, but I could care less.

“Try and behave while we’re here.” Raven fiddles with the hem of her plain white tee, tucking it in slightly at the front but leaving the back sticking out the back of her ripped blue jeans. I’ll never understand teen girl fashion. Either tuck it or untuck it. What’s with this half-tucked bullshit?

“I always behave.” Lifting an eyebrow at her as I continue prodding. “Why? You got something going on with Blake that I should know about?”

“No. We’re just friends, and I’d like to remain friends, and you tend to scare people away.” She offers while staring at the door, trying to act cool.

“Touché. Fine, I’ll behave ---- Maybe.” Before she can shoot me, another dirty look Blake opens the door to his apartment. Dressed in a dark hoodie and jeans, he looks like any other guy his age. The room is low-lit behind him, and I can’t see much.

“Hi. Hi Raven.” He smiles at her then turns his attention to me. “Mr. Colton, sir.” His smile falters, seeing my unamused state. Clearing his throat, he regains his composure and manners.

“Please, come in.” opening the door wider, he gestures for us to enter. Raven steps in

first, giving me a warning glance as she passes in front of me. I follow quietly.

Blake's apartment is average in its design but what he's done with it is far from average. His living and dining room area has been almost completely overtaken by desks filled with computer screens, towers, and wires. A glow emanates from the half a dozen screens. One giant flat screen is mounted on the wall above the desks. A large elaborate desk chair that looks more like one of those professional gamer chairs sits at its epicenter. Illuminated by the screens.

Across the room from the setup that I can only assume can launch rockets to the moon is a couch and a couple end tables. Guess he doesn't get guests very often. Even in technological chaos, there's order. No piles of trash litter the floor or half-eaten pizza's growing mold. It even smells nice in here. Like he used an air freshener. I can't help but wonder if he does that normally or if it was because we were coming over. More specifically, because Raven was coming over.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

Blake moves around us in the space, fidgeting a little. He's either nervous or just doesn't know how to entertain guests. Lots of the Smiths are recluses and stay hidden away in their homes with their computer screens. It's actually a mystery how they ever find someone to marry and reproduce with how little they get out. Maybe mail-order brides?

"Do you guys want something to drink? I have mountain dew, tea, water?"

"No thanks. We're kind of on a time limit, and I would just like to get to it." My tone might be a little more stern than necessary. But I really don't have time to pussy foot around shit. We needed to do this yesterday and are already losing time.

"Oh right, of course. No problem." Blake walks towards the couch, offering us a seat. Neither of us accepts. I'm too on edge to sit. Instead, he takes his seat at his command center and starts pulling programs up on the screens, then turns to look up at me.

"Ok, so we're looking for Clover, and you think Braxton Shaw took her?"

"Yes. We've already searched all his business properties and couldn't find her. So maybe you can find something from the night she was taken and track her or something. I don't really know." Looking down at Blake, I can see he's watching me intently, taking in everything I say.

"And the council?" he asks cautiously.

"Doesn't know anything about this, and I'd like to keep it that way."

“Of course, that’s not a problem. I would love to help in any way I can. I only met Clover that once at your shop in passing, but she was really nice. Plus, Raven says great things about her.” Smiling softly, his eyes shift to Raven standing not too far from us, then back to me. “If she steps in front of a camera anywhere, I’ll find her.”

I don’t know if he can really do that, but fuck, if he can, he’s my new best friend. Sorry, Beau.

“Thanks. If you get me what I’m looking for and keep it quiet, I’ll owe you one.” At the prospect of a favor from a Colton, he swivels to face his screens and starts typing. Possibly hiding a giddy grin. He’s still new to the game, or at least I think he is. I’ve never worked with him before. So, the idea of being in tight with a Colton even amongst the head families is a coveted place to be. We’re kind of awesome like that. Also, we know how to kill people in like five thousand different ways, so it’s not wise to piss us off. We’re the Syndicate’s enforcers for a reason. And we earned it with blood.

“Oh, I’ll get you what you need. I’ll find her. One way or another, I always find them.” That makes me even more curious about what kind of work he’s already done for the Syndicate at his young age. He’s only a year or two older than Raven. We don’t allow her to participate in anything violent yet. That doesn’t mean we haven’t trained her. She can use almost any gun she can get her hands on and has been sparring with many of us since she was at least twelve. No one can get the jump on her. That doesn’t mean I’m not still extremely protective of her.

After the incident with Robin, it’s been harder to let go of Raven. She’s older, stronger, and able to protect herself, where Robin wasn’t. She was so young, and there was nothing any of us could have done to stop what happened that night. Hunter still, to this day, has guilt over it. Since he was the one with her when it happened. We all know the cliff notes of the evening, but only he knows what really happened, and he’s never told anyone, even with my father and his threatening him. After that

night, he didn't speak for a year after her death. So, it was difficult to get anything out of him.

I know first-hand how such a traumatic event at a young age caused by the world we live in can create long-lasting issues, and I try to protect Raven as long as I can from them. When she's older, hell, probably even now, given how collected she is right now standing here next to me, she'll be able to handle anything thrown in her path.

Blake's typing is quick and fluid and draws me back to the present in his apartment living room. The clickity-clack of the keys a sort of music in the quiet hum of the computer towers.

"Ok, so before I can get in deep, I'm going to need a picture of Clover. Does she have any social media accounts or YouTube videos? Anything that I can grab a still shot from."

"What do you need a picture of her for?" He never said anything about pictures before. Sounds kinda pervy to me.

"So, I can run facial recognition through the security videos." He says matter-of-factly. Like it was blatantly obvious, even a brute like me should know that.

"Oh. Um, I don't think she does."

"Do you have a picture of her then that I can use?"

A picture of Clover? I don't think I have a picture of anyone. The only photos on my phone are of my car and bike parts that I need to find. If I had a picture of Clover, that shit would be my wallpaper on my phone. Hell, I'd probably print it out and wallpaper my bedroom with it. It would be extremely distracting. I'd never get anything done. Especially if she were wearing that red lipstick. I must have been

standing there silent for too long because Raven interjects.

“Here, I have one you can use.” She hands him her phone with the photo pulled up on its screen. Leaning over his shoulder, I look at the faces on the screen. Clover has her face pressed up next to Raven’s, and they’re smiling. Clovers bright sapphire eyes sparkling in the sunlight of what looks like the bakery my Aunt and Uncle own.

“When did you take this?”

“Girl’s brunch last week. We went with Rosie, Lily, and Emerald to Aunt Cherry’s.”

There’s not much I can say. There’s still a lot about Clover I need to learn. I want to know everything there is to know about her. When she goes to brunch. What she likes to eat when she’s sad. So, I can always have it in the kitchen for her to help make her feel better. Seeing a photo of her shouldn’t hurt as much as it does. Our relationship is so unorthodox I never thought to take a photo with her. Really though, what was I expecting? I hadn’t even told anyone about us until this happened. There are a lot of things I’m going to change after I find her. Starting with taking her picture. A lot. Maybe even take a picture of us together.

Blake takes the phone and sends the picture to his computer, where it pops up larger than life on the flat screen hanging on the wall.

“Ok, let’s see what I can find.”

Chapter 10

Clover

Idon’t know what time it is or how long I was asleep. All I know is what wakes me. The telltale sounds of Braxton returning. So much for wishing he was dead. Suppose

it was a long shot anyways. Scurrying off the bed, all I can think to do is crouch down behind it on the far side. Hoping it'll hide me. The idea to crawl under the bed flashes briefly through my muffled brain. Should I, or shouldn't I? Would he even look under there for me? Realizing the inevitability of my situation, I decide against hiding like a five-year-old afraid of the boogie man under the bed. It'll only delay the inevitable, and he'd probably enjoy it.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

Braxton enters my jail cell, strutting like the king of Norway while carrying a small leather duffle bag. Even though I know it affords me no protection, I remain on the far side of the bed. The wall of windows to my back. Based on the shadows being cast throughout the condo, I'd say it's midafternoon. I'd stayed curled up in the bed after waking this morning and pondering my life choices. Must have fallen back asleep while staring at the ceiling. My stomach growls with hunger and twists with fear and anticipation. Whatever he has in that bag cannot be good for me.

"Hello, again, my little pussy cat. I brought you a shiny new collar. Would you like to try it on?"

As expected, from his bag, he withdraws a wide banded leather collar. A metal ring dangling in its center. He holds it out for me to see better. It doesn't have a buckle like a normal belt or collar. Instead, it just has a metal loop protruding from one end and a slit in the leather on the other. Strange.

"Go fuck yourself, you troglodyte!" the words spew from my mouth.

"Oh, so vulgar. That's not very nice. And after I brought you such a thoughtful gift." He tisks at me while he circles like a vulture. The collar still firm in his grip. Each end in one of his hands. The thick leather stretched out between. Almost as if he's waiting for me to turn around and lift my hair for him to put it on me. Yeah, fucking right. Never gonna happen.

"I don't want anything you have to give me."

"You may not want it, but you're going to get it." The tone in his voice suggests a new

necklace isn't the only thing I'll be getting. The way he moves through the space, stalking me like prey, tells me this is not the first time he's done this. This game he's playing is as familiar to him as breathing. It's not a question of if but when he will catch me.

When he reaches the opposite side of the bed, I take the opportunity to make my move. Heading for the couch with plans on reaching the kitchen to grab a fork or two to stab into his neck. Taking out all my rage and hate out on him. Releasing the pent-up violence I have wanted to unleash since the moment I saw him standing outside the garage of Nix's house. I think a little of Colton's habits are starting to rub off on me. I have yet to witness their violence firsthand, but I have seen the aftermath. Any hope of reaching the kitchen for a weapon disintegrates when Braxton gets ahold of my hair and yanks.

The abrupt change in momentum causes me to fly backward, slamming my head on the floor when he releases my hair. The wind is forced from my lungs, and I struggle to suck in oxygen. Stars dance behind my eyelids. The world goes black and fuzzy at the edges and a high-pitched ringing echoes in my ears. I'm too disoriented to do anything but lay here helpless on the floor. The silk pajamas I put on after Braxton ripped my shirt, rides up, and bunches at my waist.

I still can't see straight or hear straight, but I can feel Braxton's hands on me. Around my neck tightening, I'm being dragged across the floor. Then the pressure around my neck solidifies in the form of the leather collar. I can smell it. Suddenly I'm lifted and deposited on what can only be the bed. It bounces under my weight as I settle on the plush comforter.

My vision is still too scrambled to see anything. The world spinning like a kaleidoscope of color dancing around me. You know that feeling you get when you're drunk, and you close your eyes, and everything is still spinning around you? Yeah, that's kind of how I feel right now. Like my axis has been thrown off, and I

can't right myself.

Feeling around my neck, the edges of the collar glide under my finger until I reach the back. The metal loop has been slid through the buttonhole opening in the leather, and a small padlock holds it in place. Which is what's keeping me from removing the thing from my neck. There's also some sort of cable or rope latched to it that goes somewhere I can't determine yet.

The throbbing in my skull intensifies as I struggle, so I relax, willing the pain to pass. A shift in the mattress has me trying to lift my head but unable to right the world just yet. I have to ignore whatever it is he's doing for now. Just trying to focus on regaining my ability to see and think straight takes everything I have in me. Then he's there by my side, lifting my arm and pushing the silky sleeve up to my bicep. I vaguely hear myself ask something along the lines of; what are you doing? But I'm not sure if I said that out loud or just in my head. Although when I hear him speak, I think I must have spoken it aloud.

"You have beautiful veins. I'm just going to give you a little something to make you feel better." His voice is soothing and sweet. Two things I know Braxton not to be.

Did he say something about veins? The first prick of the needle is the only answer I need to the unthought question. He's injecting me with something. I swat at him uselessly, my limbs like wet noodles. They do as much damage as a teddy bear would smacking his chest and bicep. The drugs fly through my system, burning through my veins.

My drug of choice has always been downers. Painkillers to calm and numb in pill form. This is not that. Whatever the fuck this is, it is most definitely an upper. I've never injected before, and the high is so much more instant than when swallowing pills. My heart pounds under my ribs like a bass drum, forcing my eyes wide just in time so I can see the sharpening of my vision as the world pin pricks into 4k high

definition. Edges are sharper, colors are more vibrant. Every fiber of the silk pajamas tingles across the pores in my skin. I feel like I'm wearing a second skin made of fuzzy caterpillars.

Just the simple motion of sitting up causes the material to brush against the tops of my breasts, and even through my bra, my nipples harden to peaks at the seductive friction. A shiver runs through my body, pooling heat between my legs.

No, I'm not supposed to be turned on. I don't want to be. Braxton caused this. I don't want him. I need to make this stop. But...it feels so good. Why would anyone want to stop this? I want more.

"What did you give me?" The words come out on a moan. My hands have started roaming my body of their own accord. Every touch is heaven and hell. My body responds to the drugs how it's supposed to. My brain and heart, however, try their damndest to fight it. At the moment, they're losing, but the battle rages on inside me as I try to command my hands to stop and reach out and strangle the man grinning at me and holding more leather straps of some sort.

"It's called Harley. Of course, it's normally in pill form, but I figured you would try to bite off my fingers if I put them anywhere near your mouth. So instead, I cooked this up just for you. Liquid sex, I like to call it. Do you like it?"

"Fuck no, I don't like it." Thank goodness my brain wins out on that response because my body right now is all for liquid sex.

"Really? Looks like you might." He taunts. Kneeling on the bed, he makes his way up to my ankles and runs a finger along my calf, and holy fucking ball sack that feels amazing.

No, no, it doesn't. It feels disgusting and vile.

Shit, this Harley crap is fucking up my ability to react properly, mixing desire with disgust. I think a squeak of approval slips from my lips.

No, no, no. Fight back, you pussy! I scream at myself.

By the time the thought processes, there are two more leather cuffs buckled around my ankles. Finally, my body does as I command, and I thrash, trying to kick Braxton in the face. The Harley may be amplifying physical feelings, but my emotional feelings have not changed. Braxton Shaw is the scum of the earth, and I want to tear out his insides with my nails.

“What the fuck are those. Get them off me.”

“No. I think not, little pussy cat.” The war going on inside my body is a tremendous struggle between mind and body. I keep telling my arms and legs to fight, and they do to an extent but lack any sort of impact. It seems my attempts are more a slight bother to Braxton as he man handles me. Doing nothing to stop his advances.

Turning me to my stomach and pressing my face into the bed, his hand is on my neck, holding me in place. I try to kick him wherever I can, but I can't see him. My blows only land about ten percent of the time. Barely accomplishing anything. With his free hand, he slivers it under my stomach and pulls up at my hips. The unwanted prickle of pleasurable sensation trails where his fingertips graze the skin under my shirt. I cannot let this drug that makes his vile touch feel so damn tantalizing take over my senses.

A flush creeps up my body from his hand, and I have to choke down the vomit that threatens to spew from my lips. I've never felt so much disgust, hate and pleasure all at the same time.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

Shifting his hand from my hips, he grabs one wrist and threads it through my knees. I'm now propped up in a very submissive doggy style. My ass is lifted while my face remains in the sheets. He takes one knee and presses it down on my hand to hold it in place while he tries to grab my only free hand. Moving it wildly, I try to avoid his grip, but although the world is in sharp focus, my movements are sluggish. My hand moves in front of my face, which is turned to one side, and I can see colors and light trailing in the path of my movement. As if I'm watching the world through a camera lens, and I see it frame by frame as it catches up.

So weird. Ha ha ha. I giggle to myself, watching as time catches up and my arm becomes one again, just as Braxton wraps his solid hands around my wrist.

“No. Let me go, you arrogant sack of horse shit!”

“Ha, ha, ha, oh yes, my feisty little strawberry. Keep talking.” Braxton's deep chuckle rumbles against my back when he leans over me and holds both my wrists in one hand between my knees. He's shifted his knees, so his shins are pressing down on my calves, rendering me completely immobile.

“What the hell are you going to do?”

“I'm going to fuck you, my pretty pet.”

I feel more leather tightening around my wrists and the snapping sounds of metal. Then the weight of his body is removed from mine. I instantly try to pull my wrists free. I meet resistance, unable to move from this awkward position. It feels like my hands have been pulled almost to my feet. My arms are straight, and I can't shift in

any direction. Even my ankles are locked in place. I think there are straps in between the wrist and ankle cuffs. He has me locked in place right where he wants me.

Turning my head side to side, I try to get a better look at what he's doing behind me. Instead, I get a look at the cord that is latched to the back of my collar. It leads to a bolt in the wall behind the headboard. Fucking hell. He's leashed me to the fucking wall. My body heats for a different reason now. I'm going to kill him even if I have to do it with my wrists shackled to my ankles. I'll bite off his face if I have to.

The weird sex straps make it difficult to move, and all I can manage is to sway from side to side. Hoping I can get enough momentum to flip myself onto my side. At least then my ass won't be stuck up in the air like a bitch in heat.

Strong fingers dig into my hips and hold me in place. He's positioned himself directly behind me, and I can feel his hard length as he leans in and presses it directly against my ass crack and pussy. The feeling is so intense that I don't even know how to explain it. Physical, sexual pleasure flares through my pussy which unfortunately clenches in response to the nearness of a dick. It doesn't care who the dick is attached to. Only that's it's hard and thick and pressed up against it. The radiating shiver that follows is something different. Adrenaline and fury are the cause of my body shake.

I want more, and I also want to rip off his dick and feed it to him. I don't think this is what they meant by hate fucking. I'm pretty sure hate fucking is actually enjoyed by both parties.

"Uh. Now, this is more like it. I like your fight, but I want to fuck you without losing an eye." Behind me, Braxton continues dry humping me through my silk shorts, which do nothing to dampen the feeling. I can feel the head of his dick through his slacks then his balls when he runs his entire length between my ass cheeks.

"Get. Off. Me." I bite out as calmly and flatly as possible. Trying to hide the fact that

my body is responding positively to his.

“I will be getting off very soon.”

The loose fabric of my blouse has fallen and pooled at my shoulders, exposing my torso and breasts. Leaning down, I can feel Braxton's bare chest pressed to my back, and his hands reach around to cup both my breasts. Squeezing them through my thin bra to stress how utterly powerless I am against him. The only thing I can do is growl. Unable to resist another rush of physical bliss, his touch elicits.

Releasing my breasts, he removes his body from mine. Fire burns beneath my skin. I feel as if I could set this entire room on fire if I were to breathe too heavily. My reprieve from his touch is short-lived. When it returns, it's accompanied by cold, sharp metal. Gingerly he runs the sharp tip along the swell of my ass over my silk shorts. Not wanting to accidentally jerk and cut myself under his blade, I still my movements. Wordlessly he slides the blade up my thigh and under my shorts, cutting them from hem to waist on both sides until the fabric is shredded enough to fall from my body. I'm left in only my cotton panties now. All too soon, those too are cut and removed, leaving my bare pussy and ass unprotected from him.

I can feel his eyes roaming every inch of my exposed and flushed flesh. The evidence of my body's arousal is evident as slick wetness drips down my inner thigh. Even when all I want to do is get the fuck out of here, my pussy, on the other hand, is thrilled at the possibility of a good fucking. Apparently, my vagina and I are not speaking because no matter how much I mentally chastise it and tell it to stop, it keeps clenching and pulsing thanks to the liquid sex coursing in my body.

“Fuck me. You are divine. And you're already wet for me.” One of his large fingers slides through my wetness spreading me more for him. I can't help the quiver that runs from my spine to my clit. A throbbing need for more pulsing at every nerve ending. I bite my lip to keep from moaning. I don't want this. I don't want him. I keep

chanting to myself, trying to will my body to stop. It doesn't. But he does. Thank fuck.

A grunt and a rustle of clothing come from behind me. "Too bad. Your pussy will have to wait. Today I want your ass."

What? He's not just going to fuck me and be done with it? No, that would be too simple for him. Instead, he's going to take me in a way he thinks will hurt me more. Physically and emotionally. It is his goal to break me, after all. Fucking me in the ass is just the first step in his plan to do so.

Whispering in my ear, his body pressed against my bare one, he growls out a promise.

"I'm going to do to you what I did to his sister." Again, he leans back, rubbing the tip of his blade along my now bare ass. "I see now why Nix was always staring at your ass. It is perfection." His hand not holding the knife cups and squeezes one cheek. "Perhaps I should mark it up a little. Mar this beautiful porcelain skin of yours." He seems to be talking to himself because I highly doubt he wants a response from me.

The pounding in my chest picks up speed again, the drugs still coursing through my veins mixed with a healthy dose of fear. A dick is nothing to be afraid of, it can fuck you for sure, but it can't actually harm you. A sharp knife, on the other hand, can very much harm me and do lasting damage.

A sudden sting spreads across my ass as the blade breaks the skin and drags across my flesh for a few inches. It doesn't feel deep but will no doubt leave a scar. Which I'm sure was his intention. Biting down on the blanket, I don't allow myself to verbally protest. That's what he wants. Pressing my eyes together tightly, a hot tear rolls down my cheek. When I open them, my vision is blurred by more unshed tears. The entirety of it all crashing down on me. The drugs in my system only enhancing

the pain I feel from the cut. He may have only grazed the skin, but it feels like the blade reached all the way to the bone. Filed my skin and muscles leaving a hole in my body the size of a bowling ball.

There's a brief realization that Braxton is moving again. Doing who the fuck knows what. My mind has focused on the dust particles floating in the sun rays by the windows. I latch on to them. I don't want to know what he's going to do next because I know I can't do a damn thing to stop it. Watching the floating specs, they shift and transform. Taking the form of fluttering glittering butterflies. Flapping their wings and leaving trails of glittering gold flecks in their path. Oh, what I would give to be a butterfly, to be able to fly away from here. Nothing to stop me from flying where I want. Flying back to him back to Nix. A love that I never saw coming. One that sank into my very being without even realizing it. His foul mouth and hot body lured me in, and it was his smart wit and loyalty that hooked me for good.

Whatever Braxton does to me, I know Nix's love will heal. When he finds me. I know he will. I have faith in his stubborn, thickheadedness. Giving up isn't in his nature. All I have to get me through this is my memories of him. So, I focus on him. His dimpled smile, his piercing eyes, his gentle touch when he holds me close at night. Braxton's demanding voice pulls me from my reverie.

"I'm going to ruin you, my little strawberry. And when I'm done, I'll make sure he knows you broke under my cock. You're not going to like this, but I'm going to fucking love it."

That's all the warning he gives before thrusting his dick inside my ass. He must have lubed it or rubbed it through my wetness first before slamming into me because he is slick and slides in deep. It hurts at first, but this isn't my first time receiving anal. I know the feeling and what to expect. The pinch and slight pressure, a not completely unpleasant pain, when done properly. That doesn't stop it from shocking me. Especially with the liquid sex Harley drug Braxton shot me up with. It amplifies

every sensation. The pain, the pleasure, the sting, and burn. It may not be a foreign feeling, but it still feels like he's ripping through me while my pussy clenches wishing the dick were in it instead. I fucking hate my pussy right now.

More movement, more sensations as Braxton rocks in and out. Sliding his dick through my tight hole. I can feel every ridge of his cock, the bite of his fingers in my hips, the beating of my heart as it pounds viciously in my ribs. The entire world falls away. Leaving only this room with Braxton fucking me, his breathing becoming ragged as he continues furiously pumping his hips. His moans and groans of pleasure sicken me. All the while, the glittering butterflies twitter around the room like magical little fairies. Sparkling every time the sun hits their golden wings.

The butterflies act as a distraction from Braxton. I can still feel him. I can still feel everything. The sting from the cut on my ass, the pressure inside from his cock pressing deep, the swelling in my eyes from the tears. All of it is still there, but all I can think about is the sparkling butterflies that look like their wings are made of golden fire. Like tiny Phoenix's being set aflame by the sun.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

Braxton's pace quickens behind me. His grip around my hips tightening, fingers pressing in so hard I know they'll bruise. His desire growing angry and rough. Pushing him harder, deeper, faster.

Time is a fluid concept, and I have no idea how long he's been at it. It could have been two minutes, could have been two hours. Drugs will do that to you. They steal reality and replace it with magical butterflies.

Tremors start to shake Braxton's body behind me. He's close and going to come soon. That means it's almost over.

"Take it all, Clover. Fuck, you feel fantastic. I bet Nix hasn't even felt your sweet ass yet. I'm gonna come so hard in your tight ass." Another groan resonates from his throat. His pounding is frantic and hard, causing me to wince. His balls slapping at my pussy, causing more unwanted pleasure. I swear to fucking Christ if he makes me come from this, I'm going to break his dick off with my ass. Forcing myself to not enjoy it. But it's hard with the Harley amplifying the sensations. I want more and it sickens me.

Smooth large hands slide around my hips and across my lower stomach, fingers stretching and reaching towards my core. Making contact and placing just the right amount of pressure on that overly sensitive spot. His finger circling and sending rippling waves of nauseating arousal through me.

"That's it sweet thing. Let it out. Give in. You know you want it. I can tell by your slick heat between my fingers. You're going to come for me little pet, and it's going to be better than anything he could make you feel. You're going to like it so much

you'll be dreaming about the next time I'm going to touch you." His words are labored moans inbetween his continued thrusts and now torturous touch.

Forcing my eyes shut I try to forget who he is and what he's doing because if I don't, my heart might stop beating in my chest. Especially when the pressure builds to an unyielding unavoidable crishendo pulling from me a massive forceful orgasm that rocks my body and pulses between my legs.

Seaking something to hold on to and squeeze. Finding nothing, but still pulsing all the same. It's a pleasure that I hoped I would never experience. Forced from me and pulled out of me, leaving me shaking, biting down on the sheets to smother any noise. Braxton may have brought me to climax but I will not give him the satisfaction of hearing how it has affected me. However I cannot hide the evidence of his accomplishment. My traitorous body rocks and sways momentarily in the aftershocks. Wanting more.

After my orgasm it takes him mere seconds until he stills seeding himself to the base as his cock pulses out his release in my anus. It sickens me that I can feel his release hard and hot inside me. Once the pulsing subsides, he slowly slides himself out of me. I can feel his thick sticky cum trickle down my inner thigh, and I shake with unyielding hatred for this man. Thismonster.

"Nix is going to kill you," I speak into the damp blankets under my face. Slick from my sweat and silent tears. My voice is shaky, and my resolve is starting to crumble. I still mean every word.

Either he's ignoring me or doesn't give a shit about my halfhearted threat. The mattress shifts as he moves and steps off. After a moment, he returns, removes the shackles, and unhooks the leash but leaves the collar. My body relaxes, and I curl onto my side. Not caring if I smear blood and cum all over his bed, I pull a blanket over me. Defeated and unwilling to fight anymore today.

“Thanks for the good fuck. Next time it’ll be that sweet pussy of yours. And you’re gonna like it. I’ll even make you come with my dick.” He says that like he’s doing me a favor, promising pleasure. Even the thought of orgasming because of his royal douchebaggery curdles my stomach. He will never be able to bring me real pleasure. Only drug-induced forced physical stimulation.

“When he finds you, he’ll do to you ten-fold whatever you do to me. If I were you, I would think very carefully about touching me again.” my grumbled threat is almost muffled by the blanket wrapped around me. Braxton hears it all the same.

“You’d have to be alive when he finds you for him to know what I did to you. Remember that before you try to threaten me again.” He says as he runs his finger across my forehead and brushes back a strand of hair. His threat is spoken sweet and soft like a lover seducing his mistress. With that, he leaves me to wallow in regret and self-loathing.

I brought this upon myself with all my arrogance. Nix was right. Once again, I find myself sitting on the floor of the shower letting the scolding heat burn off his touch and his cum. Washing away the remnants of this encounter. It won’t always work. The scolding water can’t wash away everything. Sinking under my skin is the pain and anxiety inside my heart at the loss of my sanity, the loss of control. At the loss of hope and losing Nix. Because right now, I have lost him. I am lost to him. Until he comes for me. With every passing minute of every passing hour, that becomes less and less likely.

Chapter 11

Phoenix

Raven and I have been at Blake’s apartment for the last couple of hours as he scours through hours and hours of security videos from every possible location Braxton may

have taken Clover. So far, he hasn't found any traces of her on any of the videos. He did find Braxton entering and then leaving the building that houses his penthouse and then arriving at the Jewelry Box. We watched every second of the video that had Braxton on it since then. Watching him enter and leave a number of establishments. A few of which were after we had made our way through them. Probably cleaning up what we left behind for him. We weren't subtle or very respectful of his property and may or may not have broken a few doors and the ribs and noses of a few uneducated security guards.

While I've been sitting here watching the billion security videos I checked in with Griff, he hasn't been able to find anything either. None of his feelers have felt out anything. The others are either waiting for us to return to my house or checking in with their own feelers. Other than that, I've just been sitting here on this couch. Which isn't necessarily a good thing. All this quiet time allows my mind to think way too much. Everything is so reminiscent of the aftermath of Robin's death. The hectic scramble to find who did it, the long hours of waiting for someone to call with info on their location. Sitting around and waiting for something to happen. The difference is they didn't take Robin. They just killed her without a second thought. I'm not sure which is worse, knowing or not knowing.

At least when I found out Robin was dead, it was immediate. We were all able to mourn and grieve her loss. Drawing it out, not knowing how I should feel, causing me to swing widely and rapidly from extremely hopeful and optimistic then plummeting down to crippling anxiety and misery has my brain swirling like a blender on puree. I don't know what I should be feeling, and if we don't find her soon, I'm going to snap and just torture it out of Braxton.

Glancing up at Blake's screens, I can see him working frantically, searching everything and everywhere. His fingers are graceful as a pianist playing a concerto flying across his keyboards. Eyes glued to the screens, not even looking at the keys. He doesn't need to. He does this so much his fingers muscle memory driving their

movements.

“I’m still searching through all the security feeds, but I’m also trying to tap into traffic cameras to see if I can find them leaving Nix’s house after taking Clover and where they went. But that’s going to take a little longer. So, I thought I would check into every building title with the Shaw’s name attached. Found a few interesting shell companies that I’m digging deeper into.”

Blake has been chatting with Raven the entire time he’s been searching. She pulled up a chair next to him and has been watching over his shoulder. Seeming generally interested in what he’s showing her, but I did notice her glancing at him with more than general interest a few times, and vice versa. Hmmm. Don’t know if I approve of this pairing. Gonna have to keep a close eye on Blake. Although getting involved with someone already invested in our way of life makes it easier, it can also get very messy. Especially if they break up. Or things could turn out like they did with Braxton and Falcon with Griffon and me beating Blake within an inch of his life. Then we would be on bad terms with two of the head families. Not exactly ideal, but if it has to be done, so be it.

It’s during one of the moments that Raven is sneaking a longing glare at Blake that he asks the question that shakes me out of my plans to hurt him without killing him if he ever hurts Raven.

“Hey, do either of your guys know a Hillary Jones?”

“Who?”

“Hillary Jones. I ran Clover’s picture and name through an algorithm I wrote to find any credit cards, driver’s license, cellphones, etc., and all the Clover Jones’s I found weren’t her, but this Hillary Jones looks just like her.” Blake points at his screen that has a picture of Clover on a Nebraska state license. I stand and cross the living room

to watch over Blake's opposite shoulder from Raven.

He types out a few things on his keyboard and brings up more information on Hillary Jones. Born in Pasco, Washington, to Hannah Jones, no father listed on the birth certificate. No siblings listed either.

“All the info matches what she’s told me. She never mentioned having a different name, though. I’m gonna call Beau and ask him.” Slipping my phone out of my pocket, I do just that. Beau explains to me that yes, Clover is Hillary. Apparently, that was her name when they met, and she didn’t like it, so they chose a new one for her. She just hasn’t changed it legally yet. It was part of her new start in life, I guess.

Informing Blake that yes, Hillary is Clover, he uses that name and ID as well to search for more information on how we might find her. Hillary Jones doesn’t have anything more than Clover does. No credit cards or registrations. There’re a few school records for elementary and high school, then the few semesters she spent in art school before dropping out mid-semester a few years back. That’s probably when her mother got sick, and she needed to take care of her. Hannah. She also had never told me her mother’s name. She did mention her father was never in the picture, but he’s not even listed on her birth certificate. Unless her mother told her before she died, or she does a twenty-three, and me Clover may never know who her father is. The polar opposite of my family. We have our generations mapped out in a family tree going back almost two hundred years, back to when our family’s ancestors immigrated here, mainly from Italy, Great Britain, and France.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

If I wanted to know the name of my third cousin on my father's side four generations prior, I could just look it up and know their name in minutes. It must be strange to not know where you came from or if there are other siblings or cousins out there that you don't know. It could also be liberating. Not having to be a Colton because my name is Colton, I could just be a tattoo artist and nothing more. Not completely sure if I would like that. I enjoy my work and having the freedom to do what I please and not care what the authorities would do if they found out. The freedom that comes attached to the name Colton makes flipping the bird to government officials fucking fantastic.

"If Clover did leave on her own, is there somewhere specific she would have gone?" I know Blake is just trying to help, but insinuating Clover left me voluntarily is infuriating.

"If one more person suggests that Clover left on her own, I'm going to break every bone in their hands and feet one by one," I growl out to know one in particular, but my message is received loud and clear.

"Right, ok, got it. Braxton took her, and we're going to prove it and find her."

"Exactly. So, keep looking." The boy is obviously nervous when he speaks next, his voice a little shaky and quieter.

"Well, I did find something interesting. Not sure if it's connected to finding Clover or not, but...."

"What is it?" Raven scoots her chair closer to Blake, pressing her side against his

arm. He turns to look at her, and even in the light of his computer screens, I can see the red heat flush his cheeks. A low growl rumbles in my chest. Instantly Blake recoils back, so Raven is no longer pressed against him and focuses on me and the documents on the screen in front of us. Raven is thankfully oblivious to our unspoken conversation.

“Well, there are delivery invoices for furniture and appliances to the condo directly below Braxton.”

“And why is this interesting? People have furniture delivered all the time.”

“It’s interesting because when I backtrack the order to who placed it, the invoice is billed to a shell company that is owned by the Shaw’s hedge fund company. But the name on the title of the condo is Norma Jean O’Grady. A seventy-five-year-old retired widow.” Blake is rattling off this info, and I’m trying to decipher what he’s trying to get at.

“So?”

“So. Norma Jean O’Grady doesn’t really exist. Her entire history only goes back far enough to explain why she’s there and how she paid for the condo. There’s nothing else, no school records, jobs records, credit cards, rentals, travel, passports, nothing. She’s not real. It’s a front. And if it’s a front and the Shaw’s are hiding the fact that they’re the rightful owners of this condo....” He looks up at me wide-eyed, waiting for me to fill in the blanks. I just look back at him, waiting for him to spell it out. I’m not really in the right state of mind at the moment for critical thinking.

“It could become sort of safe house. I also found an invoice from a security company for the installation of an electronic four-bolt automatic key code security door. No cameras or any other security on the inside. So, I can’t hack in and see what’s in it. Same with inside Braxton’s penthouse. Guess he doesn’t want anyone to see what he

does in there.”

Worms slither under my skin at the thought. If he doesn't have cameras inside, there has to be a bad reason. And that reason sits like razor blades in my gut. Probably to protect himself from anyone getting video evidence of whatever the fuck it is he does in there.

“There are cameras in the hallway to Norma Jean's condo door, however, and to further prove she doesn't exist, no one, and I mean no one, has entered or left through that door in six months. And that's only how far back I looked. I bet if I kept looking, I wouldn't see anyone going through that door in years.”

“If they don't go through the front door, how do they get into the condo?” Raven speaks the words out loud that were sitting on the tip of my tongue. None of this is making any sense to me.

“My guess? If he had a security door installed, it might lead up to his penthouse on the floor above. So, he probably gets in through a secret entrance in there. That way, no one would ever know he was in there.”

My blood rushes through my veins like white water rapids. Gushing loud in my ears, muffling the world around me. He has her hidden in a secret safe house under his penthouse condo. That motherfucker is dead. I'm going to string him up and skin him alive. Because now I know where he took her and why we couldn't find any trace of her. It wasn't suspicious for him to go to his condo. None of us thought anything of it.

My legs start to move, and I'm heading for the door before I even know what my plan is to get her out. All I know is that I'm going there today and finding her. For once, I have a destination, and the feeling of urgency runs through my veins. Making me feel like I just did a face plant in a mountain of coke. Erratic heartbeat, twitching fingers, and a sharp focus like I've never felt.

“Where are you going?” Raven asks from behind me. I stop before opening the apartment door and turn back to my little sister. Her eyes are pleading and concerned.

“I’m going home to gear up, then I’m going to find her and bring her home.” Shifting my gaze to Blake, I give him my most big brotherly protective glare. I need him to continue looking for Clover, but I also want him to know that I know and I’m watching him.

“Keep digging. I want to know everything and double-check every possibility. I may also need you to hack into his safe house, so find out everything you can on that door and get into his system however you can.” Turning my attention to Raven, I don’t have time to tell her what to do. Instead, she tells me what’s she’s going to do.

“I’m staying here to help Blake. We’ll call you when we find something.”

Nodding in approval, I turn to leave the apartment and step out with more purpose and determination in my stride than when I got here. I now have a real lead and need to make a plan to get in there as fast as possible.

Chapter 12

Braxton

It took great pleasure in defiling Clover. Locking her ankles and wrists in the leather restraints holding her face down and ass up on my bed was so damn satisfying. Choosing anal first was more for my pleasure than necessarily her pain. Her pain was an added bonus, but I want to leave her pussy for last. Taste every other inch of her and ruin every part of her before damaging her permanently by taking her pussy. Every submissive position I put her in and part of her I taint builds my anticipation and desire to take her last sacred spot from her. So that when I do shove my cock inside her sweet pussy, she will be completely mine, and it will feel a hundred times

more satisfying. It will be the final nail in her coffin.

Giving her liquid sex was generous on my part. That way, she would be alert and sensitive to every touch and sensation. It was entertaining to watch her fight against her body's natural desires. Seeing her dripping wet from my touch and whimpering for more while biting out insults and curses at me. To watch her struggle between physical desire and emotional hate only made me harder.

I wonder how many times it'll take of drugging her before she craves the needle and begs for it. The only way I'm ever going to get my dick in her mouth without losing inches is to get her hooked on it and only give it to her if she sucks me off. Otherwise, I'm pretty fucking sure she'd make me a eunuch if I try too soon.

Finding out she was an ex-addict gave me a perfect method of control over her. Getting her hooked on Harley will be quicker than if she weren't. The benefit of it is that it's an upper, so her mouthiness and anger get amped up as well as her senses. It's the ecstasy part that gives the increased tactile sensitivity, visual hallucinations, and lowered inhibition that makes her easier to handle. Yet the cocaine is what gives her the increased energy and exhilaration.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

Harley may have been the result of me experimenting to find out which combination of drugs benefited my little games, but it is now our newest fad drug hitting the market. It's a hit among the partiers and the younger crowd. Now, if we could only get our distribution beyond the eastern half of North Carolina.

Greensboro is home, but my penthouse in Charlotte serves as my second home. This is where I had to take Clover, so for now, this is where I stay. Today I have a meeting with my brother and sister to discuss our plans for the future. We've been discussing things for years now and are finally sick of waiting. It's time to take action and place ourselves at the top of the food chain where we belong.

The three of us are in my corner office tonight. The setting sun glowing behind the neighboring buildings. Our offices are on the fortieth floor of the forty-seven-story sky scrapper in downtown Charlotte. We would have taken the top floors, but they were already claimed by the building owners. Briefly considered buying the building, but that's too much of a headache dealing with tenants and maintenance. Instead, we settled for the highest floor not already under contract. Setting up our hedge fund and investment firm, Shaw Capital Management, on the fortieth floor. Which includes roughly fifty managers, assistants, and receptionists, as well as four corner offices occupied by myself, Oxana, Jaxon, and my father, Preston. Our secondary office in Greensboro is smaller, but where I tend to spend most of my time.

I started out in this office, but when the time came to expand our business, both drug and money managing, I took the initiative to take control over it. Building our offices in Greensboro that currently only has twenty employees. Not only do we like to rule in the production and sale of illegal narcotics but in playing the stock market and making massive returns on investments, we know are going to skyrocket or sink.

My sister Oxana stands near one of my corner windows, leaning against a dark credenza sipping bourbon from a crystal tumbler. Her dagger-sharp blood-red nails tap incessantly, making an 'I have better things I could be doing right now' rhythm.

"What is going on with Phoenix Colton? There's been far too much noise coming from him and his ridiculous family the past couple of days." Her voice is sharp and piercing yet with a pleasant feminine ring to it. A tone she's perfected over the years. Using her figure and good looks to her advantage while simultaneously convincing them to do whatever she wants out of fear that she could stab them at any minute. The woman is a narcissistic psychopath, and I couldn't be prouder to call her my sister.

"Not sure. I think he has some anger issues he's working through."

"You know what she means, Braxton. You're stirring shit up with them and causing friction where unnecessary." My other sibling Jaxon says from one of the ultramodern metal chairs across from my desk. Only the seat cushion is upholstered with stiff black leather. Seats which I know for a fact are just uncomfortable enough to make a man shift every so often. To keep people from getting too comfortable and staying beyond their welcome. Just the way I like it. I don't want people to be comfortable and relaxed in my office. I need them to be on edge and unwilling to fight back. Jaxon is not as naturally venomous as my sister and me. Although he is the oldest of the three of us, Oxana and I take the lead on most things. Jaxon is more than okay lurking in the shadows and letting us take control. Even when Oxana was named the newest council member for the Shaw family. It used to be my mother, but when she became too complacent in her position, we needed to place a new fresh mind on the council to achieve our goals. Oxana was more than ready to step up.

Crossing his ankle over his opposite knee, he shifts and glares at me across my desk with his soft but deadly brown eyes. He unbuttons his purple blazer revealing a soft grey dress shirt underneath, the top two buttons undone and no tie. His sense of style is more colorful than my own and a little more casual. Usually a suit, but with a plain

tee shirt underneath and never a tie. The day I see Jaxon wearing a tie will be the day our father dies because his funeral is the only reason he'll ever tie one around his neck.

"It's fine. He's just throwing a tantrum. I can handle Phoenix Colton." Speaking his name leaves a rotten taste in my mouth. I cleanse it with a sip of my single malt whiskey before setting the smooth-edged tumbler down on my glass desktop. Leaning back in my much more comfortable chair than my 'guest' chairs, I relax a little.

"See that you do, little brother. Your fascination with torturing the Colton's will not get in our way. We have more important things to focus on right now. We'll get those inbred Neanderthals in due time. Just be patient." Her voice is flat and unimpressed as Oxana crosses her slender toned arms over her chest. The low-cut red silk top bunching slightly under the movement. She's so slender yet fit that her clothing seems to hang on her like a supermodel. Most men appreciate her body which she knows and uses to her advantage every chance she gets.

"And handle it quietly. Stop making waves." I turn to face Jaxon again. Giving him a grin ensuring my confidence in my ability to handle Phoenix Colton.

"It's not a problem. He'll give up his little endeavor soon enough, and things will be quiet on the Colton front once again. Oxana can plot to her heart's content to disband and demolish the Syndicate without them suspecting a thing."

"Are we sure we want to disband the Syndicate? What's so bad about being organized and delegating aspects of the business to people more equipped to handle them? Less shit for me to deal with." Jaxon asks in a condescending tone I'm all too familiar with. He hasn't exactly been on board a hundred percent with our plan since Oxana started on her journey to be the Queen Bee. Only giving in and going along with it because he was outnumbered and overruled.

“Yes, we do need to disintegrate the overbearing suffocating ignorant council of imbecilic has-beens so we can clear the path for us.” Oxana barks at Jaxon before turning her black eyes on me. Crossing the room with sharp clicks of her stiletto heels echoing off the hardwood floors. “And you will not fuck it up because you got a tingle in your dick for some hussy you found in a bar. I have plans, Braxton, and you will not jeopardize them. Not now that I am finally on the council and able to start making changes.” My sister the ever-effervescent ladies and gentleman. The only thing greater than her desire to sit on the top of the pyramid is her cruelty. I have no doubt it will get her what she wants someday.

“Don’t worry, your pretty little psychotic head Oxana. I know what I’m doing, and I will not jeopardize anything.”

“See that you don’t.”

She can threaten me all she wants, but I would never allow the Colton’s to hinder our plans. Playing with my new toy is just a perk of what’s to come. Irritating and antagonizing my childhood nemesis is merely a side game to pass the time and salt the wound. In the end, it won’t matter. Clover doesn’t matter, Phoenix doesn’t matter, and the accords and council won’t matter.

Chapter 13

Phoenix

Back at home, I’ve been able to get a few hours of restless sleep, mentally and physically preparing myself for the inevitable shit storm coming my way. When I returned home with the news of Clover’s possible whereabouts, I didn’t stop for a second. Grabbing my gear and whatever I think might be necessary. Until it was brought to my attention that we were still waiting on Blake to hack into his system. As well as the fact that we needed an update on Braxton’s location, not to mention

figuring out what we might have to deal with once we arrive at his penthouse.

As such, I was forced by my relatives to try and get a little rest before we set out. It isn't exactly what I wanted to do, but once again, my rational thinking was being smothered with a pillow by my impatient adrenaline-fueled need to get to her.

Lying in bed smelling her scent on my sheets causes me a pain in my chest I've never known before. Not even with Robin's death. This pain is a longing deep inside my soul. A need to have her close and safe by my side consumes me. Forcing my heart into my throat and a hole inside my gut. All these emotions flooding my system have been knocking me on my ass. It's strange to think that I lived for so long, suppressing them. With how I'm reacting and behaving, it's not that big a surprise. Irrational behavior and reckless actions topped with crippling mood swings are not really how I like to spend my days. For Clover, I would endure every emotional feeling and mood swing because it means loving her and possibly her loving me.

Clover is a brilliant warm light shining on my black soul that is filled with blood, pain, and sex. Now where there used to be only darkness, there is a ray of sunshine making my life more than the Syndicate's enforcer. There is joy and love and even a little hope. I was fine with my life before her, not caring that my soul was tarnished black. Now I don't think I could ever go back to the loveless, empty nights sleeping alone in my cold bed. Her warmth still lingers here, and no matter how much time passes, it will always remain here. I've known since the first time I had her in my bed that no other woman would ever take her place. No other woman can compare to her and her smile. Her kindness and big heart, or her smart mouth and strong spirit.

Nervous energy keeps me awake, staring at the ceiling as the moon begins to fill the darkening night sky. Speaking to the empty silence of my room, I promise that I will get Clover out of his clutches. I won't let her down, not like I've let people down in the past. I always get the job done no matter what the assignment, but I can't say I've done as much in my personal life. Missing out on Sunday brunches at the bakery

because I was too hungover to get up. Ignoring invitations to concerts, forgetting Emeralds high school graduation. Not my best moments.

It's not that I don't love my family. They're fucking awesome. It's just sometimes it reminded me that I wasn't good enough to have a family of my own. I let down Robin by leaving her with Hunter so I could go get laid. After that, I knew that's all I would be good at. Fucking and letting people down. It was because of my selfishness that Hunter was left alone to protect her. That's me, the selfish sex-crazed asshole who only looks out for himself. Or so people think. Thought? I may have used that to numb the pain and protect my heart from ever feeling hurt like that ever again, but that's not who I really am. I'd almost forgotten who I was and that I could feel until she came along and bitch slapped the ego right out of me.

Now with my heart beating once again with more than blood lust, I will be the man I once thought I could be. The one that I'll be for her. For them all, I foresee lots of ass-kissing and apologies in my future to a few people for letting them down. With Clover by my side, I'll be able to do anything, and I will. Because she may have been alone before coming to us, but she isn't anymore. I won't leave another woman I love alone to fend for herself.

I can't lay here any longer. If I don't move soon, I'll go mad. Instead of pretending to rest while waiting for Blake to call, I get up and get dressed. Jeans and a black shirt with black combat boots. As soon as Blake calls and gets us the plans for Braxton's penthouse and access to his safe house security door, we'll be in the car and on our way. It doesn't matter if Braxton and his entire security detail are there. Killing them will be my pleasure.

Heading downstairs to do, I don't know what, something to help calm my nerves. I make my way through the living room and notice the French doors open to the backyard. No lights are on, but I can see a form sitting in one of the chairs at the outdoor table. A red ember burning from the end of a cigarette of some kind. As I get

closer, the figure comes into focus. Beau is sitting in the moonlight smoking a joint and staring off into the distance.

“Haven’t seen you smoke in a while.” He turns to watch me approach and sit in the chair next to him.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

“Yeah, well, my nerves are a little frayed at the moment.” He takes another long hit off the joint before passing it to me. I take it and suck in a long drag. Maybe the weed can help steady my shaking hands.

“Anything from Blake and Raven yet?”

Shaking my head, I slowly let out the smoke before answering. “No, nothing yet.”

“As soon as they do, we’re going to get her back and kill that fucker.” Beau takes back the joint and holds it between his fingers gingerly. He’s not looking at me as he speaks. His mind is far away from us, sitting here in my backyard.

“I’m not going to kill him. I’m going to make him suffer in ways he doesn’t even know exist until he’s begging me for death.” The feral beast lurking in my heart stirs and snarls, wanting to be let out of its cage.

“I’ll help.” Is all he says.

“What do you think he’s doing to her?” I don’t really want to know the answer, but I can’t stop the question from coming out of my mouth.

“I try not to think about it. Just think about her safe when we find her.”

“It’s hard not to. I just feel so much. She makes me feel and care. I never cared before. And now I can’t stop if I tried.” I take the joint back from Beau, unable to process everything. I need to cool down. I take another drag off the shrinking joint. If we keep sucking on it as hard as we are, it’ll be gone in two more drags.

“You love her, don’t you?”

“Yes. I love her, and I have no fucking idea how to handle it. What the fuck do I do now, Beau?” Rubbing my hands over my face and then through my hair, I don’t even try to deny it anymore. Beau’s known from the beginning Clover was special. I’m also pretty sure he knew from the moment we met that she was meant to be mine.

“First, we find her. Then you tell her you love her. Then you love her and are happy.”

“What if she doesn’t love me?” the whispered words almost choke me as I speak. I’ve never been afraid of anything, but her not loving me is terrifying.

“Trust me, she loves you. Just tell her, and you’ll see.”

“What if, after all this, she wants nothing to do with us? With me?”

“Clover is tougher than she looks. I don’t think even Braxton Shaw can scare her.”

He has a point. She’s less than half my size, and even the very first time meeting me, she wasn’t afraid of my intimidating size or scowl. She knew nothing about me and what I was capable of, and yet she stood her ground. Not a single hint of fear or apprehension. One edge of my lip quirks slightly. If she is anything like she was when first meeting me with Braxton, she’ll be just fine. For a while. Eventually, Braxton will overpower her with sheer size. My growing smirk dies before it reaches both edges of my mouth and turns into a scowl. That self-righteous asshole better hope I find him before that happens.

A buzz in my pocket pulls me from my thoughts. My phone is ringing. There’s only one person it could be. And I swear to fuck if it’s a telemarketer, I’m going to find them in whatever country they’re in and strangle them with their phone cord.

Reading the caller ID Raven's name flashes on the screen. I instantly answer and put it on speaker for Beau to hear.

"Did you get the info?"

"Yes. We have the floor plans for his penthouse and the condo below. We also think we know where the entry door is." Raven tells me from the speaker on my phone.

"And what about hacking into the security door?"

Blake chuckles on the other end. "Oh, he's serious? Yeah, as soon as I found a way into the system, I can hack the code easily. It just took a few skillful codes."

"And a call to his uncle," Raven mumbles just loud enough so we can hear through the line. Blake clears his throat and continues.

"And I was able to breach their system. Just let me know when you're at the door, and I'll pop it open for you."

I may have to put this kid on my payroll. Still not sure if I like him enough to let him date my little sister, but he's good enough with computers to warrant being on my speed dial.

"Thanks, Blake. Send me everything you have. I'll let you know when it's time." Hanging up, I turn to Beau, and without a word, we stand and head inside. Time to get my girl back.

Chapter 14

Clover

Something in me snapped while I was curled in the fetal position on the white tile of the shower, washing off the blood and cum. The tears had stopped flowing, and the heat in my body wasn't coming from the hot water spraying down on me. No. It was coming from my burning rage.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

How dare that motherfucker think he can ruin my sobriety by injecting me with who knows what the fuck. It's still lingering in my system now. Though its effects are waning. That may be due to the fact that the adrenalin that shot through me mixing with the rage and Harley sent me into a murderous frenzy. Since there was no Braxton here to kill, I decided to kill his condo instead.

I do meankill. Demolish and destroy. There's no pansy-ass tantrum-throwing pillows here. Oh no. I shred the bedding into scraps, tearing it into ribbons. If I had a knife, I would gut the mattress and couch too. But there's nothing in this fucking cage sharp enough to do the damage I want. Every frame hanging on the walls now resides on the floor. Glass shattered, and whatever art or photo was inside ripped to confetti. Every drawer in the kitchen has been removed and smashed on the floor or countertop. Every plate and bowl I've chucked at the wall like an ultimate frisbee pro. That was particularly satisfying since I got to throw things and watch them explode in a burst of porcelain against the walls. Taking a few chunks out of the drywall in the process.

I leave his closet and clothing for last. It's a little harder to tear through his suits. The material is strong and well made. Eventually, I get seams to rip and fabric to tear. There're too many clothes in here for me to destroy them all, so I focus on the expensive-looking items. Then I turn my attention to the fancy dresses on the opposite wall. He will never again make another woman wear these.

After he cut up my silk pajama shorts, I put my jeans back on. Realizing wearing the thin material was a bad idea. I need more protection from him, and denim is a lot harder to cut than silk. Since he had also cut up my Colt shirt, I had no choice but to remain wearing the silk night blouse. As an extra measure, I've tucked it into my

jeans. I realize that tucking in a shirt doesn't actually create an impenetrable barrier, but it makes me feel better.

When I squat down to continue trashing the slutty dresses, the cut in my ass screams at me. There wasn't anything more in the bathroom than regular generic Band-Aids. I used three across the cut to cover it. I have to lift a little more onto my knees to relieve the strain on the cut. With all the blood rushing through my ears, I don't hear the door beep and swish. Instead, I hear Braxton's voice calling out from the main space.

"Honey, I'm home...and I see you've redecorated." He sounds amused. Fucking amused at the waste I've laid to his property. I'm going to wipe that smirk I know he's sporting off his lying mouth.

Bolting up, I sprint through the closet and out to see him standing by the couch, hands on his hip as he surveys my handy work. That's right fucker. I fucked your shit up. What are you gonna do about it now?

"You know you should really ask first before rearranging things." He says, all calm and flat. He's not going to show how mad he really is. Keeping it locked up and stored away for later.

"Fuck you! You pathetic sack of shit!" He's not wielding any weapons that I can see. The drugs, adrenaline, and rage make me do something that probably isn't the smartest choice in my current position. I run at him, screaming like a madwoman on a rage high. I don't care if I'm half his size and barefoot running through a minefield of broken glass and plates. There's no sense or reason in my action. Just pure reaction.

He's momentarily caught off guard at my advance, which allows me the extra few seconds to leap on him and wrap my hands around his thick neck. Thick to me and my tiny hands anyways. I can't grab all the way around, so I dig my thumbs into the

center of his throat, hoping that'll cut off his air supply. It does for about three seconds before he hooks his hands under my armpits and pushes me away from him. I try to hold on, but my grip was superficial, and my hands slip from around his neck.

Braxton is no longer calm and emotionless. He's fuming, breathing heavily and his eyebrows are so tight in the center of his face they're practically touching.

"You fucking bitch!" He roars as he throws me off him and to the littered floor. I land on a few broken pieces of something sharp, and they leave tiny cuts on my arms and feet. Luckily, they're not large enough to break through my denim jeans. Saving my legs from too much damage.

"You're so pathetic." I spit out amongst strained chuckles. "Can't even get pussy without abducting a woman and tying her down. What's the problem, Braxton? Unable to satisfy a woman without drugs and death threats?" I really shouldn't taunt him, but that broken filter between my brain and mouth and the high I'm riding fills me with false courage that I don't care what I'm saying.

"What the fuck did you say? I get plenty of pussy. If I remember correctly, you and your pussy were pretty damn interested in me when we first met." His whole body is throbbing with anger as he looms over me. I can see his hands curling into fists. If he decided to use those fists against me, he would surely break multiple bones. Right now, I don't give a flying fuck. All I want to do is piss him off and scratch out his eyes. I manage to hobble to my feet but stay crouched low, just in case I need to dodge a hit. Then I keep talking.

"Momentary lapse in sanity. No woman in her right mind would want you."

"You better watch your dirty mouth, you little cunt, or I'm going to have to break your jaw so you can't talk."

“Ooooh, such a big man, threatening to hurt a woman half his size.” I hold my hands out and shake them mockingly like I’m scared. Oddly enough, I’m not even a little scared of him at this moment, although I probably should be. I’m enjoying pissing him off too much to think of the repercussions of my words.

“If you had just come willingly, I wouldn’t have to threaten you.” He growls out, taking a menacing step towards me. I step back just as quickly.

“Like I said, no woman would come willingly with you, and I would never choose you over Nix. He’s ten times the man you are. Doesn’t need to drug women to get them to sleep with him either.”

“I don’t need you to come willingly anymore. I’ll have you whenever and however I want you. You’ll wish I only fuck you in the ass because what I have planned for you will make that feel like a goddamn day at the beach, sweet thing.” He threatens.

He’s restarted our little scuffle and is coming at me again. As I run and duck to avoid him, I grab pieces of whatever is on the floor and chuck them at him. A few times, they hit him and are heavy enough to make an impact. A few are sharp pieces of broken glass that nick his forearms as he lifts them to block his face. Slowing him as he advances on me. I don’t stop cursing at him and calling him obscenities. My heart is pounding, and the extreme need to escape floods my body, but I don’t regret my actions or fear him. If he wants me, he’ll have to fight me to submission. No more quiet acceptance. I’m going to make this as difficult for him as possible. So much to the point, it might not even be enjoyable to him anymore. Serves the bastard right.

On one sharp turn around the couch, my foot slips on a piece of torn sheet, and I lose my balance just long enough that he’s able to catch up with me. Grabbing me by the arms and twisting in a way so fierce it feels like he’s going to rip them out of the sockets. In seconds he’s got me pinned against the walls of windows, hands above my head, and his thigh between my legs, using his hips to hold me in place.

“I’ve got you now, my little pussy cat. You can try to run all you like, but I will always catch you. You’re mine.” His hands tighten around my wrists, digging his fingers into the tender flesh to the point I think they’ll bruise. I smother a whimper.

“I’ll never be yours.” My words are quiet but strong. No matter what he does to my body, my heart will never be his. It will always belong to Nix.

Nix. I really freaking hope he finds me soon. If I keep pissing off Braxton, he may do some real damage. Until then, I’m going to fight him tooth and nail.

“You say that now, but I will break you. Eventually, they all break.” He’s running his nose along my neck, and I crane away from his touch. I have to be patient and wait for him to loosen his hold before I can make a move. His grip is too tight, and he’s pressed too close to my body. I can only stand still and tolerate his touch. Allowing him to suck on the flesh of my shoulder, next to the stupid ass collar he put on me.

He shifts his hold of my wrists from two hands to one. His free hand starting to aggressively roam my chest. He’s panting and growling at me. The anger from our fight still pumping through his veins, feeding into his sadistic lust. It disgusts me that he’s getting hard and turned on from my disgust and hatred of him. It’s one thing to get turned on while role-playing dom and sub, but to actually get a boner from real hate and fear is disgusting.

During his angry groping, he shifts his hips back off mine so he can slip his hand between us, cupping my pussy and then sliding back up to my breasts. It gives me just enough space to strike him. Since our legs are in between one another’s, my knee is perfectly positioned to clock him right in his precious balls. With as much force as I’m able to muster, I pull my knee as high as it’ll go. Slamming into his groin with a strength I didn’t know I possessed. I guess what they say about people becoming stronger in times of distress is true.

My knee digs so hard into his sack he releases me and stumbles back, sucking in a sharp breath and gently cupping his junk. Let's see if he gets a hardon now.

“Motherfucker!” he roars out between gasps, coughs, and groans of utter agony. His inability to stand straight and the wincing after every cough makes me smile.

Who's the bitch now?

"I think you broke my dick." Every time he pulls his hands away from his dick, he looks at them like he expects to see blood. I would love it if there were blood. "Fuck!" He roars, trying to stand up, then doubles over, grabbing his groin again. I think he might actually puke from the pain. Perfect.

There's no more fight or threats. I don't think he can even think straight. I'm not a guy and have never been kneed in the balls, but I hear it's pretty fucking painful. Braxton is still moaning and grunting as he hobbles out of the ruined condo. Probably to go to the hospital. I hope I broke something permanently. If I'm the reason he can no longer have children, then at least I've saved the world from him spawning any little demons of his own.

I remain planted in one spot, not daring to move till I hear the door shut from the hidden staircase. Exhaling a breath, I didn't know I was holding I slump against the window. My arms and legs shaking from all the extreme emotions I just went through in record time. Hopefully, that will keep him away for a long while and teach him that I will fight back, and I won't let him break me.

Chapter 15

Phoenix

"S

o, what's the plan, Nix?" Magnus and the others have returned to my house, strapped

and ready for a fight. Now they wait for me to lay out the plan for liberating Clover.

“Blake got us the plans for the building, including Braxton’s penthouse and the condo below. That’s the one we think he’s converted into a safe house under a fake identity. We believe the entrance into this safe house is here.” I point to the screen on my tablet at the blueprint diagram of the building. “Inside the master bedroom. It’s not on the plans, but according to the structure here, Blake says it’s the best place to put a door and narrow stairwell down to the condo below.”

“And what about Braxton and his men?” Zander crosses his arms over his broad chest, waiting for the verdict of kill or don’t kill.

“I have been told not to kill Braxton. His men are free game.”

“Do we know if he’s in the penthouse right now?” I look to Arrow, who is on the phone checking with the guy we put on Braxton’s tail.

“Actually, Braxton just left not long ago and went to a... private hospital?” Arrow looks confused, and I must be making a face to match because he just shrugs.

“Why?” Magnus inquires for all of us, staring at Arrow, waiting for further explanation.

“No idea. My guy saw him walking in with two of his guards limping.”

“Well, let’s hope whatever the hell it is, it keeps him there.” Zander always the non-confrontation type offers. He may be as big as an ox, but he’s as soft-hearted as a Labrador puppy. I don’t think he’s ever truly been mad at anyone or anything, except when he got the injury that ended his short professional football career. Other than that, he’s always smiles and hugs. That doesn’t mean he can’t rip a guy’s arms off his body and use them as bats to beat him to death. Just means he would prefer not to.

Although it's probably better if Braxton isn't there since I doubt I could stop myself from shooting him dead when I see him.

The five of us, Beau, Arrow, Magnus, Zander, and I, load into one of the generic black SUVs we own and use mainly for security details and jobs. It's the only thing that'll fit all of us comfortably and have room for Clover when we find her. We drive to Braxton's building in silence. I text Blake to check the hospital and find out why Braxton is there. My phone dings with his response as we pull into the parking garage of the building. Blake also hacked into the garage security feed and made sure we aren't going to be seen by any of them, I don't know how, and I don't care.

Blake: Looks like he checked in an hour and a half ago for some sort of trauma.

Nix: What kind? Is he still there?

Blake: It says testicular trauma. Wtf does that mean? Yes, he's still there.

Nix: Keep me updated. We're pulling into the garage now. I'll let you know when we find the security door.

Blake: You got it, boss. (Thumbs up emoji.)

"What's the kid say?" Magnus asks from the driver's seat.

"We're good to go. Braxton's still at the hospital with testicular trauma."

"What the fuck?" Arrow looks at me while wincing and covering his own junk with one hand. "That sucks, man. For any dude."

"I can only hope Clover cut his dick off when he tried to touch her," I growl out. Because if he did manage to touch her, I don't think I'll be able to hold on to the little

bit of sanity I have left.

As Magnus pulls the truck into a parking spot near the private elevator that leads to the penthouse, I snort a quick line of coke to perk me up. I've been going pretty much nonstop for over two days now. I'm going to need every bit of energy I can get. The coke jolts my nerve endings and squashes the slight delirium set on by lack of sleep. The world sharpening into focus around me.

Let's fucking do this.

We wait for the elevator guns drawn just in case there's a guard inside for some reason. The bell dings and the light next to the doors illuminates. The sliding doors crack and start to open.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

“Back already?” A voice inside asks casually. Guess Blake did make us invisible if he couldn’t see us on the security camera in the garage. We know there isn’t one at the door or inside the elevator. Braxton must be seriously paranoid to have removed them.

We don’t wait for the doors to completely open or for the man to register our presence and open fire on him. Four shots from Magnus and me, and he’s down. Didn’t even get a chance to draw his weapon. Poor bastard. Should have chosen someone else to work for.

Stepping over his bleeding body, we enter the elevator and hit the only button for the penthouse labeled PH. The only other button is for the garage and the lobby. It’s dead quiet in the elevator. No pun intended. It’s just really fucking quiet. Does Braxton not believe in elevator music? Sick fuck.

As the elevator slows as it approaches the top floor, we again raise our guns and aim at the doors. If there was a guy in the elevator, there’s got to be a few in the condo. Beau and Magnus stand in the front to either side with Zander, Arrow, and myself behind and offset so we can aim in between them. When the door dings and slides open, we unleash hell upon anyone who steps in our path.

The first is a guy at the door waiting for us. After the first shots signaling our arrival, the others sprout from doors and rooms. All wearing black suits and carrying matching forty-fives. Not sure where Braxton found these guys, but they’re so unoriginal. And obvious. If they were out in public anywhere, they would be made in seconds. Not the best method to remain inconspicuous. There’s maybe four more in total. Who the fuck needs so many guards? What the hell is Braxton up to that he

feels the need to have this many bodies in-between him and whoever is coming after him?

Either way, four guys aren't an issue. They open fire on us, and we open fire on them. Their bullets are not much of a deterrent. Plus, we aren't stupid and strapped on bulletproof vests before stepping out of the SUV.

I remain steadfast on my path through the foyer into the living space. It's a huge open space with marble flooring and plush area rugs, low sitting couches, and odd modern art. Lots and lots of white and mirrors. Fuckers seriously conceited if he needs this many mirrors in his home.

My cousins spread out and use pillars as cover and try to flank the men. I don't give a fuck and walk straight at them. They probably think I'm insane, but really, I'm just out of patience. I don't have time to fuck around in a gunfight. One of the men in black manages to graze my side with a lucky shot. Slicing in the exposed area, the vest doesn't cover. Mine hits more center mass and takes him to his knees. My second and third, and fourth all hit center mass and one to the head for good measure. Just in case he's also wearing a vest like me, and I move on only once he's on his back, motionless. Two others are already down, and there's one left crouching behind a large lounge chair that looks like it belongs in the Jetson's with all its oddly shaped arms and oversized proportions. As he's focused on Zander to my left, I circle to the right and bring him just enough in view to get a shot off, and he drops with one bullet to the head.

Braxton's condo is now decorated with arterial spray red.

"Bedroom," I call to my cousins, and we all file down the wide hall to the master. The door is right where Blake said it would be. Black steel and no handle. Just the keypad. I call Blake.

“We’re here. You’re up.”

“On it.” He answers before I hear the clickity-clack of his keyboard. The keypad in front of me blinks and shows symbols that look like hieroglyphs, then beeps, clicks, and slides open. I don’t even thank Blake before hanging up and raising my gun just in case there are more guards inside.

I make my way down the dimly lit stairs first. There’s no way in hell I’d let one of the others go first. If Clover is here, I need to be the first one to her. Arrow remains at the door to keep a lookout, just in case, while Beau, Zander, and Magnus follow behind me. When I reach the bottom, it lets out into a spacious kitchen, a very messy trashed kitchen. Every single drawer is missing, and every cabinet is open with everything pulled out and smashed on the floor. Panic explodes in my chest like a grenade. If he did this and she’s in here, hurt or dead...

Fuck. Please don’t let her be dead.

My pace quickens, and now I’m looking for her small body amongst all the debris and clutter. There’re a few spots of red blood on the floor, and I fucking lose it.

“CLOVER! CLOVER!” Before I can call her name a third time, a door to my right opens a crack, and a small voice calls out.

“Nix?”

“Clover.” Relief washes over me, and my heart starts to beat again because it stopped the moment I knew she was gone and only now started back up again. She opens the door all the way and drops something that makes a tinkling noise when it hits the floor. I barely have enough time to holster my gun before Clover leaps into my arms and wraps her legs around my waist. Her body is shaking, and I’m sure she’s crying, but I just squeeze her tight, holding her close. Her body is warm and in one piece.

Since she disappeared, the weird pain living in my chest finally dissipates the longer I hold her in my arms.

She doesn't say anything yet. Her arms are tight around my shoulders, and her face is buried in the crook of my neck. My own face burrowed into her hair, inhaling her scent, confirming she's real and not a manifestation of my imagination brought on by snorting too much cocaine.

"You're okay. You're safe now. I've got you, baby." I whisper into her hair. She only sobs softly in response. The hold she has on me only tightens, and I'm pretty sure she's part monkey because she's holding onto me with such strength I don't know if she'll ever let go. I don't want her to ever let me go.

A painful release washes over me, holding her in my arms. I never knew someone's heart could hurt so much with relief, yet mine does. The pain reminding me of what could have been. Of how badly this could have turned out. That she may not have ended up back in my arms safe. But she is, and I can't fucking breathe with the overwhelming relief choking me.

Coaxing her to calm, I rub my hand up and down her back, soothing the vibrating tremors running through her. After a long minute, they subside, and she's able to speak.

"I thought you would never find me." Her voice is quiet and small against my skin. And it fucking hurts to hear her so frail. My strong shotgun-wielding girl reduced to tear-filled whispers. I'm going to ruin Braxton and his whole fucking family for this.

"I will always find you sweet cheeks. I'll never let you go." I whisper back to her. A long breath leaves her, and her body begins to go limp in my arms. Before I drop her, I set her down tentatively on her feet. She's stable enough to stand but still clings to me, her fingers grabbing my shirt, making sure I can't leave her again. I'll never

fucking leave her again.

When she composes herself enough to look up at me, her eyes are rimmed with red from crying, and the tracks of her tears are drying on her cheek. Where a purple bruise covers her cheekbone and jaw.

“What did he do to you?” The barely restrained anger seeps into my question. I try to keep calm and fail miserably.

“Doesn’t matter. You’re here now.” Her smile is soft and small, probably because it hurts to do anything more. But her eyes are bright and filled with relief. Brushing the back of my knuckles across her bruised cheek, I try not to put too much pressure on the purpling skin, brushing the unkempt strands of hair from her face. My fingers come in contact with something that shouldn’t be there. Brushing away more hair, I see the leather strap around her neck.

“What the fuck is this?” My blood boils. He collared her. He is so fucking lucky he isn’t here right now because he would be dead and in pieces at my feet.

“He said I was his pet, and I needed a collar.” She whispers to me.

“Don’t worry, baby, I’m going to get this off you.” Feeling around to the back, I realize it’s locked on her neck. I’m going to need a bolt cutter to remove it.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

Leaving it for now, I reach down to take her hands in mine and feel a warm sticky substance on them. Looking down, I realize its blood. The brief calm is gone again, and my heart rate jacks up three times its normal pace.

“What the hell, Clover?” I bite out. What the hell else did he do to her? Her sweet face, that fucking collar, and now her hand. She’s an artist. If her hands are damaged permanently, she won’t be able to draw anymore. That would kill her.

“It’s ok, it’s my fault. I was using a broken piece of glass as a weapon and held it too tight.” She’s not even looking at her hand. Doesn’t even care. It’s bleeding. All she cares about is me, staring at me like she doesn’t believe it. Like I’m a mirage about to disappear at any moment.

Don’t worry, sweet cheeks. I’m not going anywhere.

Beau appears at my side with strips of fabric in his hands. “Here. Let me wrap it for now. We can clean you up properly at home.”

Clover notices Beau and her eyes soften. Releasing my hands, she wraps them around Beau’s neck, ignoring the makeshift bandages in his hands. He returns her hug, squeezing her tightly but tentatively. Unsure what else might be bruised or bleeding. I can hear his exhale as he holds her. Pressing a soft kiss to her uninjured cheek before he softly presses her away so he can tie the material around her palm.

“We should really get going,” Zander says from a few feet away, where he’s been keeping guard over our reunion. Clover notices him and Magnus not far from him and smiles as more tears fall from her beautiful blue eyes. But she’s smiling, so they

must be happy tears. Or tears of relief? Either way, they're not sad tears.

"Come on, sweet cheeks." I don't even wait to ask her if she can walk and scoop her up into my arms and cradle her close to my chest. She doesn't argue and wraps her arms around my neck, bringing herself once again against my neck and chest. Needing the nearness as much as I do. I give her a quick kiss to the temple before striding out the trashed condo and up the stairs where we meet up with Arrow, who nods and visibly relaxes when he sees Clover curled in my arms.

It only takes us five minutes to get out of the penthouse and down to the garage, and into the truck. Arrow climbs into the third row allowing Beau, Clover, and myself to sit in the second row. Magnus is driving, and Zander is in the front passenger seat. There's nothing for any of us to say now that it's done. So, we drive in silence with the radio playing quietly to break the awkward quiet when Clover raises her head from my chest. Staring warily at me, she speaks softly.

"I'm sorry, Nix."

"What the hell do you have to be sorry for? None of this is your fault." I assure her.

"Yes, it is. If I had just listened to you and made sure I was with someone, Braxton wouldn't have gotten the jump on me. If I'd just waited for Rosie, none of this would have happened." Her words are broken with small sobs. When she mentions Rosie, her eyes widen, and her speech speeds up. "Please don't blame her. It's not her fault I convinced her to let me drive alone."

"Shhh. It's ok I don't blame anyone but myself. I should have known he was going to do something and not left you." I rub my hand in calming circles on her back, easing her to rest against my chest. She's wearing some sort of pink silk blouse, and it's speckled with blood droplets but is soft under my hand. It's not the shirt she was wearing when she was taken, so he must have given it to her. Knowing that the soft

material burns my fingertips every time I touch her. I need to get her home and in her own clothes and bed. She looks like she's slept about as much as I have. Her hands are still shaking with small tremors, and her eyes are jittery, looking from place to place and back to me. Like she's tweaking on something.

"It's not your fault either, I—"

"No, I will not let you blame yourself for this. For fucks sake, Clover, he kidnapped you." I pin her with a look that says If you try one more time to blame yourself, I'm going to kiss you till you shut up. I might do that anyway. I've missed her lips and the warm softness that melts my heart every time I kiss her. Glancing down at said lips, I run the pad of my thumb over them, stilling the nibbling she's been doing to her bottom lip. She stills and lets out a soft breath.

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me just yet. I still need to make Braxton pay for what he's done." Again, she curls into my side and rests her head on my chest, her breathing slowing as she calms. My heart aches to see her like this. Frail and weak. My girl is not weak. She demolished that condo and was using a piece of broken glass as a weapon. She will recover from this. She will be strong and happy once again.

I will see her smile and laugh and call me names while taunting me with her tempting body and smart mouth. This will only bring us closer together. I won't let it ruin her or me or us. We're stronger than anything—together.

Chapter 16

Clover

Ashriek breaks free from my lips as I shoot up in bed. The nightmare coming to an

abrupt end as I blink back the darkness and realize I'm back in my own room in Nix's house. My savior himself lying next to me, now propping himself up on one elbow-rubbing at his eyes. My yelling having woken him.

"What it is, baby? Are you okay?" This giant of a man is so soft and sweet with me it makes my heart swell when I see his golden eyes glowing in the moonlight. I rub at my neck where the collar was. Nix cut it off as soon as we got home. It's now in the trash outside, far from me. A faint red mark from the leather rubbing against my skin the only evidence it was ever there.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just a bad dream." My heart rate is dropping back to normal, and the panic is ebbing.

"It's ok, you're home now. You're safe." He sits up and cups my unbruised cheek. I can't help but lean into him. His warmth soothing the ache and anxiety the dream brought on. I feel safe in his touch, but am I really? Braxton is still alive out there. Granted, he's probably still icing his family jewels and won't be able to use them for a long time. But he's still there.

I wonder if he knows I'm gone yet. I wouldn't mind seeing the look on his face when he enters the condo and finds me gone. Plus, all his security team is dead on his living room floor. Nix probably thought I wasn't paying attention, but I was. I saw the massacre they laid down to get to me. I'll never be able to repay them for what they did. Any of them.

"I just need some water." I don't want to pull away from him, but I feel a little lost at the moment. Wanting to return to my life and what it was before but unable to shake Braxton's touch completely just yet.

"I'll get it for you." He starts to roll off the bed pushing the white comforter to the side. Before he gets very far, I reach out and grab his forearm.

“No, it’s ok. I’ll get it. I need to use the restroom anyway.” I lie. I don’t really need to, but I need a moment to clear my head. Before he can argue, I slip out of bed, walk briskly to my attached bathroom, and click the door shut behind me. Not giving one look back to Nix in my bed.

Flipping on the light, I make my way to the sink and splash cold water over my face. Being careful not to smack the bruise and my fading black eye. Taking in a few slow, deep breaths in through the nose and out through the mouth, I’m able to steady my heart rate and suppress the anxiety. In my nightmare, I woke back in Braxton’s condo, and it wasn’t the threat of violence or unwanted sex that ate at my insides. It was being alone, forgotten. Left to rot by those I thought cared about me. Nix never came to rescue me, Rosie didn’t care that I was gone, Faust was disappointed in me for leaving without telling them, and Beau didn’t bandage my hand, which isn’t as bad as they thought it just bled a lot.

Looking down at the gauze around my left palm, where the glass I wielded as a weapon left a two to three-inch slice in my skin. The white medical fabric is slightly damp from the water. What would I have become if they’d never come for me? What would I have done to escape? I’ve never been suicidal before but being trapped there knowing no one cared. No one was coming with only Braxton to interact with. I may have sunk to that level after a time. There’s only so much a person can take before they break. Braxton would have won. He would have broken me. But not with his sexcapades and leather restraints. Instead, with his ability to separate me from everyone else and kill the spirit in my heart.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

Checking the cut on my hand reminds me I should check the bandage I put on my butt. I still haven't told anyone what Braxton did to me over the past couple of days, so they don't know about the cut. Explaining how it got there is too embarrassing. Admitting that he got the better of me, admitting I was weak, that I'm now feeling the withdrawal the Harley caused. The slight tremors in my hands aren't from adrenalin or anxiety or fear but my body screaming out in anger at the loss of the stimulant in my blood. I just can't do it, not yet.

I spend a good five minutes calming myself and checking my wounds before switching off the light and stepping out back into my room. Silver moonlight streams in through the sheer curtains, and the massive body that was in my bed when I left is no longer there. My feet stop only a few paces outside the bathroom when I notice Nix is gone. A small flash of panic at being left here alone heats up my skin from the inside of my chest and begins to expand up my neck. When I turn, to see him leaning against the dresser on the wall by the bathroom door.

"Nix. What are you doing over there?" The hot panic disappears when I see him. Relief cooling it like ice-cold water on hot coals.

"I wanted to make sure you were okay." His eyes are dark and filled with his own brand of pain and concern. He doesn't move, but his eyes roam over my body. Over the material of my white tank top and matching white underwear. It's not a hungry gaze. He's taking a mental inventory checking again to make sure I'm here and whole. I'm here, but I'm not quite whole yet.

"I'm fine." I try to reassure him with false strength.

“Then why is there a bandage on your butt cheek?” Reflexively, my hand reaches out to cover the spot on my backside.

“Oh. It’s nothing.”

“If it’s nothing, then let me see it.” He does move now, pushing himself off the dresser and stepping closer to me. I step back, keeping space between us. I don’t do it on purpose. My body just reacts protectively.

“You really don’t need to. It’s fine.”

“Please, chipmunk. I just want to take care of you and make sure you’re okay.” Again, he takes another step, this time reaching out to me. Again, I step back and curl my arms around my body out of his reach.

“I’m not going to hurt you, Clover. I would never hurt you.” He sounds pained that I would think he would hurt me. His brow furrowing as a small frown turns down his lips. I know he won’t. I just don’t want to be forced.

Nix watches me as I twitch a little and watch him. The ex-man-whore who used to not even remember the girl's name or give them a second thought once they left. The mountain of a man that can snap a man’s bones with one hand. The cocaine snorting party boy that starts bar fights for fun. The man who carried me out of the club to protect me from Braxton that ordered his cousins to guard me and watch me. The man with the exterior of elephant skin and insides of a warm gooey brownie. With shelves of sketchbooks filled with emotional art and a mind so much more than the brute force he appears to be. Who broke his only rule for me and holds me tenderly in his muscular arms at night while I sleep. Like I am the most precious thing in his world.

Nix will not hurt me and has proven he will protect me. When he reaches his hand out

again, not to grab me or pull me to him, just waiting for me to allow him to touch me, I do. Nodding but not moving. Nix steps closer and slides his large warm hand around my waist, and instead of forcing me to turn, he pulls me into his chest and presses a kiss to my forehead.

“May I please see it, Clover?” Again I nod, this time turning to the side so he can see the wound. With hands far gentler than the monster hands he has, he lifts the hem of my shirt and slides my panties down just enough to reveal the gauze pad held down with two pieces of surgical tape. Peeling up one side, he lifts it, and I can hear the audible gasp when he sees it. I know it looks worse than it is because I didn’t have Neosporin or proper bandages in Braxton’s cage. Now it’s dressed with butterfly bandages and some cream to help it heal and not get infected. It’s still red and angry, but the swelling has gone down.

“Jesus, sweet cheeks, what did he do to you?” The words are strained; Nix’s voice is low and scratchy, unlike his fingers. Which are soft and gentle as they caress the tender flesh around the cut. Placing the gauze and tape back in place and gently cupping my ass over the wound.

“Doesn’t matter.” I croak out in a whisper.

“It matters to me. Why didn’t you tell me? We can get this looked at by a doctor properly.”

“Like you got your stab wound looked at by a doctor?” I don’t mean to snap at him, but that’s how it comes out. I don’t want to go to a doctor and tell him what happened. I just want to cover it up and move on.

“I was stabbed by a drug dealer in a delivery gone wrong. Not by a psychopath who kidnapped me.”

“What’s the difference? Still a knife wound.” I counter. He doesn’t seem to like my answer, and out of the corner of my eye, I see him scowling softly at me. Giving me his ‘are you fucking kidding me?’ look.

“The difference is mine wasn’t paired with psychological trauma, and I instantly killed the fucker who stabbed me.” He’s getting angry now. I don’t want to talk about this, any of it. I pull away and head towards my bed.

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not.”

“How would you know? We barely know each other.” I don’t have to see him to feel the hurt radiating from behind me. I hurt him.

“Well... I know your real name is Hillary.” I spin to face him and discover he’s moved closer to me, standing mere inches away. His expression is odd, something I’ve never seen from him before. A mix of pain, determination, and tenderness.

“How do you know that?”

“Blake found it when we were searching the internet trying to find you.” Blake? I remember Blake. He was the guy I met at Nix’s tattoo shop. He was nice, sweet. I don’t know how he got roped into all this, though.

“Does it matter what my real name is?” reaching down, I pull back the sheet so I can get back into bed and hide under the blankets and hopefully end this horrible conversation. Nix doesn’t let me run away from him, though. Reaching out and wrapping his strong arm around my stomach, gently forcing me to turn back to him. He keeps his hand planted on my low back, keeping me wrapped against him. If I really wanted to, I could easily remove myself from his hold. It’s not tight or

demanding. Just a firm tenderness.

In this position, I can't help but look up at him. It's either that or stare at his bare chest, which only makes me want to touch him and right now is not the time for that. Instead, I stare into glowing golden hazel eyes watching down at me.

“No. It doesn't matter what your name is. It could be Archibald for all I care. But I do know you. I know how easily you blush when I say dirty things to you. That you don't take shit from any man. Especially big guys with pervy minds.” He chuckles a little before continuing. “I know that you're kind and care deeply for the people you love. You gave up your dream to be an artist to take care of your mother. You're a hard worker and way fucking smarter than me. I know that you've been through some horrible shit in your life, and yet you're still smiling. You don't let life get you down. You pick yourself up and keep going. Because you're strong and determined.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

His hand reaches up and brushes away tears. I didn't even know I was crying. I didn't know he paid so much attention to me. He sees beyond the red hair and boobs. He can see me beneath the protective layer of sarcasm. Down to who I am inside. To someone I can't even see all the time. His scowl has softened, and one side of his mouth tilts up.

"I may not know your favorite color or movie or candy, but I do know you, Clover Jones." Running his hand down my throat and collarbone, he stops over my heart and flattens his hand on my chest. "In here."

Holy shit. Phoenix Colton is a million times the man I ever thought he was before. This man standing in front of me is someone he, too, has been hiding from the world. Concealing with his own protective layer and armor. Shedding his own fears and insecurities to show me him. The vulnerable, loving man inside.

The emotions are too much, and my body feels like overcooked ramen, giving in and allowing myself to succumb to his pull. Snuggling against his chest and pressing my ear to his heart, listening to the erratic pounding beneath his pecs. The warmth and security of his arms wrapping around me reassuring me, telling me with every caress that he will always be here to protect me. The tightening of his muscles ensuring that he will never again let me go. I am his, and he is mine. In this emotionally filled silent embrace, we say everything and nothing. Releasing the tension racking both our bodies and souls. Promising without words that we're safe and no one can come between us.

As gently as he had earlier tonight, he scoops me up and places me in the bed, crawling in beside me. Never once breaking our contact. Always keeping a hand or

arm around me. Making sure I know he's still here and probably reassuring himself that I'm real. Pulling me in close and wrapping me in his protective arms. Holding me to his chest. Before I can bury myself in his body, he reaches down and tilts my chin up to look at him. Placing his lips against mine, the soft, warm kiss tingles through my entire body. He lingers on my lips, angling his head to allow the kiss to deepen. He's still soft and tender. Tasting my mouth with his sliding the tip of his tongue along the seam of my lips but not pressing in. Keeping our kiss laced with his obvious sexual desire but more with his desire to soothe the ache in my heart. Coating it with his affection. Delivered through expert soft caresses with his lips against mine.

When he releases me, I can tell he doesn't want to. He wants to devour me and make me feel something other than the fear and pain. To feel pleasure and the ecstasy that is the physical god-like perfection of his body. But he restrains himself. Although I can still feel the steel rod in his boxer briefs pressing against my stomach. He does nothing more beyond the scorching kiss. Running his fingers through my hair and pressing my head down to lay once again in his arms.

It's the first night in days I can sleep. Wrapped up in Nix. Safe in his embrace. Listening to the steady beating of his heart and feeling the rise and fall of his chest. The proof that he's really here, I'm really here. I am safe with Nix.

The next day after many well-deserved hours of sleep, everyone who took part in my rescue has gathered in the C.C.S. offices. I've never been in these offices before. I knew they had them but never had a reason to visit. Not really the best circumstances to be here now, I guess.

I'm feeling a little better after sleeping and being held by Nix. His large hard, yet soft body was a solid reminder of my safety. The withdrawals still come and go. The shakes and sweats are minimal, but I'm getting itchy. That familiar need to get my

next fix and slip back into la-la land, scratching at the back of my mind. I don't know how other people manage recreational use only. Taking them just to enhance their party. Once it's in my system, it becomes a part of me, and letting it slip away is like losing a vital organ I need, and I can't let it go without tremendous pain. Maybe someday, but today fucking sucks.

At the office, I try to hide the twitches and itching with long sleeves and baggy clothes. Rosie and Lily are here. Rosie nearly takes me out with her hug when she sees me. I don't hold back when I embrace her. A female touch is much easier to take at the moment than a male's. Except for Nix and Beau, I recoil from every man that gets near me. She's soft and squishy and smells like frosting and sugar. Probably been indulging in sweets from the bakery. I don't blame her. I stress eat too.

The entire time we're in Griffon's office, Rosie stays by my side, her hand firmly on mine as I sit in one of the seats in front of Griffon's desk. It's the only thing other than Nix's presence keeping me sane. Lily keeping a quiet guard over us from Rosie's other side. All the others are talking and some yelling. Explaining to Faust, Nix's father, and my boss, and Griffon Nix's older brother, everything that happened the night before at Braxton's.

They also informed me that Braxton was absent when they made their way into his penthouse because he was at the hospital for testicular trauma. I told them that's because I kneed him in the balls so hard he choked on them. That's all that I've told them, though. I still didn't tell Nix how I got the cut from Braxton.

Griffon, a man I'd only met once, maybe twice before, briefly, sits in his massive leather desk chair behind an imposing thick metal desk and asks me questions. Who took me? Where did he take me? Were there any other people involved? I tell him everything they already suspected and apparently confirmed when they found me in Braxton's secret safe house.

“There, it's confirmed. Braxton took her on purpose. He also hired Marco to kill us. Can I please go kill him now?” Nix bellows to his brother. A man who is as stoic as a British palace guard. Showing no emotions, no reaction, nothing. He's kind of scary. I think seeing a man who has no emotions is worse than seeing someone like Braxton, who is unhinged with too many emotions.

“Technically, Braxton didn't break any accords,” Griffon states flatly, unmoved by Nix's plight.

“What? Are you fucking serious? Are you deaf, dumb, and blind? She just told you what he did, and you can see what he did to her face. And I left Marco alive. He can confirm Braxton hiring him to take us out.” Nix is pissed at his brother, yelling and pacing, waving his hands wildly, and curling them into fists. I think he wants to hit Griffon but restrains himself.

“Yes, I can see that. It's unfortunate what the girl had to go through, but there is no accord that says he can't abduct and beat a girl. Or a Colton, for that matter. You know as well as I, as long as there's no killing, all is fair game. As for the attempted assassination, we'll have to look into that.” I can't believe he just said all that with a straight face. And ‘the girl’ really? He knows my fucking name, and we all know he knows it.

“Are you out of your goddamn fucking mind?!” Nix, on the other hand, is bursting with rage and bordering on unhinged.

“On the contrary. I'm far more composed and saner than you.” Reaching up, Griffon straightens his navy-blue tie that matches perfectly with the rest of his navy-blue three-piece suit. He may be unfeeling, but he definitely isn't unfashionable. Nix stops pacing and slams his hands down on the desk, gripping the edge as if he might flip it over at any moment. It has to weigh over two hundred pounds, and right now, I believe he could do it.

“I’m sorry if I’m a little unstable right now. That may be because the psycho who hurt our sister, that you and I both beat the shit out of for, just abducted, beat, and did who knows what the fuck else to my girlfriend. So yeah. I’m a little insane right now.”

“Girlfriend? I wasn’t aware you two were dating.” I wasn’t either, but hearing Nix call me his girlfriend sends a whole hoard of hummingbirds through my chest.

“Well, we are.” Nix doesn’t waver or fault in his words. He means it. He may be fuming at his brother, but he turns his eyes to me to make sure it’s okay that he called me his girlfriend, and fuck yeah, it’s okay. It’s more than okay. The thought of being more to Nix than just a hook-up is stirring the electricity in my blood. So is Griffon, though, but for different reasons. He wants to let Braxton get away with what he did to me. He doesn’t want retribution or revenge. He wants to abide by the rules and leave him to do it again and again to other girls. Another girl who won’t have Phoenix Colton on her side hunting for her and killing for her. Standing up for her and never giving up until he finds her.

“Still, she’s not a Colton, and she’s obviously not dead.”

“She’s practically a Colton. We all accept her as family and treat her like a sister.” Rosie, my dear sweet, strong Rosie, speaks up next to me. Lily stepping closer in quiet support. I’ve been sitting in the leather seat, and she remains standing at my side, holding my hand the entire time. Rosie looks down at me, smiling sweetly. Lily, the one who is usually the extra sugar in your tea sweet, is not one granule of sugar at the moment. I’ve never seen her so serious before. Lips pursed into a straight line as she stares daggers at Griffon. Her body so still and calm, no flexing or twitching or nervous twiddling of her fingers. Nope, Lily is the epitome of calm and collected. The only evidence of any emotion the ice she’s shooting from her eyes like lasers into Griffon’s black heart.

“Be that as it may, Rose, it’s not enough to warrant killing him. If we take out Braxton, we’ll have the whole fucking Shaw family after us. Then people really will die. Is that what you want, Rose? Do you want your sister to die because Nix’s little girlfriend got a little beat up?” Griffon may not be an emotional man, but he is practically yelling now but in a flat stern tone. Silencing Rosie, who never gets silenced by any man. I feel like I’m in the twilight zone, and I have to speak up for her, for myself. She wanted to protect me, and I want to tell Griffon exactly what he did because Braxton Shaw didn’t just ‘beat me up.’

“He did more than beat me up.” I turn my glare on Griffon now. He may talk like I’m not here and not give a rat’s ass about me, but he will know the extent of Braxton’s behaviors he’s just nonchalantly brushing off.

“What?” Nix asks, turning to face me, releasing his death grip on Griffon’s desk. I ignore him. If I look at him, I won’t be able to say what needs to be said.

“He didn’t just beat me up and knock me around. He humiliated me, belittled me, and chained me to the wall like an animal. Calling me his pet. He cut me so I would have a permanent reminder of him. Of how he cuffed me, pumped me full of drugs that amplified everything. Then fucked me in the ass without my permission coating me in his disgusting cum. So I’ll always remember the smell and feel of him on my skin. Reminding me how weak and frail I am.” I leave out the part where my body turned against me and gave in to the feeling of pleasure. No one needs to know that. No one. As I speak, I stand, losing grip on Rosie’s hand, and walk closer to his desk, my spine straightening with every step I take. Forgetting the others in the room watching and listening. Laying my utter humiliation and defeat on his desk for him to see. As he watches me speak and the beginnings of tears welling in my eyes, he does nothing. His face does not contort in discomfort or empathy. He does not look away or lower his gaze from mine. No, he watches me and listens. Carefully.

“He told me that once he was done playing with me and had broken me, he was going

to kill me. Cut me down to size and leave my pieces on Nix's doorstep.—Does that sound like just giving me a good beating?"

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

Griffon's hands lay on his desk, crossed over one another, and he does not flinch. He does not answer. He just keeps staring at me. Almost bored and waiting for me to finish so he can go back to work.

“That may not be covered under your accords, but some people would agree that that fucker deserves death. And if you have any heart, you would do more than sit there and worry about your precious fucking accords.” The tears have taken over and roll freely down my face. I don't know when they started, but now, I can't stop them. All the pent-up frustration and guilt, and shame pours out of my eyes.

When he continues to say nothing and no one else can say anything, I make my escape fleeing the office before I can see the disgust and abhorrence in any of their faces on his face. I don't want to know how disgusted he is knowing I've been tainted by Braxton. I doubt Nix will ever want to touch me again after this.

Chapter 17

Phoenix

When I caught up with Clover, she wouldn't even look at me. Every time I tried to touch her, she pulled away, and, in the end, Rosie drove her home. I tailgated them the entire way. She went straight to her room and locked the door. No matter how much I wanted to break it down, I didn't. I couldn't scare her like that. If she wanted to be alone, I couldn't blame her. She dropped quite a bomb in my brother's office. When she wouldn't let me comfort her, I took my anger out on the punching bag in my home gym. Almost knocking it off its chain.

I spend the entire night in the gym hitting that bag. Hitting it over and over and over until my knuckles bleed through the tape wrapped around them.

Arrow came home with us as well. He's been keeping an eye on me, so I don't sneak out in the middle of the night and kill Braxton. Zander and Magnus went back to their own homes and lives. I owe them a huge debt. Anything they ever ask of me ever again, I'll give them. Because they helped bring Clover back to me. Even if we were too late and Braxton was able to ... even if he ... Aaaaahhhhhh. I can't even fucking think it without burning with murderous rage.

Arrow took up sentry on a yoga mat near the door of the gym. Every time I thought he'd drifted off to sleep and I'd have a chance to sneak out, he stopped me like a goddamn ninja that can see through his eyelids. Making it impossible for me to run off and be a vigilante.

Morning came and went, and Clover stayed in her room. Beau checked on her a few times. Rosie came by, and she let her in. It was the only way to make sure she was ok since she wouldn't let me in. Every time one of them entered or left, I was there at her door. Just to see a glimpse of her to make sure she was okay. They assured me she's fine, just working through everything. Admitting she's ashamed of what happened to her. Ashamed to face me because of it.

The only person ashamed should be Braxton for what he did to her. Rosie told me it didn't seem like Clover cared that Braxton had sexually molested her. She is too strong for that. What hurt was everyone knowing what he had done and that she wasn't able to stop it. She feels like I'll see her as dirty.

My heart almost stops when Rosie tells me this. Nothing Clover could do would ever make me think of her like that. She needs to know that. I need to tell her. But I can't because she won't let me in. Won't let me near her, not yet anyway. I need to cool off and get some advice. Where do I go for that? Magnus.

When I find him, he's at home. He had built a large spacious modern home a few years ago on a healthy chunk of land outside of town. It takes me at least thirty minutes to drive there. I don't mind. It allows me time to think alone without worrying about Clover. Beau and Rosie both promised to stay at the house with her. I was tentative to leave her under their watch again after what happened last time. Beau guaranteed me he wasn't going anywhere. Wouldn't even leave to get the mail. Reluctantly I believed him. It could have been the brutal determination in his eyes or the extreme guilt resting on his shoulders, or even the deep sisterly love for Clover pounding in his pulse.

Pulling into Magnus's driveway, I step out of my truck and make my way up the walk to the front door. It's unlocked, and I make my way through the minimally furnished rooms and past the state-of-the-art kitchen to find him sitting on a white ball cushion thing on his back porch. Barefoot and shirtless. Wearing only loose grey lounge pants, his legs crossed and hands resting limply on his knees. I knew Magnus liked to meditate, but I've never actually seen him doing it, so I'm a little taken aback by the sight.

A cool autumn breeze ruffles his shoulder-length hair, which he has left untied. He doesn't move as I make my way to his side. The view from his place is incredible. He managed to snag a sweet five-acre plot complete with a small man-made pond that backs up to a nature preserve. A crystal clear above-ground glass edge pool butts up to the deck. Magnus likes his peace, quiet, and privacy. He definitely gets it out here. The summer sun is turning into autumn, and the humidity has gone with it, leaving a perfect evening. Warm and breezy.

Other than the floor, the closest seat to Magnus is another one of the oversized marshmallow-looking things. Shrugging, I remove my shoes and sit like he is. Not as uncomfortable as I expected. Cradles the boys, doesn't cause me to try and scrunch my legs together to get comfortable. These are obviously meant for us big guys, and I appreciate that.

For a long few minutes, we just sit there in silence. Watching the trees sway in the breeze and the birds' flutter around a few birdhouses, Magnus hung in them. He's weirdly conflicting like that. Quiet, logical, hanging birdhouses and getting pissed at anyone that touches them. Yet also a raging mass of muscle and violence, unflinching while dismembering a man. He's always perplexed me. Maybe that's why I come to him. He seems to have a handle on himself.

"Is Clover doing well?" He finally says, breaking the quiet.

"As far as I know. She's still got some things to work through, I guess."

"Girls got balls standing up to your brother like she did."

My lips quirk up in a smirk. Yeah, my girls pretty fucking fearless sometimes. Most people look at Griff and submit under his scrutiny. Not Clover, not my girl. She fucking thrives in it and slings that shit right back at him.

"Yeah. She hasn't exactly spoken to me since then. She feels ashamed, and I don't know what to do."

Again, he's quiet, contemplating. Then he turns to face me, tilting his head to one side ever so slightly.

"Do you know why I meditate?" Not really sure what that has to do with anything, but I'll go with it. Usually, he has a point at the end.

"No. Not really. Something about calming?"

"Sort of. It quiets the mind, body, and soul. It allows for you to clear your head of nonsense and chatter. Focus on what truly matters. Centering yourself to get a balance in life."

“Okay.” Still not making any sense to me. Maybe he means I’m too loud?

“Here. Close your eyes.” He instructs me. Raising an eyebrow at him, I give him a skeptical glare. “Just do it. I promise it’ll help.” Huffing an exasperated breath, I do as he says. Closing my eyes and letting my hands rest on my knees like I saw him doing.

“Now, I want you to take deep breathes in through your nose and exhale out your mouth.” Again, I do as he instructs. “Calm your breathing, slow your heart rate. Now, this is the hard part. Clear your mind. Stop thinking about Braxton, the Council, the Syndicate, Griffon everything. Empty your mind of anger and anxiety. It’s those things that are feeding your stress and fear. You have to let it go. Don’t let it control you. You are in control.” He pauses for a moment allowing me to relax and breathe.

I try my best to ignore the itching desire to maim and destroy. Releasing the anger that burns inside and the anxiety that has been eating away at my sanity for days now. Allowing my mind to go blank, empty, quiet. Listening to the chirping birds and his calm deep voice.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

“Now, in your empty space, think of Clover. Not of what she’s gone through or how she was hurt. Just her. Her smile, her laugh. The feel of her hair through your fingers. Let it calm you. Knowing she is safe, healthy, and loved. Do not let the anxiety and anger interfere with her.”

Thinking of Clover is easy enough. Trying not to think of her naked and sweaty moaning my name is a little more difficult. But I manage to stop myself before that fantasy takes over. Popping a boner in the middle of a meditation lesson led by Magnus in his home isn’t appropriate. So, I focus just on Clover. Her bright, vibrant blue eyes, that thick auburn red hair twisting around my fingers as it blows in the breeze, I can feel it licking across my skin. The sing-song tone of her giggle as my fingers brush the sensitive skin on her neck. Peace and calm possess my body, and I feel the weight lifting. The boulder of despair cracking and rolling off my chest. This meditation shit actually works.

I can faintly recognize Magnus’s voice still coaching me through, but it’s like a quiet soundtrack running in the background. You know it’s there but don’t really know what it sounds like. When I feel his hand on my shoulder, I open my eyes to see the sun has moved farther down the horizon. How long was I like that?

“How do you feel?” Magnus asks, now standing at my side, having vacated his marshmallow seat.

“Good. Great, actually.”

“See. Told you to trust me.”

“So you did. How long was I like that?”

“About an hour.”

“Holy shit. An hour? It felt like five minutes.”

“Yeah.” He chuckles. “Happens to me too sometimes. There are just those times when your body and mind need the reprieve.” He turns and makes his way into the house heading for the large kitchen.

Standing, I stretch out my limbs which are the only indicators that I have been sitting there for an hour. My left foot fell asleep, and my knees are a little stiff from the slightly bent position.

“Here.” Magnus hands me a cold-water bottle which I open and promptly chug. I didn’t know I was this thirsty till I started drinking.

“Did it help answer your questions?”

“What?”

“The meditating. I assume you came here with questions and wanted guidance. Did it help?”

This man has got to be some sort of mind reader. He knows me way too well. Then I think about it. I came here because I was stressed and concerned about Clover. While meditating, the stress and anxiety disappeared, and a sort of clarity came over me. Clover will be fine and eventually will let me in. I just have to be patient and not push her. Give her the space she needs and be there for her when she’s ready.

“Yeah, actually. It did.”

“Good.”

Chapter 18

Phoenix

I’m going out of my fucking mind. I know meditating with Magnus cleared my mind and shit, but being back at home with Clover so near knowing she’s under my roof and safe, and I can’t be near her, can’t touch her, kiss her. Tell her she’s everything to me no matter what. It’s literally driving me crazy. I tried meditating again on my own, but it’s just not the same as it was at Magnus’s house. He must live on magical land or something.

Deciding that maybe a long hot shower would help, instead, I let the hot water wash away the stress and tension along with the tightness in my muscles caused by an entire second night of a one-sided battle with the punching bag, and no sleep, again. It does its job, invigorating me and soothing the aches and pains. Clover remained in her room again for the whole day yesterday, and I don’t know how much longer I can be patient.

When I step out of my bathroom wearing nothing but my boxer briefs, I find Clover there. Sitting on my floor swaying rhythmically to a song I cannot hear. She’s completely naked except for underwear and a bra. The rest of her clothes strewn around her on the floor.

What the hell is she doing? If this is some sort of seduction, it’s one I’ve never seen before.

“Clover?” I call her name as I approach her cautiously so as not to startle her. Her big round eyes catch on me, and her smile is broad and beautiful. To see her smile again nearly puts me on my ass.

“Oh, hey, Nix. There you are. I’ve been waitingforeverfor you to come out.” She sounds drunk with a little giggle in her speech. Like a child, she crawls to her feet and prances over to me. Wrapping her arms around my waist and grinning up at me, all smiles and giggles through her white-toothed grin.

“What are you doing, sweet cheeks?”

“Oh, I was just making all the bad thoughts go away.” She’s still smiling. It’s getting creepy.

“How?”

“The same way you do silly.” She coos. Her hands are all over me, running across my pecs and abs, wrapping around my hips and biceps. It’s like no matter how much she tries, she can’t touch me enough. And it’s doing things to me. To my dick. Which has been missing her soft skin and dirty mouth. I didn’t think she would want anything physical after everything she’s been through. Apparently, I’m wrong because she’s pressing against me seductively and fuck does she feel good.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

“And how is that?” I barely remember to speak when she presses herself against my quickly hardening cock. My hands are working over her body now too. How could I not? Feeling the smooth skin of her back and cupping her glorious ass. I have missed this ass. I’ve missed the woman it’s attached to even more. She brings balance to my crazy with her own. Without her, I was off-kilter.

“With drugs and sex, of course.” She pauses, her eyes flicking around my head, then looks back at me. “And butterflies. Can’t you see the butterflies, Nix? They’re so sparkly.”

My hands still around her body as I stare down at her. There’s no way she’s done any drugs. She was so proud of being sober and fighting the urges. Butsparkling butterflies?

“What drugs, Clover?” I ask gently so as not to scare her. She looks back up at me, and I can see her pupils are blown out saucers. She has taken something. But painkillers don’t make people act like this. So, what was it?

“The fun pink and blue ones. Harley Braxton gave it to me when he had me. Although he cooked it and injected it. Since I would have bitten off his finger if he tried to feed me pills.” She giggles, looking at her fingers while she does, acting like she’s telling me about any other day. Not a man drugging her before raping her.

What the fuck was Harley again? Some sort of special combo the Shaw’s made. Based from rock cocaine and ecstasy, I think. How did she even get it?

“Don’t worry, Mister Worrywart, I only took one. I can’t OD on only one.” She

assures me as if it's no big deal she broke her sobriety. She's an addict. She shouldn't have any drugs. She'll just slip back into bad habits. Eventually, ending up right back where she was. I can't have that. Popping a few pills here and there and snorting some blow on occasion doesn't bother me in the least. Being an addict and unable to function without getting higher than the space needle, not ok.

"Where did you get the Harley, Clover?"

"In your sock drawer. You should really find a better place to hide your stash. Way too obvious." Another adorable giggle snort. She shouldn't be so cute to me right now, but I've never seen her this free, this unrestrained with her emotions. She always keeps them hidden inside. It took weeks to get her to admit she liked me. If she could learn to use the pills recreationally, maybe she could learn to enjoy them rather than rely on them.

I didn't even know I had any Harley in my stash. I must have kept a bag from the delivery. It's a new pill that we're distributing, and I need to know what we're selling, for professional reasons, of course. How am I supposed to distribute something that I don't even know what the fuck it is? I always test or try out new things. At least the recreational shit. I don't touch heroin or anything like that. Way too many side effects with that nasty garbage. I like my teeth right where they are, thank you very much.

"How do you feel, sweet cheeks?" I ask softly. She doesn't seem to be tweaking or having a bad reaction. As long as I can keep her from taking anymore, she should be fine.

"I feel tingly. I feel everything." She groans as she rubs her hands from my chest all the way down to my cock and back up to my abs. The tree trunk in my shorts pulses in response to her touch seeking more. Her hands on me are fire lighting a very short fuse.

My growl resonates in my chest when I grip her ass and press myself into her.

“Uuhhh.” Her airy moan only stirs my blood to pump faster south. Filling my shaft till it’s throbbing. Her head lulls back at the pressure, and her eyes flutter shut, then open again to practically eye fuck me.

“Clover. Baby. You gotta stop. You know I can’t say no to you.”

“I don’t want you to say no to me. I want you to fly with me.” From her round ample breasts, she produces a pink and blue pill. Holding it out for me. She wants me to take the Harley and fly high with her.

Temptation in the form of a mostly naked Clover holding pills out for me is the exact thing I always enjoyed. Women, drugs, and sex. Clover is different, though. She isn’t a bar bunny or a party girl, and that’s what I like about her. But this Clover is so fucking tempting. I want to take the pill, jump off the ledge and fly with her. I know taking it will feel fucking fantastic, and I’ll be able to go on tomorrow and not give it another thought.

I’ve been around drugs and taking drugs for years. Building up my tolerance and learning control over my use. To me, it’s just another day. To Clover, it’s so much more.

Should I take it, or shouldn’t I? What’s the harm at this point? She’s already high. We’re safe in my home, and I was meaning to test the Harley anyways. Why not test it with her and reap the benefits? I’d never debated so much over taking pills before. In the end, I decide, what the hell? I wrap my lips around her fingers and swallow the pill dry.

Clover giggles and wraps her arms around my neck. Standing on her tippy toes, she reaches up and presses her lips to mine. Needy hungry for my touch. Claiming my

mouth as hers, with her lips, her tongue, her teeth. We're a frenzy of sucking and biting. Clover is climbing me and wrapping her legs around my waist. Grinding her pussy against my cock and driving me out of my fucking mind.

This ginger vixen is my undoing and my salvation. The reason my heart is now an active participant in my life, whereas before, it was just another muscle keeping my body from dying. When I didn't realize I was already dead. My heart and head never knew so many emotions and feelings even existed. Until her, until Clover. From that very first night and the very first words that came out of that smart mouth, I knew I had never felt before.

I can tell the moment the Harley kicks in. Every brush of her skin is electricity across my body. Sending shock waves through every nerve ending. Her nipples are hard as diamonds running across my skin. And it sends shivers straight to my balls. Which are tightening, and my cock is thick and heavy in my boxer briefs. The cotton is suddenly scratchy against my sensitive skin, and I want to get out of them. Rub skin to skin with her.

Clover continues to ravage my mouth with her tongue, seeking more and more. Demanding reciprocation. She pulls back to breathe, and I see her through the eyes of the Harley. Everything is in technicolor when before I only saw it in black and white. Her hair is like fire, red hot and streaming around her bare shoulders. Blue eyes like spotlights shining on mine. Desire and need glistening in them. In this room, she is the Phoenix, not me, rising from the ashes in a burning flame. Returning to life even after being stomped on and put out, nothing can keep her down. It's her flame that brings me to life.

"You feel like fucking heaven." She moans while rocking her hips against my overly sensitive cock. Sending shock waves of pure fucking bliss across my flesh and deep into my muscles. My cock throbs and pulses against her, and I need to remove the barrier and slide inside her velvet channel before I come in my pants. Her heat calls

to me, begging me to be part of her. To connect us in the way we both need.

“Fuck I want to feel your sweet pussy around my cock. I want to feel every inch of your skin.”

“Mmm-hmm.” She nods and then unlatches her legs from my torso, sliding down to the ground. A chill runs up my spine and the absence of her heat. My Clover, my girl, is staring at me with so much heat I think she might be able to melt my underwear off with her gaze.

For a moment, I stand and watch her. Feeling my blood boil and my body flush. Sensitive to every brush of fabric and fingers. I need to feel her again, but she’s backing away from me. Beckoning me with her swaying hips and come-hither look.

“Where are you going, little chipmunk?” Biting her bottom lip, she reaches around her back and unclasps her bra, letting it drop to the floor. Releasing those glorious globes, they bounce softly when released from their lace prison, and I groan. I can all but taste her perky hard pink nipples.

“It’s really hot in here. I think we should open a window.” Then she’s at the door leading to my balcony and opening it. I should probably care if there’re people outside who might see her, but I don’t really give a fuck right now. Besides, my nearest neighbor is like a whole football field away. I own a big chunk of property. So, when she steps out onto the balcony sliding her panties down her thighs, I follow suit, removing my annoying undergarments and leaving them on the floor. My thick cock springing free and stands at full attention. Tapping against my stomach in the mother of all hardons. I have to cup my balls just to relieve the pressure building in them.

Meeting her outside, she’s right. It was hot. It’s much nicer out here. The cool night breeze brushes against my skin, sending goosebumps over every exposed inch of me,

and it's as satisfying as if Clover had told me she is mine forever. I feel it everywhere and in every pore. I could get off standing here in the breeze. I can feel my cock getting impossibly harder, if that's even possible, and a pressing need to fuck, to slide inside her tight pussy and make her scream my name overtakes me.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

Backing her against the railing, I take possession of her mouth again and shamelessly rub my cock against her stomach until she grabs it with her small hands and pumps up and down my length a few times.

“Fuck, Clover. You feel so damn good. I missed you so much. Don’t ever fucking leave me again.”

“I won’t.” Again, her lips are back on mine, and I can’t stop touching her or stop thrusting into her hands.

“I need to feel your pussy, Clover. I need to feel you tight around me, squeezing me. To make you mine,now.” I growl into her mouth and grip her hair.

“Yes. I want to feel you stretch inside me. I want you to fill my pussy and come inside me.”

“Turn around,” I tell her while guiding her to grab onto the railing of the balcony. She does as I instruct. She’s always mouthy and bossy outside the bedroom, but as soon as I have her naked and wet, she does exactly as I command. I know it’s not because she’s trying to please me, but because she knows I want to please her. And she fucking loves it. Because I know how to please my woman. Know every stroke and thrust that will send her crashing into her climax.

“Like this?” She asks and bends over, presenting her ass to me. The bandage still on her right cheek. A hot surge of rage bursts through me. I want to kill and fuck all at once. Wanting to claim her as mine. Fuck her, make love to her, fill her with me, so she forgets him and what he did. I know he didn’t touch her pussy, and that is the

only thing keeping me from jumping off the balcony and running naked to his penthouse this moment to beat him to death with my rock-hard cock. That sounds bad, but I mean it in a completely non-sexual way. I'm just that fucking hard for this woman that my steel shaft could easily be used as a blunt force object.

"Just like that sweet cheeks." I'm careful not to grip her cut and bandage as I rub my cock along her slick wet folds. She's dripping wet for me and feels like Aphrodite herself sucking me into heaven. Sliding up and down my length, the crown of my cock spreading her pussy, coating me in her arousal.

Sparks of pleasure fill my vision. I can see the pleasure my cock is feeling. Fuckingseeit in gold glitter and small sparks like tiny fireworks swirling around us. Then there are the butterflies. Pink and blue with gold stardust fluttering off their wings as they flutter about, circling Clover and me.

"Sparkling butterflies," I say out loud, or at least I think I do. Right now, I don't really know what the fuck I'm doing. Except when I feel Clover shift back against me, rubbing her throbbing pussy up and down my cock. Then I ignore the fucking butterflies and turn my attention back to my girl in front of me in my hands and on my cock. And so deep inside my heart, she practically part of my physiology.

"Fuck baby. You're perfect. I want to feel all of you. Do you want me to slide my cock inside you?" I may be high as a fucking kite and can feel the wind making love to my ass cheeks, but I remember her dirty mouth and how she likes it.

"Yes, Nix. God, you're going to make me come just rubbing your cock on my clit." Her breaths are quick, and she moans with every thrust of my hips. Sliding my cock through her again. This time I make sure to rub the tip over her clit, and she screams. Pretty sure our neighbors heard her even half an acre away. I don't care. I need to make her do it again.

“Aaahhh, fuck yes, right there. I’m going to come. Nix, do it again.” Her screams and moans have my cock hurting to be inside her, but I want to make her come on me first. Then I’ll use her juices to slide deep inside her tight heat. Rubbing her clit with my cock, I press up and stay there, pumping the crown on her sensitive nub until she’s screaming my name. I can feel her cum coating every inch of my throbbing erection.

“Holy fuck, baby, you’re gonna make me come just rubbing against you.” Without another word, I pull back and can’t stop myself from slamming balls deep inside her. Forcing another scream of pleasure from Clover as she grips the railing and thrusts backward onto my cock. Wanting me inside her as much as I do.

I let out a thunderous growl as I pull out and slam back into her. Her slick pussy is hot, velvety, and still pulsing from her first orgasm as I pump in and out of her. Fuck me. I’ve fucked while high before, but not like this. Harley is taking this to a whole new level of pleasure. My balls are so damn tight they feel like billiard balls hanging between my legs. Slapping Clovers pussy and clit with each and every pound. I can’t slow. I can’t stop. It feels like nothing I’ve ever experienced before, and not just because I’m high, but because it’s with Clover.

“Yes, Nix. Harder, harder.” She screams at me while reaching back and grabbing my wrist that’s firmly latched onto her hip. I can feel my climax building. My cock impossibly hard inside Clover’s pussy. Every ridge of my cock can feel every flex of her channel. Every slick inch of skin against mine. I should probably be concerned that there’s no condom but fuck if I can think responsibly at the moment. Nothing and no one could stop us at this point. We’re so far gone in each other we’re on another fucking planet.

“Fuck I’m gonna come soon, baby. I need you to come again on my cock.”

“Yes. Fuck I’m so close.” She is. Her channel is starting to tighten around my shaft,

and I can feel her about to break the cusp on her second orgasm. Just as she reaches between her legs, cups my balls, and squeezes, my orgasm rips through me.

“Fuuuucckk. Clover, goddamn it—I’m coming.”

“Me too.” She moans as her pussy clamps down on my cock, pulses with her release, and we come together so goddamn hard I see stars.

My cock is still spurting inside her, and I’m still pumping my hips into her, coaxing every last fucking drop out. It feels like I’m coming forever, draining myself inside her, and she’s taking it, wanting more. Her legs are shaking with the aftershocks of her climax, my head is spinning, and I can’t see straight.

My cock is still buried inside her, and I don’t want to pull out, but I need to sit down before I fall off the balcony. Sliding out of her warm heat, I take two steps back, pulling her with me. I collapse on the deck chair and pull Clover onto my lap. Burying my face in her neck and inhaling the scent of her arousal.

We’re both silent and spent gasping for air until our heart rates both synchronize. Not slowing to normal since the Harley won’t let them. I’m still alert, hyper-focused, and super hypersensitive. Even the soft brush of Clover’s leg against my softening cock stirs it back to life.

In the quiet moment of the fall night, I hold Clover close to me. Trying to ignore the hardening and impatient steel rod between my thighs, so I can feel her. The silky softness of her hair, the soft velvet of her skin, and the warm heat of her breath on my neck. Fuck I love this woman, and I need to tell her. It’s on the tip of my tongue, but I choke it back. Not now, not while we’re both high and riding the Harley train, later after we come down so she won’t run away from me.

Within minutes Clover is once more running her hands all over me, searching and

memorizing. Running her fingers along my tattoos and then licking them. Turning in my lap, she positions herself, straddling my hips, her wet center pressed against my cock, which is once again almost completely hard. This Harley shit is amping up everything. Before I know it, Clover is fisting my dick and positioning it at her entrance again. This time, she slides down, forcing me inside her. It only takes a few minutes of her riding me like a wild stallion for us both to come again. My hips pistoning into her, giving her what she wants.

After that, I carry her inside, and it doesn't stop there. We do it again at least two more times on my floor and my bed. Finally wearing ourselves out enough to pass out wrapped around one another in my bed. Smelling of sweat and sex.

Chapter 19

Clover

Athe rock-hard and very heavy body is wrapped around mine. Thick muscle-bound arms lay snug around my waist, and I can feel warm breath tickling the back of my neck. Nix sleeps soundly behind me, his body limp and worn from our night of marathon fucking. Because that's what it was. It was great, amazing, revitalizing, freeing even. Until I remember what started it all, and shame washes over me.

I relapsed.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

I found Nix's stash and took the Harley. I only knew it was Harley because it was written on the plastic baggy. I knew it was the same stuff Braxton gave me, and I wanted to feel good. I wanted to replace what Braxton made me feel with real pleasure and desire. Not forced false arousal. Replacing the disgust with happiness.

As soon as it hit my system, that's exactly what I felt. Unencumbered, unable to feel the negative emotions and replaced them with bliss and pleasure. Nix took the Harley too. He didn't have to, but he did. Riding the crazy train right along with me. I wonder if he can teach me to enjoy recreational drugs without getting addicted? Or if I'll always be an addict. Jonesing for my next fix relentlessly seeking it out.

My mind is whirling with questions, and honestly, I'm freaking the fuck out a little.

"I can hear you thinking," Nix mumbles into my hair.

"What? I'm not thinking. I'm just laying here sleeping. You must be dreaming."

"Ha, ha, ha." His low chuckle is gravelly and filled with sleep. His arms flex and tighten around me, holding me in place. His nose nuzzling the back of my neck and sending a warm shiver down my spine. For a long moment, we're silent in the quiet of his room. Unsure of what to say and what to do. After the last couple of days, everything inside me is twisted and knotted into a ball so tight I'm sure every muscle in my body is constantly tense.

"You okay?" Nix's voice is low and soft, his lips against my neck a gentle reminder of his concern.

“I don’t really know,” I answer honestly. A delayed tightening of his arm around my waist tells me he doesn’t know what to say either. We lay there silent, both of us unsure where to go from here. Me wanting to hide in my closet from shame and embarrassment, him from the lack of experience dealing with a girlfriend. Girlfriend. I’m Nix’s girlfriend, and right now, all I want to do is run away from him.

The thick band of muscle around my body, however, isn’t letting me move one inch. Behind me, Nix’s bulky body shifts, and the warmth and protection it afforded me leaves a cool chill in its absence.

“Clover.” His hand gently tries to nudge me to roll over and face him. I don’t. “Clover, please look at me.”

The last thing I want to do is look at him, and I shake my head as I burrow closer to my pillow.

“Why not?”

“I just, can’t. Not after everything.” My admission is barely a whisper. The words choking in my throat. “How am I supposed to look you in the eye after what I’ve done? After what Braxton did to me? How can you even stand to look at me without cringing?”

“What the hell Clover? I could never look at you like that.” A sliver of irritation laces his words. This time when he reaches out for me, he doesn’t let me pull away, gently forcing me to roll over and look up at him. Cupping my face and rubbing soft circles on my cheek with his thumb. “Why would you say that?”

“Because it’s true. I’m a fucking disaster. Tainted, addicted to pills. Why would anyone want me?” A fat tear rolls down my face and is caught by his thumb, brushing

it away before it drips from my temple. My heart is cracking on the inside with the pressure of his stare. Nix isn't a relationship guy. He doesn't do commitment and real-life responsibilities. His love life is easy, girls. One time and gone, girls. Not hot mess girls that allow themselves to be taken advantage of. Not addicts that relapse and complicate his life. He may have called me his girlfriend, fought to rescue me, but he won't stick around, not after finding out that beneath the bright smile and confidence is a broken and beaten pathetic little girl.

There's no way after what he's seen and knows that he really wants more with me. Right now, he's probably figuring out a way to tell me to get the fuck out and don't let the door hit me on my defiled ass on the way out.

The tremors are back. Rattling my body to my bones. Coming down from the high, sprinting through every emotion known to man, making my body vibrate as more tears spill from my eyes. Nix is blurry now, the film of salty water coating the world in the evidence of my agony. There's a shift and dip of the mattress as he moves, then I can feel him lifting me, pulling me into this lap. I'd try to pull away if I could, but my muscles are raw and weak. There's no way I could even sit up right now if he weren't holding me. He's muttering something while stroking my hair. Comforting me with his giant body and even bigger heart.

For the second time in our short relationship, I break down in his arms. Unwanted sobs wrack my body, but not for nearly as long as they did when I broke down after the pool incident. This time I'm able to pull my shit together and suck it up. His grip doesn't loosen on me, keeping my naked body cuddled close to his naked body. Since we never got dressed after last night.

"No one's perfect, Clover. I'm certainly not. I slept with every girl that caught my eye and then discarded her before learning her last name. Sometimes her first. My family sells drugs and guns. I've hurt people, killed people. There are scars on my body and soul that will always be there. Taking a few pills to dull the pain and make

you feel better doesn't make you a bad person. For fucks sake, I do it all the time. If you want to snort blow or party with molly, I'll be right there next to you along for the ride." He thankfully leaves out Braxton and my stint as his sex pet. Leaning down, he presses his cheek against the top of my head, nuzzling my hair and taking in a deep inhale before he continues with the words that cut straight to my heart. "It doesn't make me love you any less. Because I do. I can't fucking stop myself. You make me feel things I never thought I could. Never thought I would ever deserve from anyone. I'm the biggest asshole on the planet, and you decided I was worth more. I was worthy of you. I'm not afraid of anything, but when he took you, I was scared out of my goddamn mind. That I wouldn't find you in time, that I'd never see you again. That I wouldn't ever be able to tell the only woman I've ever loved that she slapped the stupid out of me enough for me to see that I wasn't living. I was just existing. You sparked me to life, Clover. Without you, I'd still be a walking sex corpse."

I can't help the chuckle in my chest. I don't think anyone has ever referred to themselves as a sex corpse. I just picture Nix in zombie makeup, seducing a zombie girl. Maybe she's even me. Were we both zombies in our own right, just existing? Not living? I know I didn't feel like I was living before I came to North Carolina. Before I saw him lying in this very bed that first night we met. Scowling and cocky as only a man as hot as him can be.

There are no words I can say that can match his declaration. A declaration that I'm not sure he truly understands. I know he just told me he loves me, but I can't say the words. I can't allow myself to believe he does love me. Nix doesn't know what it is to love. Everything that comes along with that baggage. The long nights, the arguments and disagreements, the tears and sadness. All that he'll have to give up being with me. All that he'll have to deal with if he really does love me.

I don't realize it, but I'm shaking my head in disagreement, trying to push away from him.

“Oh no, you don’t.” He shifts my legs, and I find myself straddling a naked Nix. My most intimate parts exposed to him. Not that he hasn’t seen them, felt them, tasted them. Now though, being this bare in front of him causes a blush to creep up my body. Nix doesn’t notice or care. Pulling me flush against his groin and bare chest. Pressing our sex together. My breasts squished between us. I fit against him like he’s my other half. Like I was broken and missing a chunk of myself, and he’s that chunk. It’s all too much.

“You may not be able to tell me you love me right now, but I know you do. And one day, I’ll make you admit it to me.” Sliding one strong hand behind my neck, I feel his lips brush mine before I see him make the move. Soft, plump lips caress mine coaxing me to respond and press into him. His mouth moves over mine, seducing me, compelling me to submit and give in. There’s nothing I can do but submit to his kiss. Deep and longing, filled with new and uninhibited passion. Similar to how he kissed me that very first time in the den. Overflowing with emotions that he didn’t know what to do with or how to control.

He knows what to do with them now. The kiss is not timid or hesitant. Nix demands my love for him in the form of this kiss. Slipping his tongue through my lips and tangling with my own. Wrapping an arm around my waist and securely fixing his hand over my bare ass. Pressing me down into the growing erection directly below me. His insatiable appetite for me fills one of the many holes in my heart put there by Braxton.

Before we get too lost in the rapidly accelerating make-out session, I break the kiss and pull back enough to suck in a breath. Resting my forehead against his. I don’t pull away or try to escape his embrace. No matter how much I want to run away and hide, I also never want to leave. To stay forever in this bubble we’ve created. Then I ruin it with my big mouth.

“I don’t know how to love. I’ve been broken for so long. Pills are the only way I

know how to feel. The only way to replace the anxiety and fear with something else.” I’ve never admitted to anyone, not even my sponsor, how empty I feel inside until I take the pills. At first, I used them to remove my emotions to numb everything, so I didn’t have to feel. Later I didn’t know any other feeling except the emptiness. After everyone was gone, the sadness gone, the fear gone. I was left empty, hollow. Then, taking the pills was the only way to feel. Now, I can feel Nix filling the void, and it scares me. To be so dependent on another to feel whole. Only to lose them and create a bigger crater where they once lived in your heart.

“Honestly, I don’t really know how to love either.” His self-deprecating chuckle eases my tension. “But I’m willing to learn for you. And I think I have something that can help with the whole anxiety thing.”

His eyes twinkle with mischief and humor. I glance down at his hard cock, eagerly pressing into me between us. He laughs again, this time lighter, easier.

“Not that. But I’m more than happy to accommodate you if that’s what you need.” When I bring my eyes to meet his, they’re soft and his smile so easy and warm. Lifting the weight crushing my heart and allowing me to breathe once again.

“Come on. I’ll show you.”

Nix and I put on clothes enough to be considered ‘dressed,’ him in lounge pants and me in one of his oversized shirts. Then he takes me to the balcony that we christened last night and teaches me how to smoke weed in a pipe and a joint. Telling me, it’ll help with the jitters and anxiety. It’ll calm me down when I’m itching for a fix but won’t cause me to go completely numb. Then he gives me the pipe and weed, placing them back in the small wooden box it came from.

What’s different with Nix helping me over a sponsor or NA is that he doesn’t tell me to stop using drugs. Letting me know that if I ever want to get high, I can. He’ll even get high with me. Ride the wave and fall off the edge by my side. As long as we do it together. Not living in fear of it and allowing others to tell me I shouldn’t. Life is meant to be enjoyed and experienced. Not tip-toed through without ever feeling or cracking a few eggs along the way. However, I’m not allowed downers or painkillers unless I’m in actual pain. Like missing a limb pain.

Only the good shit for recreation and enjoyment. Or so he says.

We spend the rest of the day in each other’s arms. No sex or fucking. Just being. Filling the silence with soft whispers and even softer kisses. Cocooned in a moment of reprieve from the world outside. Watching the trees sway in the fall breeze and the sunset over their tops from his balcony. Curled up in a large lounge chair, a fuzzy flannel blanket draped over us, where I fall asleep. Wrapped up in him, in us. In the possible future, we have together. Now that we’ve found each other.

Clover

Beau, Rosie, and Lily have taken it upon themselves to watch over me every second of the day now whenever they aren't working. It's kind of cute and sweet to know they care about me enough to be here. To keep me sane and try to help me get back to normal. Even though I'm still scared shitless to step outside the house any farther than the back patio. And don't even ask me to go in the garage. I still can't go in there without breaking into a cold sweat.

It's getting better, though. It's been a few days since the whole getting high and fucking Nix six ways from Sunday and then having an epic meltdown once I came down. But the day after we spent together, forgetting about anyone and anything except for us, was perfect. Realigning myself and setting my mind straight to allow me to move forward. Granted slowly but still forward. Sometimes I still feel contaminated by Braxton, but Nix never allows me to fall down that hole very far before pulling me out.

Showing me with his touch and affection that I am not dirty, and he most definitely is still completely obsessed with me and my ass. Nothing would stop him from having me every moment of every day if he had his way. And he does have me, just not every second of the day. Not for lack of trying on his part. He won't stop touching me whenever he's within reach. It's soothing, and I can feel myself emerging from the fog I was under.

Today is the first day since my liberation from the penthouse prison that Nix will leave me. He says he has a few things he needs to take care of, but he'll be back in a few hours. Leaving me with Rosie, Lily, and a very uncharacteristically quiet Zander. He still wears his good-hearted smile, but it doesn't reach his eyes. Not to mention he doesn't participate in any of our conversations. Just sits in the armchair pretending to watch tv. I can tell his mind is a million miles away and nowhere near the show playing on the flat screen. I wonder what he's thinking about? Someone as

lighthearted and huggable as him sinking this far into his thoughts must mean they're pretty intense.

"So, I thought today we could go for a walk and get some fresh air."

"Excuse me?" I don't think I heard Lily right. She wants me to go for a walk. Outside?

"Yeah, you need to get out. Get some sunshine. Your skin is starting to look like a transparent jellyfish." Rosie pokes at my extremely pale forearm sticking out from my rolled-up sleeve.

"Maybe I like looking like a jellyfish. They're cute and squishy." I make a squishy face trying to be adorable, so I can distract them from wanting to go for a walk.

"I don't think so." Rosie chides me. "You can't distract us that easily. We're going outside, and you're getting some fresh air and sunshine. It'll do you some good. Let's go, sweet cheeks."

Hustling me off the kitchen stool, she pushes me towards the foyer. Distracting me by using Nix's nickname to get me that far. My groaning protests are met with squinty-eyed glowers from Rosie and a determined eyebrow lift from Lily.

"Zander, help me. Tell them I don't need to go outside. Please." I manage to escape their grasp enough to cling on to Zander's arm. Pouting with a big bottom lip as I try to convince him to back me up on this. He doesn't fall for it.

"Nah, I think they're right. You can't stay cooped up in here forever. The weather is perfect outside for an afternoon stroll. I think we should go."

"Traitor. Why are you always siding with them?" I stomp my foot like a two-year-

old. This is the second time he's turned on me. Mental note; never run to Zander for back up he'll only hand me over to his cousins eagerly.

"I am not. I just happen to agree with them. Some sunshine never hurt anyone."

"Ughh. Fine, I'll go outside. But I can't promise I'll go any farther than the end of the driveway." That should be enough to satisfy them since the driveway is like five miles long.

They both give me a 'that's what you think' look. I don't think we'll stop at the end of the driveway, but I still let them push me out the front door. The early autumn sun is high in the sky and starting to decline back to earth. A small sprinkling of white fluffy clouds accompanies the unassuming sun. It's about three o'clock, and the weather is warm but not boiling hot anymore now that summer is slowly receding and autumn is taking over. The leaves on the trees are even starting to change colors. Darkening to reds from green. Eventually, not too long from now, they'll be orange, red, and yellow. Coating the city in warm tones welcoming us into fall.

It's hard to believe I've already been living in North Carolina for close to three months. More has happened in those three months than in the past year. Strange how one bad day that ended with me passed out in a bar has led to this. I try to focus on all the amazing changes coming here has done to my life. It's better than thinking about the one bad thing that still looms over my head. Focusing on the bar, Beau, Rosie, and Lily. My colored in tattoo, the pastries from Cherry's bakery. Sunday family brunches, and Nix. The conundrum that is my love life. So bizarre and yet so right.

Rosie and Lily both flank me on either arm and hold on. Most likely so I don't turn around and bolt back to the house. Even if I did, when I glance back over my shoulder, I catch sight of Zander stalking behind us. With a sly grin, he winks and me and shoves his hands in his pockets. Well, at least he's following behind to keep an eye out. Which makes me feel slightly less panicked.

The gravel and fallen leaves crunch under my flip-flops as we make our way slowly down the driveway. It's not actually five miles long, but it's a good hundred yards or so. The house sits deep inside Nix's property. Which I appreciate. I'm a big fan of personal space and privacy. After sharing a two-bedroom apartment with three other girls for a year, I can't get enough space.

Everything starts out fine. I even get twenty feet from the house before a cold sweat begins to form on my brow. I start to feel resistance in Rosie and Lily's hold on my elbows, which either means they're trying to pull me or I'm trying to pull them. Whichever it may be, I'm not the only one who notices.

Both sisters slow but don't stop, watching me carefully. Their hands on my arms were firm but not forceful, conveying their faith in me. Filling me with their Colton strength. Just enough to get me to the end of the drive, and as I predicted, they keep going. Since I'm not breaking down crying and running in fear, I keep going as well. Still sweating, but that could be because I'm wearing one of Nix's black knit sweaters.

I dug it out of his closet yesterday and have decided I'm going to live in it for the rest of my life. There are soft leather elbow patches on each sleeve which rest almost at my wrists, and the hem is long enough to be considered a dress on me. So, I paired it with a pair of grey leggings.

"See. You're doin' great. Doesn't the sun feel nice?" Rosie turns her face upward to the sun soaking in its warmth, a relaxed smile on her lips. Beau told me she was a wreck while I was gone. Crying her eyes out and my heart swells for the woman beside me who is like the sister I never had and always pretended was given up for adoption and now have found years later.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

“Yeah, it’s great.” My enthusiasm is forced, but the sun does feel nice. After being inside in the filtered and circulated air conditioning, it’s nice to breathe in the smell of trees and fresh-cut grass.

“Just what you need. Things will be back to normal in no time. Just you wait and see.” Lily squeezes my arm reassuringly and adds one of her signature sweet as pie smiles to top it off. No doubt to distract me from the fact that we’re getting out of the line of sight from Nix’s house.

The farther we get, the more people we see, the more nervous I get. Rosie notices and draws my attention to her.

“Don’t worry, sweetie. We’ve got you. No one is getting near you today.” She winks and suggestively pats the backside of her opposite hip. I turn to look at Lily, who does the same but pats her thigh under her flowy peasant skirt. Carrying a loaded weapon on a lazy afternoon stroll must be a Colton thing. Or is it a southern thing? I don’t know. But I’m grateful because knowing they’re packing actually does make me feel better. Pretty sure Zander has something on him as well, as he keeps a polite distance behind us, allowing us our girl talk space.

Taking in a deep, steadying breath, I continue putting one foot in front of the other. Allowing the sisters to push me past my comfort point and force me back into the world. Because I really do want to get back to normal. I hate the panic that rises like bile in my gut when I think about doing anything simple, like going to the grocery store alone. I can’t live the rest of my life fearing everything and everyone. I’ve never been like this. Braxton may not have broken me in the way he intended, but he did break something. My confidence, my strength. The girl who stood on the bar and

fired off that shotgun is nowhere to be found. Instead, in her place is a fucking coward, and I hate it.

As we walk, we see tidbits of life. Housewives getting the mail and chatting with neighbors on the curb. Children riding bikes and laughing. A man on a riding lawn mower cutting his grass. Dogs barking in the distance somewhere. At first, it's unnerving. All the sounds and movement. I can't figure out where to look and where the threat might come from. But then my attention snags on one little girl all alone in her driveway. She can't be more than five. Drawing on the ground with large colorful chalk sticks.

Her focus is solely on her chalk masterpiece. She doesn't look up or have her head on a swivel watching for danger. In reality, she probably should have a little more stranger danger instinct, while on the other hand, it's relieving to see her lack of fear. Her comfort in the safety of her home and neighborhood. Her blonde hair is tied up in pigtails and dangles in two long braids. At each end, a pink charm of some sort clips the ends together. Her chubby cheeks working away as she talks to herself and tilts her head side to side inspecting her work. As I watch, her face goes from scrunched contemplation to jubilant excitement. At that very moment, a man exits the house wearing a polo shirt and khakis. He reminds me of Nix, in a slightly more responsible, less muscled, and tattooed adult way. The little girl runs screaming, "Daddy, daddy, look at my drawing." Squealing when he scoops her into his arms and adores her with a kiss on her cheek.

A place in my heart thumps heavily, watching the two. Jealousy over their smiles and happiness. As well as a lingering desire to see Nix hold a little girl like that. To see him hold her on his shoulders and teach her how to draw and paint. To carry our daughter like that someday. Our daughter? Do I really think Nix is the fatherly type? Probably not. However, there are all the stories about him and his litter sisters. Perhaps he does want children? I've never asked him. Haven't really had the right moment to talk about things like that. Can't really bring it up in between wielding a

gun in a bar and getting high and fucking on his balcony. We're not exactly proper parenting material. But maybe someday we could be? Maybe? If he doesn't get sick of me by then.

We turn a corner, and I can no longer see the little girl and her Nix look-alike father. I do know where the dog barking has been coming from now. One house down, we see a large sign painted on a piece of plywood and stuck in the ground on a spike.

Puppies for sale.

I freaking love puppies, and to be mauled and licked by a herd of them sounds like heaven right now.

"Let's go look at the puppies." Releasing Rosie and Lily, I stride faster towards the yard with the temporary fence placed in a large circle, filled with sweet little furballs of cuteness. I don't wait for them to catch up, even though I'm sure Zander may have had a small panic attack when I took off from the girls before I step over the low childlike playpen fence and go right for the nearest puppy.

There's a variety of colors and breeds romping around. Browns and yellows, mixed with a few black and greys. A dozen or so labs, poodles, and pit bulls run in circles biting each other's ears and leaping at a couple of other people also playing inside the gate.

Rosie and Lily stand just outside the gate and watch from behind me. While Zander, who kept his distance, kneels down at the edge of the puppy pen and pets a few that run up to greet him. Giant teddy bear.

Called it.

A brown-haired middle-aged woman approaches us with a friendly smile and a wave.

“Hey there. How y’all doin’ today?”

“Just fine, thank you.” Lily answers in her southern sweet unintimidating voice.

“I’m Ellie-Mae. Are y’all interested in getting a puppy today?” she reaches out her hand, offering it to Rosie then Lily. Zander being the southern gentleman he is, stands and introduces himself before returning to the puppies and watching me.

“Oh no, we’re just—” Rosie starts, but I interrupt.

“Maybe. I always wanted a dog, but we moved around too much to have one.” My answer shocks my friends, and they look at me with renewed interest.

“Well, you’ve come to the right place. I’m trying to get these cutie-pies to good homes as quick as possible. Practically givin’ em away. Pure breed and papered with all their shots and ready to go home with a loving family today. Only three hundred dollars. Cash only.”

Ellie-Mae is a good saleswoman. Plus, it’s kind of hard to not be able to sell puppies. I mean, they’re puppies. They practically sell themselves.

“Why so cheap? Papered puppies usually go for ten times that amount.” Lily asks our new friend Ellie-Mae.

“Well. They were my grandad’s. He bred dogs of all breeds for forty years. Sadly, he recently passed, and these are the last of the puppies from the litters he had when he died.” She gestures to the puppies currently attacking my face. Lapping me with kisses and cute as fuck puppy whimpers.

“I’m sorry for your loss. How did he pass?” Lily asks.

“Heart attack. It was very sudden. Just out feeding the dogs one morning, and then he’s on the ground clutching his chest.” Ellie-Mae tells Rosie and Lily about her grandad and his love of dogs while I turn my attention to the little cuties around me.

Sitting on the grass, I let them jump and leap on my lap. Climbing on my back and nibbling on my hair and ears. Cuddling into me and fighting over who gets to be closest. Just outside my little circle of new best friends, a silver-grey Pitbull with pale blue eyes paces, trying to find a way in but is unsuccessful. Instead, she sits and stares at me, waiting for her turn. I can’t help but watch her as I continue petting the other more enthusiastic puppies.

“So here I am trying to find these little one’s good homes. Sure, I could sell them for more, but there are lots of people and families out there who would love to make these little ones part of their home but may not be able to pay that much.” Ellie-Mae finishes with her sales pitch to my two friends behind me.

Standing, I release myself from the hoard and make my way the few steps to the blue-eyed pittie sitting and watching me. Lifting her, she’s maybe fifteen pounds and a few months old, I nestle her on my shoulder in the standard baby burping position, and she snuggles into my neck. Her fur is short and soft like velvet.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

“Hey, there, sweet girl,” I tell her as she makes herself comfortable in my arms.

“I see you’ve found a new friend. She likes you.” Ellie-Mae comments. While Rosie and Lily grin at me. I didn’t notice it, but I’m grinning too. Not just grinning but smiling. Feeling lighter and more myself than I have in days.

“I like her too,” I tell the three ladies watching me cuddle with the grey pittie. “Do you think Nix would mind another roommate?” I ask Rosie because I know she’ll give me a straight answer.

“No. I don’t think he would mind one bit.”

Chapter 21

Phoenix

“W

hat are we doing here, Nix?” Beau and I are sitting in my black Camaro outside the club I carried Clover out of that night we first had sex. That night was possibly the best night of my life, and remembering that moment in my truck when her dress shifted and showed me a sneak peek at her pretty nipples has my cock twitching with approval in my pants. We’re not here for fun, though. No. Today we’re here for a little payback.

“Griffon might have my balls in a vice when it comes to killing Braxton, but like he said, as long as we don’t kill him, the rest is ‘fair game.’” I chuckle a little

maniacally. I very well may have lost my mind, but I don't give a shit. What I have planned will be very therapeutic.

We sit and wait. I know Braxton is here because Arrow's guy told me so. All we have to do is wait for him to come out and head for his electric blue Ferrari. Pretentious bastard. It's getting close to two hours we've been sitting here waiting for him to make his appearance when the man of the hour steps out of the back door to the club and makes his way to his car.

Alone.

We killed most of his security detail. Probably thinks he's safe here at his club where there's cameras and witnesses. Little does he know I now have a computer hacking wiz in my back pocket who hates him as much as I do. Don't know why Blake dislikes him. If there's a specific reason or just because his name is Shaw. Either way works in my favor.

There will be no video recordings of our arrival, the hours we sit here, or our departure. It'll be like we were never here. So we're not subtle about stalking out of the Camaro and sneaking up behind Braxton. He's so oblivious to anything that isn't about him he doesn't even see us coming.

The damp rag in my hand ready to cover his nose and mouth. Just like he did with Clover. He's limp in my arms after five seconds of a weak attempt to break free from my hold. Beau pops the trunk, and in he goes with very little grace. I also didn't clean out my trunk, and he lands on top of a jack and random tools. The first discomfort and pain of the night.

The light overhead flickers a few times before settling into a low hum above us.

Casting shadows from Braxton's naked body zip-tied to a wooden chair in the center of the abandoned warehouse. Dusk shimmers outside the broken windows, and I have no more patience to wait for sleeping beauty to wake up.

Pulling back, I get a good wind up before bitch slapping Braxton back into consciousness. He yelps and mutters. Blinking away the chloroform haze to see Beau and me looming over him. He chuckles, fucker thinks this is funny.

"Phoenix Colton. Can't say I'm surprised. A little cliché, don't you think? Couldn't find anywhere more interesting than an abandoned warehouse? Really?"

"Doesn't matter where we take you. You're still gonna pay for taking Clover." Hot molten lava burns through my body, causing me to clench my fists. He is naked, tied to a broken chair, and he's the one wearing the cocky grin. The asshole is a psychopath.

"Clover. How is my little pet? Did she tell you all the fun we had together?" Jesus fucking Christ himself couldn't stop the right hook I plant on Braxton's smug face. He leans to one side from the impact of my fist and spits blood on the floor. It drips from his nose and mouth when he turns back to look at me. A small flicker of satisfaction calms my immediate urge to kill him. What I have planned is so much better than killing him. I wasn't lying when I said I would make him feel pain like he's never known.

"So she has. She also tell you how wet I made her? How ready she was for me? The way she moaned under my touch?" This time I reach out and curl my fingers around his throat and squeeze. I can already see him turning red.

"What? Got nothing to say now? I'm listening." I cup my free hand behind my ear and turn like I'm trying to listen closer. He can't speak, my hand practically crushing his windpipe. "Yeah, I didn't think so."

One-handed, I lift, picking up Braxton and his chair, dangling him in the air by his throat, watching him choke and sputter trying to breathe. I would gladly stand here and watch the life drain from him, but Beau's hand on my shoulder reminds me why we're here.

Pain. I want to inflict pain after pain on him. He doesn't deserve a quick death. I drop him, and the chair groans and splinters a little under his weight as it makes contact with the ground again. Hoarse coughs and gasps come from Braxton as he fills his lungs with oxygen. There's already a nice red and quickly purpling mark around his neck in the shape of my hand.

"You can't kill me." He spits out between coughs.

"I don't plan to. I have other things in mind."

"And there are many things we can do to you that will make you feel like you're dying," Beau adds.

"First, however, I think you need a little something." From my back pocket, I retrieve the collar I told Clover I threw away. I didn't throw it away. I saved it so I could make him wear it while I teach him a lesson. Latching it around his neck, I lock it in place with a padlock. "Perfect. Now we can begin."

"You're fucking dead, Nix. As soon as I get out of here, you're dead." He threatens.

"Unfortunately, the same accords that keep me from killing you keep you from killing me. Unless you want my entire family to hunt down you and yours and slit your throats. You know as well as I that once blood is shed, sides will be taken, and shit'll get real ugly real fast. I'm pretty sure you don't have nearly as many allies as we do."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

It's true of all the families in the Syndicate, the Shaw's are the least liked. They have allies in the James's and Kingsley's but not many. And since we are the enforcers of the bunch, we have many more capable killers on our payroll than any others. It would be a mess, but he knows we would come out on top.

Reaching into the bag we brought with us, I produce two ropes with canvas sacks tied to each end filled with screws and nuts from my garage. They're heavy and have a few jagged edges.

"What the fuck are those?" Braxton is finally starting to realize this isn't going to be a simple beating like before. Not this time. I'm older and have a lot more tricks up my sleeves now.

"Oh, these?" I swing the sack rope side to side as I position myself on his right, and Beau goes to his left. "These are nut sacks. We thought we'd show you what a real pair looks like. And feels like."

The rope swings and picks up speed as I swirl my wrist, propelling it in a circular motion building up momentum. Once it has a good speed going, I underhand release it, and it flings under Braxton's chair. Smacking right up into his dangling testicles. Before strapping him down, we removed the center of the seat, so it has a nice big hole exposing his ass, dick, and balls. Since we also zip-tied his legs open to the chair, he can't cringe and try to protect himself.

"Aaaaahhhh motherfucker!" Before Braxton can even breathe through the pain, Beau swings his nut sack and hits him again from the other side. His screams echo through the large room, and it's motherfucking music to my ears.

Adrenaline, rage, self-righteousness, and the sweet taste of satisfaction fill me. We swing the sacks into his sad sack until he can't stop the tears, no matter how much he grits his teeth and snorts like a pig trying to breathe through it. Leaning down, I whisper in his ear.

“So, how does it feel to have a real pair of nuts between your legs?”

“Feels great. You're really missing out. You should try it.” He tries to make a dig at me, but between the snot running down his face and the black and purple spreading through his groin, it doesn't really have the effect he hopes for.

“Maybe you'll like to see what a real shaft feels like next.” Beau hands me a cattle prod he produces from the duffle bag. I had wanted to just use whatever cylindrical item I found lying around, but Beau told me this would be better. Not sure why but I'm sure I'll find out. Soon. When it comes to anal, I'll trust Beau on what he says.

“Ooh, I'm so scared. What are you gonna do shock me? So original.” He tries to laugh, but the movement makes him wince, and he stops abruptly. He is trying to still himself enough that the pain radiating from his dick and sack doesn't force him to pass out. I can see it written all over his contorted face.

“Oh, no, no, no. I'm going to fuck you with it. Just like you did to Clover.” His eyes practically bug out of his head. That's right, now you fear me. Since you know where I'll be sticking this electrified pole in about thirty seconds.

The sun has all but set now, the only light from the halogen overhead. There are no honking horns or noises from the city here. Just the muffled crunch of my boots on scattered leaves and broken glass and debris left behind by whatever manufacturer used to operate here decades ago. There are empty leftover crates scattered with tags and spray-painted art coating the rotting surfaces.

Actual real fear shimmers in Braxton's waterlogged shit brown eyes. He should be afraid because this is going to hurt a lot. Now I'm going to be the monster, and he will be the prey.

"No, no, no. We can figure something out. Make a deal, like last time." He never removes his eyes from the cattle prod, so he can't see the hatred in mine. Mentioning Flacon while I have him tied to a chair and about to fuck him with an electric cattle prod probably isn't the smartest idea he's ever had. Right after taking my girl and hurting her.

"Sorry, all out of deals today. And you weren't exactly keeping up your half of the last deal."

"What? I didn't fucking touch your sisters or your cousins."

"No. instead, you touched the girl I love. Big. Fucking. Mistake. Beau." I nod to my cousin to help me move him into a better position. We pick up his chair, flipping him over and propping him on his knee's face firmly planted on the dirty cement floor.

"This looks about right. Is this how you had her?" Growling between clenched teeth, I can't say more without losing it. Rosie had told me what Clover had confessed to her about what Braxton had done. Cuffing her wrists to her ankles and putting her face down on the bed when he—had his way with her.

"Yeah, I took her like this. Touched her sweet pussy and slid my dick inside her tight ass." He chokes out one last jab laced with the terror he can't mask. "She loved it when I took her from behind, squirmed, and got so wet for me." He tries to laugh and make it seem like he's not scared shitless.

There's nothing he can say to stop what's about to happen, and he knows it. The asshole thinks he's invincible. He's about to learn otherwise.

The underside of his balls is bruised and swelling. That'll only add to the pain he's about to feel. Gently I tap the handle against his swollen nuts. His entire body shutters and convulses with the slightest touch. Teasing him like I'm sure he teased Clover, I rub the inactive prod against his taint and circle his tight puckered hole. His butt cheeks clench reflexively, trying to protect the sensitive area. His cries and moans are muffled by his position. Beau holds him down so he can't try to flip over.

"Does that feel good, Braxton? Do you like it up the ass?"

"Keep it set on the lowest setting. He's going to love and hate this. Just like he made Clover feel when he pumped her full of Harley." Every time I hear about something Braxton did to Clover second-hand from my cousins, I see red. She is so ashamed of what happened that she can't even tell me. I have to get the info from Rosie and Beau. I want to turn the prod up to max, but Beau is adamant about what to do, so I listen. If it's going to make him feel how she felt, then I'll do anything he tells me to.

Turning the little dial on the handle, I set it to level one. It flickers to life and crackles from the tip. This one is different from the ones I've seen before. It's not thin but thick like a baton, with the two metal tips flickering at the widest top point. It's basically an electrocuted battering ram dildo. It's perfect, and I can't wait to see why he's going to love it because I don't see how any of this could be enjoyable.

I don't wait for his answer and shove the first few inches inside his rectum. Guttural roars of pure agony tear from Braxton below me.

"Does it turn you on to take women in the ass who think you're a disgusting sack of shit?" I push in farther and pump slowly. Letting him feel every centimeter of the intrusion. He doesn't play the cocky, hardass now. Now he's blubbering like the fucking bitch he is. A sound comes from Braxton that doesn't sound completely like pain but pleasure, like he actually is enjoying this. What the actual fuck? He is sick and twisted.

“Are you actually enjoying this?” His body shakes and pulses with the small electrical voltage running through him, and he moan screams again. Pleasure-filled agony. I pull the prod out and send a questioning look to Beau, who’s grinning from ear to ear in pure unadulterated glee at what he’s seeing. Bending over, I look down to see Braxton’s dick is completely hard and thumping like a rabbit’s foot.

“What the hell?”

“The electricity stimulates his prostate, forces an erection and orgasm. But the thick staff of the prod and the electricity also causes pain. If we do this over and over with each orgasm he has, even that becomes painful. A man can only stand to come so many times before it becomes torture.” Beau explains to both of us because I didn’t even know what I was doing other than ass raping him with a blunt object. “He won’t want to come, but he won’t be able to stop it. It will force a painful pleasure until it just becomes pain.” Beau’s eyes are wide and filled with a pure sadistic evil I didn’t know my cousin possessed. He gives me a nod to continue, and I do. Sliding the prod back into Braxton’s ass, he again twitches and spasms but moans through the forced arousal in protest.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

I pump in and out, so he feels the entirety of it. Watching him now, his dick spasming and then pumping out a forced orgasm. His cum shoots out like a rocket and splatters on the concrete. I don't stop. I keep going faster this time. Forcing his cock to remain rock hard and in less than thirty seconds, he's pulsing again, coming on command. Groans and croaks breaking him as his entire body convulses and shakes.

We continue like this under Beau's instruction. Pulling out the prod and allowing him a break, and just when he is soft again, we turn on the prod and force it in him again. It's quite entertaining to watch a man grow fully erect in seconds and come while crying through the pain and pleasure.

Beau and I trade off sodomizing him. Beau has a little more grace and finesse than I do but seems to enjoy it just as much. I'm rough and hard where Beau is slick and skilled with his movements, but that doesn't make them any less torturous. If anything, they might be worse. Eventually, after an hour of this, Braxton is crying and sobbing. Begging us to stop saying he can't come anymore. This is the best torture Beau could have suggested. Not only do I get to hurt him physically, but we are also associating orgasms with pain. Hopefully, every time he comes in the future, it hurts, and he fears it. Forever ruining sex for him.

After that last painful orgasm, Braxton's voice fades, and he falls quiet. Beau props Braxton and his chair right side up again. "Hmm. He passed out."

"Let's wake him up. I have a few more things I need him conscious for."

We wake him with hot water poured all over his groin. Then we have a little fun delivering alternating body blows. When he's good and soft, we remove him from the

chair, and I carve my name into his ass with my knife. Right where he cut Clover. However, his scars will be much deeper and much harder to cover up.

“You’re going to fucking pay for this.” Braxton slurs as we toss him back in the trunk naked with his wrists tied for good measure.

“I’m sure I will, but at least I’ll be able to shit and take a piss without bleeding.” I slam the trunk on him before he can try to say anything else and take my spot in the driver’s seat.

We don’t talk or listen to the radio as we drive back to the club, where we grabbed Braxton and drop him off right where we found him. On the ground, unconscious from the second dose of chloroform, next to his car and his keys. Still naked and zip-tied around the wrists.

We’re almost home before I finally speak again. “I’m going to kill him one day.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

Chapter 22

Clover

Smoking a bowl before bed really goes a long way to help me relax and decompress. Not to mention my new furry guard puppy cuddled next to me. I can actually close my eyes and not see Braxton’s ugly mug every time. Rosie and Lily were shocked as shit when I actually bought my new bedmate. I had to borrow the cash from them but promised to pay it back as soon as I can get to an ATM. Of course, they told me not to worry about it, but I’m still going to pay them back. As well as for all the new stuff we had to buy for her at the pet store.

They were really shocked when I suggested we actually get in a car and drive somewhere. Zander came with us, silently pushing the cart we filled with stuff. At least three dog beds, a crate, dog food, cute pink dog bowls, a new pink collar, and leash. That was difficult to handle, but I managed to muscle through it with a little help and distraction from the cute ball of fur in my arms. She really is the best dog. Calm and smart as a whip. Even for her age. Practically already potty trained. We also threw in about two dozen toys and balls and bags of treats.

By the time I hear Nix's Camaro pull into the garage, it's pitch-black outside, and I'm half asleep. I wait and listen. Nix climbs up the stairs, goes into his room, and showers, then walks down the hall to my room when he realizes I'm not in his. We've spent most nights in his room, but I just felt like being in my room tonight with the new puppy. I wasn't sure if he would appreciate her being on his bed.

Through heavy eyelids, I see Nix's form step through the door and make his way to my bed. When he's almost all the way in, he disturbs my new dog, and she ruffs at him in a soft warning.

"What the shit is that?"

"That's my new dog, Sloan."

Nix remains half in and half out of bed, no doubt glowering at Sloan.

"When the hell did you get a puppy?"

"This afternoon."

Finally, sitting all the way on the mattress, Nix reaches out and picks up Sloan, holding her to his bare chest. She licks his chin, and I see the smile he thinks I can't see in the dark.

“I leave for six hours, and you get a dog?”

“We went for a walk, and they were selling them down the street.”

“So you just thought, yeah, I’ll just bring home a dog today?” His chuckle is warm and not at all upset about her being here. As a matter of fact, I think he likes Sloan.

“Yeah. I’m gonna train her, and she’s going to be my guard dog. I can even train her to sniff out drugs. In case you might need her.”

Nix’s body shakes with a silent laugh. “We make and sell drugs. Why would I need a drug-sniffing dog?” He sets Sloan down at the foot of the bed out of the way enough for him to lay down and wrap an arm around me.

“I don’t know. Maybe some drugs go missing, and you can’t find them. Then you’ll come begging to borrow Sloan so she can help you sniff them out.”

“Oh really?” Now he’s pulling me partially under him, burying his face in my neck. Pressing soft kisses in the hollow of my neck that send shivers all the way to my toes.

“Really.”

“Why Sloan? Why not pooky or spot?” More kisses are pressed into the sensitive skin of my collar bone, neck, and behind my ear. A small moan slips from my lips.

“Those are stupid names.” I can feel his grin against my skin, but he doesn’t stop his exploration of my neck. A hand sliding up my bare thigh.

“Oh really? Is that so?”

“Yeah, it is. Sloan is a much better name.” The words are breathless, and I’m losing my train of thought with his hands roaming my side and his lips devouring my skin.

“Mmm-hmm.” He murmurs without breaking contact. Sliding his mouth from one side to the other and doing the same torturously delicious suckling.

“It means—warrior—in Gaelic.” I don’t know why I keep talking, but I can’t stop. My brain is fuzzy, and I can’t think straight when he does this to me. Every touch sends sparks under my skin and through my core. I can feel my panties getting wet the longer he continues his lazy exploration with his mouth. Sliding his hand up my shirt, cupping my aching breast and already hard nipple.

Flicking it with his thumb, causing me to arch my back and buck into him, needing more. Moaning his name between gasps.

“Maybe I should call you Sloan.” His lips brush over my ear, and then he nips and sucks on my lobe. Sending a shudder of pleasure through my brain temporarily

paralyzing me. I want to feel that everywhere.

“Why?” I finally huff out when I gain my senses again.

“Because you’re my warrior. Strong, intelligent, resilient, beautiful.” Each word is punctuated with a kiss to my shoulder and chest. The neck of my shirt was pulled down to reveal as much skin as possible. Unable to get any farther from the collar, Nix slides the shirt off over my head, bearing my chest to him. My breasts are firm, and I can feel my nipples tightening as he takes me in. Running his hot gaze over my flesh followed by his curious hand.

With more kisses on my stomach, belly button, the valley between my breasts, the round tops and nipples, he keeps peppering me with his words.

“You’re so much stronger than you know. You’re a fighter and don’t take shit from anyone. Especially me. That’s why I love you.”

“Nix...”

“No.” I try to argue, but he silences me with a look. “Don’t you dare fucking argue with me. I love you, and you’re just going to have to accept that.” I open my mouth to say something, I don’t really know what, but I don’t even get out one syllable. His lips are on mine, cutting off any thought of talking. Sliding his tongue in through my parted lips, tasting me. Devouring me with a savage need to claim me and shut me up.

My hands slip into his hair. It’s getting long on top, but the sides are still shaved short. I get tangled up in him forgetting to argue. Because arguing with this man about loving me is stupid. Who in their right mind wouldn’t want Nix to love them? No one, that’s who. Besides, I do love him. I’m just a big baby and can’t say it. I’ve never said it to a man before. No one ever wanted my love or earned it. Nix both

wants and has definitely earned it.

Yet I can't bring myself to say those three little words that I know are true, and he deserves to hear after everything. There's just something deep inside that worries it's all too good to be true. There's no possible way little ole me could make the world's biggest man-slut do a complete one-eighty. Going from a different woman every night to wanting only to be with me. Me. Broken, used hot mess me. Yet here we lie. Nix is tasting every inch of my skin with his talented sinful lips. Telling me he loves me and arguing with me over it. Only we could argue over loving one another.

The more he moves his tongue across my flushed skin, the less I can think straight. All thoughts of arguing and debate fly out the window the moment his mouth moves south, sliding between my thighs and straight onto my throbbing pussy. Removing my panties in record time. His tongue circling that sensitive bundle of nerves, causing my brain to shut down. Hot bliss tingles my pulsing core. His mouth does magical things to my body. Nix sucks on my tender nub before returning to killing me slowly with his magnificent tongue.

Lifting my legs, he hooks them over his shoulders and lowers himself onto the mattress, settling in between my thighs. I'm in pure fucking heaven. Then,uh shit. He inserts one,fuck,then two fingers inside me. Slowly pumping and stretching me. All the while, his mouth lapping at my arousal.

I'm so lost in this man. My hands dig into his thick hair, pulling him closer to me. Melding myself to him.

"Nix." His name is a throaty whimper on my lips, and his responding hum into my pussy sets me off. An orgasm I didn't see coming crashes into me, knocking the senses right out of me. I can't see or hear. I can only feel. Feel Nix still face down in my pussy, coaxing my climax longer harder. Vaguely I'm aware that I'm screaming his name as the most epic orgasm I've ever experienced racks my body with spasms.

My thighs tighten around Nix's head, but he doesn't even notice he just buries his fingers deep inside me and crooks them in a way that, holy fucking shit. I'm coming again. And I am not ready for it.

Nix's name is a chant on my lips between screams of ecstasy. My back arches in response, thrusting my breasts into the cool night air. The soft breeze tipping my nipples as Nix's strong free hand slides up my stomach and cups one of my breasts, pinching my nipple. My entire body is on sensory overload. As I ride a high better than any pill could ever give me. Rolling my hips against his mouth, stretching out the sensations and pleasure.

Once my full body orgasm calms enough for my limbs to stop shaking, Nix slowly removes his fingers from inside me and kisses his way up my body, leaving warm hot marks everywhere he touches. Until he reaches my mouth. Peppering me with soft butterfly kisses. Coaxing me back to earth from the out-of-this-world orgasm he just gave me.

His lips are swollen, and when he slips his tongue out to meet mine, I can taste my arousal on his lips. Sweet and warm. Without ever breaking contact with me, I feel Nix sliding his boxer briefs off and kicking them away. Our blanket is long gone, and I'm pretty sure the pillows are somewhere on the floor. The bedsheets are crisp and cool to the exposed night air. Our hot bodies quickly warm the space.

Then I'm skin to skin with Nix. Warm, strong muscles press against my soft, warm skin. Normally Nix and I love to talk dirty. Telling each other what we're going to do and what we want. Tonight, we haven't said a word. Words aren't needed. Only touch. That connection of body to body. Hard against soft. Our bodies locking together in perfect synchronicity.

I can feel his hard cock pressing against my tender wet entrance, but he doesn't thrust inside me. Not yet. Instead, he unlatches his mouth from mine and pulls back enough

to lift up on one elbow and look down at me.

Glowing in the moonlight, he looks like a tattooed god. Hovering over me with half hooded eyes. Running his knuckles along my healing bruised cheek before tucking a wayward strand of hair behind my ear. His thumb tracing the line of my lips.

“You are so fucking beautiful.” Is all he says. Any words I might have spoken get caught in my throat. All I can do is kiss his thumb then suck it into my mouth. Swirling my tongue around his large digit. His resounding growl in the back of his throat is the only audible response he can produce.

Then his lips are on mine again, taking me, claiming me with all the passion and love he possesses. Even though my body was just a pile of mush from my first two orgasms, it is flaring to life under his attention. Primed and wanting. My pulse thumping through my pussy, begging for him to fill it.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

“I want you inside me.” I manage to say between ravenous mouth fucking. I need him. I need to feel him. I want to make him lose his fucking mind the way he just made me lose mine. He doesn’t answer with words but by shifting his hips down to align the head of his hard thick cock with my pussy. A small whimper escapes my lips when he tauntingly runs the tip of his cock along my seam. Coating himself in my wetness.

“Fuck baby. You are so fucking sexy. I wanna ram my dick inside you and fuck you till we both can’t see straight. But tonight, I’m gonna take you slow. I want to feel every inch of you. I want to enjoy seeing you writhe under me.”

Shit.

I very well might lose my damn mind tonight. Nix has never taken it slow with me. We’ve always been frantic and animalistic, attacking one another. This Nix is different, and I like it. His movements are slow and methodical. Pumping his hard length into me one agonizingly mind-blowing inch at a time. Stretching me to fit his large size. Coaxing breathy mewls from me with each thrust.

All the while, his free hand roams my body. Cupping my breast, running soft fingertips down my side and around my hip. His large fingers spreading out across my ass and lifting me to meet his leisurely thrusts. Pulling my knees to wrap snugly around his waist. Our joined bodies moving rhythmically together. Nix’s lips never leave my skin. Either he’s devouring my mouth or worshiping my neck and collarbone. Sending shivers down my spine and settling between my legs where his cock fills me.

I can feel his balls pressing against my ass as he slides his entire length inside my pussy. He releases a shuddering breath against my breasts, his forehead resting in the crook of my neck. He begins picking up speed. His body was hot with sweat, every muscle tense and primed. The hard ridges under my fingertips only sending me farther into the bliss oblivion that is Nix Colton. Reaching as far as I can, I dig my nails into his ass. Pressing in with my heels and pulling him closer, deeper into me.

“Fuck...Clover. You’re so goddamn perfect. I know I said I was gonna go slow, but I can’t. Not anymore. I need to fuck you—hard.” I can tell he’s having a hard time restraining himself. He wants to draw it out and take his time. But his own need is building, and he can’t take it anymore.

Neither can I.

“Then fuck me, Nix,” I whisper in his ear, my hot breath sending shivers down his neck.

Then he does. Not waiting any longer, his speed increases, and his thrusts become wild and needy. Digging his fingers into the soft flesh of my ass, rocking me into him to match the motion of his hips. Swiveling and grinding his pelvis to mine.

Fucking perfection.

That’s where I am as he plows into me, harder, faster, angrier. His thick length rubbing my clit with every thrust pushing me closer and closer to the edge. I can feel his orgasm building in the frantic pounding of his cock inside me.

“Come on my cock, sweet cheeks. I wanna feel you squeeze me before I come in your sweet cunt.”

Fuck me. His filthy words push me that little extra distance, causing my body to

spasm and contract around him. Squeezing his cock tight inside my channel. I can feel the ridge of his head rubbing that spot inside that makes my eyes roll back inside my head. I scream into his chest, biting down on the muscle of his pec. Tight and hard under my teeth.

He responds in the like shoving deep inside me with a deep gravelly growl as his cock pulses his release inside me. I can feel his hot cum filling me. Warming me, and it turns me on so fucking much one final orgasm pulses through me. Clenching down on his throbbing cock still inside me.

“Shit—fuck.” The sensations are all too much for my muddled brain to comprehend as my body goes limp in Nix’s embrace. He’s still holding himself up above me. Resting his head on my chest while he catches his breath. Still seated inside me, aftershock tremors cause his dick to pulse inside me every couple of seconds as he comes down from his own orgasmic high.

It takes him a good thirty seconds to regain his composure enough to pull out and roll onto the bed next to me. Grabbing me and pulling me tight against his side. His hand leisurely running through my crazy sex hair. Smoothing it down and pressing soft kisses to my forehead and temple.

“That was—fucking amazing.” He says into my hair, his lips brushing the top of my forehead with another kiss.

“Yeah—it kinda was. I didn’t know I could come like that.”

“You were spectacular. I’m going to have to make you come like that again. Soon.”

“No arguments here.”

His soft chuckle rumbles through his chest as we lay there panting, trying to regain

our senses wrapped up in one another. The aftermath of our lovemaking is still present between my legs and slick on his still half-hard cock resting against this thigh.

“Stay here. I’ll be right back.” Before he removes his sweaty body from the bed, he presses one more soft kiss to my lips. Sauntering over to the bathroom, glorious naked ass gleaming in the moonlight.

A minute later, he returns with a damp rag in hand. Sliding it in between my thighs, cleaning my tender bits. No man has ever cared enough to do such a thing before. His lips press tender kisses into my stomach as he cleans me. Carefully, gently. When he’s done, he deposits the rag on the floor, ignoring it and returning his attention to me once again.

Thick, strong arms wrap around me. Engulfing me in their strength and comfort. Shielding me from the world outside of us. Embracing me in the heat of his soul. Spreading warmth and liquifying my insides. Softening me against him, allowing him to keep me, make me his. Forever.

Soft sheets wrap around us, and somehow the pillows reappeared on the bed. Creating a cocoon for us to recharge in.

At some point, Sloan decided it was safer on the dog bed on the floor than on the bed with us. Probably a good idea. We don’t want to traumatize her at such a young age.

“Was she watching us the whole time?” Lifting my head, I look in the direction of Nix’s gaze. He’s watching Sloan, who’s watching us.

“Probably.”

“So, she’s a little freaky, just like her owner.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

“I am not.” I try to smack him in the chest, but my body is so limp and ooey-gooey satisfied that I basically just lift and drop my hand right back where it was on his damp chest.

The hand he has wrapped around my back is slowly drawing circles on my skin, and the soft touch is lulling me to sleep. He’s quiet, and that’s not normal. I can tell he’s thinking. Internalizing whatever it is that’s running through his mind. You wouldn’t think it to look at him, but he thinks quite a lot. Not the normal, what-are-my-plans-for-tomorrowmulling either. Deep and intense things.

“You know—I’m not a good guy Clover, and I won’t ever be. There are things I do that you wouldn’t like. There are times where things will get ugly. Where people can get hurt, and no matter how much I want to protect you every second of every fucking day, I won’t be able to.” His chest rises and falls with a shaky breath, and with my ear pressed to him, I can hear his heart beating. Usually steady, strong and rhythmic is now wary and quicker than normal.

“I know. But I’m not afraid. I can handle it. Braxton was... a lapse in judgment. That won’t happen again.”

“I just, if I lost you, fuck Clover, it would kill me.” He’s quiet again, pressing his lips to the top of my head holding me close. There’s more than just possibly losing me eating at him. I hadn’t thought much of it before, not wanting to overstep, but Rosie and Lily were very tight-lipped about what happened to his little sister Robin. It hadn’t occurred to me till this very moment that he could be reliving whatever it was that he experienced with her death while hunting for me.

“Is this about what happened to your sister?” His arms tense around me. Shit, he’s going to clam up just like Rosie and Lily did. I shouldn’t have asked. “I’m sorry you don’t have to answer.”

“It’s okay. I want to. You should know.” A long pause fills the dark room as I allow him the opportunity to organize his thoughts, giving him all the space he needs to process. Neither of us moves. I just hold on tight to him, listening to his heart pick up pace before he speaks again.

“Robin was five, I was eighteen almost nineteen, and I thought I was top dog. Knew everything there was to know about everything. I was so fucking stupid. Obsessed with women and partying. I didn’t care about anything but getting high and laid. Guess not much has changed. Suppose that’s because after she died, I couldn’t bring myself to face the ugly reality of it all. It hurt too much, the guilt and self-loathing. Guess you can say I became an addict then, using booze, sex, and drugs to numb everything. Except I never came out of it. I just stayed there numb. Forgetting was better than facing the truth that it was my fault she died. I was supposed to be the one watching her. Instead, I left to get some pussy.” Taking in a steadying breath, I can tell he’s mentally preparing himself. “It was just me and my cousin Hunter and Robin. I don’t remember why we were the ones tasked with babysitting, but we were. Probably the first mistake. Hunter and I were troublemakers, but mom knew I loved Robin and would always say yes to watching her for them. While we were watching some cartoon with her, a friend I had gone to school with texted me about a party and that this one particular girl I’d been trying to get with for weeks would be there and was asking about me. I convinced Hunter to watch Robin alone, and I would be back in two hours tops. That everything would be fine. Everything was not fucking fine. An hour later, I got a frantic call from Hunter, sirens wailing in the background people yelling. He was a fucking mess. All I heard was Robin was shot. My heart shattered. I broke every traffic law driving back home. The entire time telling myself she would be okay. She would be fine with a scar we would make stories about. I would tell her she fought off wild bears and saved me. Everything would be ok.

When I got home, I found Hunter, mute sitting on the front lawn, rocking and crying. He wouldn't say anything to anybody. Not even the cops."

My quiet tears are impossible to hold in. It must have been so traumatic to be a teen boy thinking life was dandy to get a call like that. I know all too well what it is to lose a loved one. Only I had time to say goodbye and prepare myself, and it still tore open my chest and ripped out my heart when that little green line went flat. Learning of a death so sudden to someone so young must have been devastating.

Lifting my head, I rest my chin on his chest and cup his scruffy cheek in my hand. Caressing the soft skin of his cheekbone. Those golden hazel eyes finding mine and staying there as he continues.

"She was so young and innocent and sweet. She had big round green eyes like Beau and so much thick dark brown hair we never knew what to do with it. Falcon was always braiding it and putting it up in pigtails. She had it in two long braids that night with pink little dinosaur charms on the ends. She loved dinosaurs. I bet she would have grown up to do something that involved them. Land Before Time was her favorite. She would have been fifteen by now. Probably dating, and me and Griff would be scaring the boys shitless whenever they would look at her like we looked at girls at that age."

His chuckle is low and forced and reminiscent of good times past and missed.

"You guys didn't exactly have it easy growing up, did you?"

"No. But Mom and Pop made the best of it. We were loved and happy. Just a little unorthodox."

"Did you ever find out who shot her?" He failed to mention if anyone was ever caught or how exactly she was shot.

“Since Hunter wasn’t talking after that night, all we had to go on was the evidence in the house and his few descriptions of the men and their car. He was beaten to shit, must have put up a hell of a fight. We don’t know why he wasn’t shot. There were bullet holes everywhere. From what we could tell, it looked like a drive-by, but it also appeared that they had come into the house. Maybe looking for something? Someone? We don’t know. Hunter never told anyone the whole story. Mom and Pop may know, but they never told us much about business details back then. Anyways, Pop said they found the guys and dealt with them, and that was that. No cops ever came around investigating or anything. That’s when I first learned how much reach and control the Syndicate really had in this city.”

“Your poor mom, she must have been so crushed.” He nods. His normally bright golden eyes are dull and sad. I didn’t want to make him sad.

“She was. She’s a tough bird, though. We all worked our way through it in our own time, except Hunter. Life would have been so different if I’d just stayed home. Robin might still be alive, and Hunter wouldn’t still be blaming himself for it. You know he didn’t speak for a year after the accident?”

“Really?”

“Yeah, no one could ever get him to say a word. Once I caught him out in the woods behind his parents’ house. I was being a total creeper and watching him from the bushes. All he did was scream into the trees. Arrow says he heard him do it a few times. It was the only reason they knew he still could speak.”

“Jesus. Poor Hunter.” He only nods and says nothing more. I can feel the weight lifting from his chest as the seconds tick by. Knowing this family, he probably never went to therapy for the trauma, and talking about it helps, I would know. Then he speaks again just when I thought he might be falling asleep.

“I’m not good or perfect, but if you’ll have me, I’m yours.” Now his eyes are brightening as he watches me, waiting for me to say something—anything. I want to say everything. All the tingly butterflies he gives me, all the times I catch myself smiling thinking of him, and the way his touch soothes every uneasy ache and all the chatter in my mind. How much I truly love him no matter his past or future.

“Guess it’s a good thing I don’t love you because you’re a good guy. I love you because you’re unapologetically you. Crass, impulsive, aggressive, raw edges and all.” Golden eyes, bright and focused, now stare back at me. Hanging on my every syllable. The darkness from reminiscing about his dead sister is gone.

“Say it again.”

“I love you, Nix.” In half a second, he’s rolling me under him and sealing his mouth to mine.

Our mouths have been stuck together for the better part of an hour. With how demanding and desperate his touch is, it feels like I haven’t been kissed in years. Wanting to wash away the sadness and guilt from both our pasts and reinforce this newfound solidity we’ve created together.

Fingers tangle in my already tangled hair pulling me even deeper into his lips. It’s unforgiving and filled with promises to always love me. To always be by my side and make me feel exactly how I do now. Admired, happy, loved, protected, safe. Nix tells me all the things he doesn’t have the words to describe with his mouth, touch, and love. He sure as hell is getting pretty fucking good at kissing to convey his emotions. It might just be our own language.

Breaking the kiss, he rests his forehead on mine and closes his eyes, his fingers still running through my hair.

“I told you, you loved me.” His smile is infectious, and when he lays down dragging me to his chest once again, two broken and misshapen chunks, we fit together perfectly.

Chapter 23

Phoenix

“W

hat the hell did you do?” My most annoying sibling bursts into my home way too fucking early. Stomping through my living room, demanding I tell him something when I don’t even know what the hell he’s yelling about. Okay, that’s a lie. I know what he’s yelling about because last night Beau and I gave Braxton a beating he won’t soon forget.

“You’re going to have to be more specific. I do a lot of shit.” I don’t even look at Griffon as I continue eating my breakfast sandwich of eggs, bacon, and cheese on whole-wheat toast. Naturally, I have two sandwiches on my plate. Growing boy’s gotta eat. Clover sits next to me, eating a similar sandwich but with avocado sans cheese. While Beau has doubled up on the bacon. None of us stand to greet Griff as he makes his way into my home, stopping only when he enters the dining area and rounds so I can see him. He actually looks pissed. Weird.

“You know what specifically.”

“Do I, though? So, I guess now we’re having meetings in my dining room at breakfast in our pajamas? Can’t this wait till later? Like, after we get dressed?” I ask between bites of my sandwich, not really giving him my full attention. That is still focused on Clover’s tits and perky nipples that are poking out through the sleep shirt she’s still wearing.

“It’s eleven in the morning. Most people are dressed by now, Nix.” He booms at me.

Standing there glowering like it's unusual for us to be up so late.

"Well, some of us work nights."

"You mean like last night? When you snatched Braxton and tortured him for hours before dumping him in a parking lot naked and zip tied."

"Ha, ha, ha, yeah, that was pretty funny. I had a still printed from the security camera to keep as a souvenir of him unconscious propped against his stupid Ferrari." When I look up, I find Griff almost sneering—almost. He's trying really hard, but he hasn't had much practice, so it's a little like he ate something bad that's not agreeing with him. Beau tries to stifle a laugh with his breakfast sandwich, and Clover is sitting there slack-jawed watching me. Shit. I hadn't told her about the Braxton thing yet. Fuck she's gonna be pissed at me for not telling her.

"You did what?" Her big sapphire eyes blink wide at me, waiting for an explanation. I highly doubt she'll be opposed to what I did, considering she supported the idea of killing him, but she doesn't know the specifics of what I did. I told her last night I wasn't a good guy, and I meant that. I feel no remorse for what I did to that worthless slimeball. He got what was coming to him, and I would do it again in a heartbeat.

"We only roughed him up a little and then took him back to his car. Don't worry, he's still alive." I growl to Griff. "I obeyed your rules. No killing. All the rest is fair game. Right?" I spit his words from the other day right back at him.

"You fucked him up the ass with a cattle prod." I watch Clover to see her reaction. She doesn't do much, just purses her lips together and looks down at her plate. Picking at the toast. "You may not have killed him, but you're stirring shit up, Nix. I don't appreciate having to deal with this shit first thing on a Monday morning."

Straightening, Griff rights his tie that got a millimeter out of place and brushes his

hands down his vest straightening out nonexistent wrinkles. Like he's better than us as if he doesn't have just as many scars and tattoos hidden under that five-thousand-dollar suit. If it weren't for our appearance and mutual penchant for violence, I would question if we were really related.

"Your actions have consequences Nix."

"Yeah, like Braxton has to sit on an inflatable donut for the next six months." Griff is not amused. Even though Beau and I both chortle under our breath. Even Clover cracks a grin. I knew my strong warrior woman would appreciate what I did for her.

"No. like we're going to have to start watching our backs now." Griff bites out.

"We've always had to watch our backs. That's not new." Beau chimes in from across the table, giving Griff aso whatkind of look.

"Except now we have to do it within the Syndicate from the Shaw's."

"They've always hated us and vice versa. This is nothing new and just one more thing on the ever-growing pile of why we hate each other." Griff turns his glare on Beau, now trying to manifest the superpower to fry him with laser eyes, from what I can tell. Or he's constipated and needs to take a shit. It could be whatever disagreed with his stomach to twist his face up before.

"Chill the fuck out, Griff. He's alive. No accords have been broken. If the council won't do a fucking thing about what he did to Clover, then they're not going to do a fucking thing about this." My brother stands over all of us, authoritative, hands gripped in fists at his side. The only sign that he's any kind of angry. Everything else is flat and indifferent as usual now.

"All of you will be at my office inonehour. We have things to discuss." With that, he

leaves just as abruptly as he arrived. None of us hurry to finish our food. Clover only takes a few more nibbles off her's before we eventually rise and get dressed to head to my demanding brother's office.

Just to piss off Griff, we stroll into his office at CCS headquarters one hour and fifteen minutes later. He doesn't even lift his gaze from his computer to greet us. Just barks out a one-word command.

"Sit."

I lead Clover to sit in one of the chairs. They're the same exact one my father has in his office but with much less wear on them. Griff doesn't have people in his office if he can avoid it. He much rather prefers conference calls, e-mails, and pigeon carrier letters with wax seals over dealing with people face to face. He's not exactly the public relations type. If they plan to grow C.C.S. beyond local drug lords and gangsters, they're going to have to hire a P.R. person of some sort or marketing magicians. I've heard mentions of Griff trying to expand to other types of faction all along the eastern coast. Trying to make us the top name in private security for a number of industries. Including celebrities, businessmen, lawyers, politicians, judges, police chiefs, etc., some of which are all in someone or another's pocket. When you get in bed with criminals, you tend to need a little extra security when you go about dealings with them.

After Beau settles in the other guest seat and we wait for a moment, my father and mother both enter Griff's office. Beau stands and offers the seat to my father. Out of respect, of course, because he is in no way elderly and unable to stand for long periods of time. Hell, if we went at it right now, he'd probably still kick my ass. Man's got just as much muscle as me but with decades more experience.

My mother, who is just as capable of handling herself, takes a seat on the crisp leather couch along the wall. Sitting on the edge and crossing her ankles like a proper lady.

Which is contradictory to the knuckle tattoos and fitted leather pencil skirt she's wearing. Somehow my mother manages to balance badass and boss lady into one outfit. She helps out at C.C.S. with client relations but prefers to handle the money. Accounts receivable and payable, billings, payroll, that kind of stuff. I think that's where Raven gets it from. My father is really the only one that is good with face-to-face client relations. Even when dealing with the less than respectable, you need to be respectable. Otherwise, you'll just run off all your clientele. Kill'em with kindness and if they're still assholes, then just plain kill'em. It's a family code of conduct of sorts.

My aunt Pearl also makes an appearance and takes a standing position near Beau. She's probably only here because she's the second council member for our family. This means this is going to be a serious and loud conversation.

Sloan barks from Clover's lap. She insisted on bringing the little furball with us. Apparently, she's going to train her to go everywhere with her and be her personal doggy-guard. She wants to train her in English and Russian because she read somewhere that it's harder for people to command them if they're trained in a different language. German is the norm for training, but everyone knows that now because of the internet, so she chose Russian cause it sounds cool. Can't disagree with her when she's right. It does sound fucking cool to tell a dog to sit in Russian. 'Sidet' pronounced see-dee-yet. Fits right in with our lifestyle, I suppose. Let's just hope the Russian mafia doesn't ever come after us.

Pops sees the blue-eyed Pitbull and reaches out to pet her from his seat next to Clover. Since Sloan is still a puppy and hasn't learned yet not to let strangers pet her, she wags her stub adamantly and licks at his hand.

“Who’s this cutie?”

“Her name is Sloan.”

“Well, isn’t she precious? Hello there Sloan. Who’s a pretty girl? Yes, you are.” We never had pets, so to see my father baby talking to the dog is, well, it’s weird and hilarious.

“So, what’s all this about Braxton getting his ass handed to him last night?” Pops gives me a knowing side-eye, but it’s accompanied by a wink that says nice job. Everyone but Griffon wanted to put Braxton in his place. I was just the first one to take action.

“Your son,” Griff starts eyeing me. He tends to refer to me as their son when he’s displeased with my behavior. “Took it upon himself to seek retribution without sanctioned approval.”

“Sanctioned approval? Are you fucking kidding me? This isn’t the army. I don’t need your permission. Corporal control freak.” I am not in the mood today to deal with his irrational need to control everything everyone does.

“Yes, you do. Technically you work for me, and you do as I say.” He must be out of his ever-loving mind if he thinks that’s gonna slide.

“Technically, I don’t give a rat’s ass, and technically this had nothing to do with work.” My glare could cut diamonds, and he still sits in his big boss man chair, acting like the king of everything. Pops really shouldn’t have given him so much power in

the business. It's gone directly to his over-inflated head.

"You'll be singing a different tune when you're assigned to low-level deliveries only." He thinks threatening me with easy could-do-it-in-my-sleep work is going to make me any less argumentative. Little does he know if all I did was low-level shit, I would have way more time for tattooing and Clover. In my book, that's not a bad thing.

"Go ahead. See how long that lasts before shit hits the fan. You know I get shit done right, and dealers like Robbie and Lulu don't like to work with anyone else." Not to toot my own horn, but I'm the fucking best at handling the problematic dealers. They like my swagger and charm. Although Lulu will be disappointed to discover I'm a taken man now. She's been trying to get in my pants for years. Even though she has a boyfriend who could easily double as my twin, she says it's not the same as the original. I think she got with him solely because he resembles me.

"Sorry to interrupt your little dick-measuring contest, boys, but perhaps Clover would be more comfortable waiting outside while you discuss matters?" My mother's calm and cool voice silences both my brother and me. We never interrupt mom when she's talking. Not unless we wanna pay for it later. Even as grown-ass men, we fear the wrath of mom. "Come, Clover. Let's sit in the lobby where there's a little less testosterone peacocking."

Reaching for Clover's hand, my mother guides her and Sloan out of the office to wait in the lobby. As she passes, I give her a quick peck on the temple, promising to be out as soon as my brother pulls his head out of his ass. Which makes her grin. Then she exits with my mom, leaving me, Beau, Griff, Pops, and aunt Pearl to 'discuss' the situation where Griff will yell, scold, and eventually realize there ain't shit he can do and send me on my way with a "warning."

Clover

Delila, Nix's mother, leads me out of Griffon's office and a good twenty feet away in the large expansive lobby. Clean, modern furniture separates the open space into two areas around the main receptionist desk. A fuller, curvy blonde woman sits behind the desk, answering the phone and taking messages for Faust and Griffon and directing calls to other employees. She has victory rolls in her hair and bright red lipstick to match her strawberry pattern dress. If she were to stand, I bet it's some sort of vintage fifties style dress.

I wonder how many people work in this office. How many people are needed for a private security firm? Looks to be maybe a dozen. Probably not necessary to have too many in office. The people who actually do the security don't really need to hang around waiting to be put on assignment. I suppose they just call or e-mail them the info when they receive an assignment. So these must all be back-office people.

They say they're 'private security,' but I'm learning that mainly means bodyguard services. Sometimes security details for clubs and businesses but nothing like the private security cars you see patrolling malls and apartment complexes.

"Here, dear, have a seat." Delila directs me to a pair of armchairs turned slightly to face one another in a far corner out of the way. In case clients come in. Sloan plops herself down at my feet and curls up on the floor.

"Now, this is much better." She's not wrong. The escalating voices and arguments in Griffon's office were starting to give me a headache. I've had enough of yelling and arguing for a while. "Would you like a glass of water or something else to drink? Tea perhaps?"

"Water would be great. Maybe some for Sloan too?" Delila gestures to the woman behind the receptionist's desk, who turns her attention to her immediately. Which

means she was probably watching us the whole time keeping an alert eye on her boss.
“Water for Miss Clover and Sloan if you please.”

The woman nods and stands promptly to fetch the water. I was right. Her strawberry print dress pinches at the waist with a white belt and flares out to a circle skirt. Her full curves giving her a rounded-out pin-up girl look.

“So. How are you feeling, dear?” Delila looks at me with real concern but no pity.

Thank fuck.

“I’m doing better. Getting back to normal as best I can. Having Nix, Beau, Rosie, and now Sloan is helping a lot.”

“I’m so glad my son is good to you.”

“He’s extremely good to me.” Thankfully I keep the sarcasm out of my tone, but I can’t hide the knowing smile on my lips.

“Good. He needs a good woman in his life. Been too wild for too long.” Damn, even his mom knows he was a man-whore. “But he’s a good man underneath it all. Just needed to see it for himself, I think.”

I nod because I have no idea how to respond to that. My brain is still a little frazzled from the yelling before. The fifties-style reception returns with a bottle in one hand and a large glass bowl in the other filled with water for Sloan. Handing me the bottle, then placing the bowl on the floor in front of Sloan and giving her an ear scratch before standing again.

“Will that be all, Missus. Colton?”

“Yes. Thank you, Sandra.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

“You’re welcome, ma’am.” She answers sweetly with a smile before returning to her desk and the phones. Opening the bottle, I take a large swig before recapping it and setting it on the table to the side of the chair.

For a moment, we sit in silence. I don’t really know what to say. I haven’t spent much time with Delila on my own. Just the interaction at the family bar-be-que. Which I had the rest of the girls around me at the time to act as a buffer. Delila, although friendly and nice, was also a very intimidating woman. Tall tattooed and dressed to kill, literally. I’m pretty sure there’s a tiny gun strapped to her thigh under that leather skirt.

While I look like a child playing dress-up in her daddy's clothes since I’m still wearing Nix’s sweater. This time with jeans and my doc’s, though. So I look a little more put together. I rub Sloan’s head nervously, unsure if I should talk or wait for her to. Should I talk about the weather, sports? Doesn’t seem appropriate. Thankfully she chooses for me.

“When I first met Nix’s father, we didn’t exactly get along either. As a matter of fact, our families hated each other. His was made up of criminals and gangsters. Mine were members at the local country club and wore sweater vests.”

“Wait, what?”

“I know I don’t look like it now. Trust me, when I was younger, I wore pastels and khakis. I even used to like it.” Delila chuckles while scrunching her nose as if she smelled rotten fish. I could not picture this badass bitch wearing khakis or pastel sweater vests. Apparently, my astonished face conveyed that for me because she only

laughed more when she caught sight of it.

“It’s ok. I don’t wear them anymore. Faust helped me to find my true self. I wasn’t really the country club golfing type. No matter how much my family wanted, me to be. When I first met Faust, I was disgusted with his muscles, smoking, and tattoos. He hated my clean and polished life. But it seemed wherever I went, there he was, lurking about in the shadows. It wasn’t until way later that I realized he was dealing with all the country club members. Don’t let people’s shiny polished lives deceive you. They do more drugs and party harder than they’d like the public to know. They just know how to hide it better. Anyways, we went back and forth a lot for a while. Me threatening to call the cops and him checking out my ass every chance he got. Then things got a little complicated and messy, really messy. We almost lost each other. Almost giving up thinking it would just be best for everyone if we went our separate ways. That we weren’t right together. Turns out we were apparently exactly what the other needed. He was the man that taught me to think for myself and make my own choices and that I liked a little violence in my life. I was the woman that taught him a few manners and to have a little more structure in his ... businesses. On the surface, it didn’t seem we were meant for each other, while underneath, we were perfect together.”

She stops her reminiscing to let a heartfelt smile slip across her lips as she stares off, lost in her memories. Watching her, I can see the pure love and affection for Faust there in her bright golden eyes, just like her son’s. Is that how Nix looks when he thinks of me? One can only hope. Once again, I’m taken aback by this family. Their ability to love so deeply but still do what they do without qualms.

“How did you know he truly loved you?” My question breaks her daydream, and she turns to face me again, still smiling.

“Men in the Colton family don’t always know how to convey it easily. But they show it in less traditional ways. What Nix did for you, hunting you down and taking out the

men in his way getting to you, that's his way of showing it—plus, Faust told me. Colton mendo nottell anyone they love them unless they mean it. Well, except maybe Arrow. That boy falls in love with every girl that smiles at him.” We both get a good chuckle, and the tightness in my chest eases.

Nix had told me he loved me and I him. Knowing he's not just saying it to make me feel better ironically makes me feel better. You can't blame me for being a little unsure. He was a man-whore, after all. Fucking his way through all the women in North Carolina.

“Don't worry yourself, Clover. Even I can tell how he feels about you. He's never done anything even slightly like this for any woman before. You're special, believe that.”

And I do.

Chapter 25

Phoenix

At the end of our little conversation in Griffon's office, I was informed that there would be a council meeting held in two days to discuss everything. Including our encounter with Braxton, and Clover and I are to be there along with everyone involved with her discovery and retrieval. Meaning Magnus, Beau, Arrow, Zander, Rosie, Lily, and Raven. No matter how I argued against Raven attending, they were insistent that everyone who knew or took part be in attendance. No one mentioned Blake's involvement. That was an unspoken truth between us. We would not drag him into this, no matter what. After what he did for Clover and me, I owe him that much.

Today is that day. Clover is dressing in silence. I know she doesn't want to go, and

she doesn't want to talk about what happened. Thankfully she's told Rosie and Beau enough, and they've conveyed it. Her little outburst before was more than enough confirmation of what Braxton did. Pops has assured me that they will only ask yes, or no questions, and he's conveyed everything we've told him to the rest of the council. This is just a formality to allow the Shaw's their moment in the sun to speak their piece. Which means they just want to yell at me and deny that Braxton did anything wrong.

Braxton, of course, can't attend; he's incapacitated at the moment. Probably in a private hospital somewhere licking his wounds. That's the only reason I'm even allowing Clover to go to this meeting. If he were going to be there, I wouldn't let her anywhere near it. She doesn't need to see him and be reminded of what he did and listen to whatever he had to say. Maybe someday, she'll be able to face him without fear and confront him properly. For now, I'm glad for his absence. Protecting my girl is my top priority, and if any of the other Shaw's try anything, I'll do to them what I did to Braxton. Possibly worse.

We arrive at the meeting with Beau, the others making their own way to the meeting. Which is taking place in one of the many offices owned and operated by members of the Syndicate. To keep everything balanced, the meetings are rotated between different family's properties and businesses. This helps keep the peace so no one family can gain the upper hand because the discussions are always held in their space. Because of that, today, we are assembling for this little pow-wow in the McKinney's offices behind their furniture store.

A furniture store that sells unique one-of-a-kind pieces made by the McKinney's and their employees. Since most of them are potheads, they're pretty chill and like making things with their hands. There's a lot of unique carved pieces and woven wicker chairs. Funky upholstered refurbished pieces and even some metalwork sculptures. They make it all out on their compound outside of town and sell it here. Sometimes they take it to festivals and carnivals when it suits them or lines up with

other revenues of business and works as a logical cover.

They decided to have this meeting on a day the shop would be closed, which is probably for the best. Considering there will most likely be a lot of yelling going on. Anytime we get in a room with the Shaw's, there tends to be tension. Now that the main topic of discussion is about a Shaw messing with the Colton's, there's bound to be a few explosive words. Specifically, from me to them, and how I'm going to kill each and every one of them if they ever so much as look at Clover again.

The office space is in the very back of the shop and large enough to fit one of those long fancy conference tables that I'm sure my father has in one of his offices for CCS. Allowing the entire council Griffon, Clover, and I, plus Jaxon and Loretta Shaw, who used to be on the Council but has since been replaced by her psychotic daughter Oxana, to be able to sit comfortably. However, since they wanted everyone involved present, Beau, Rosie, Raven, Magnus, Arrow, Lily, and Zander all have to stand along the wall behind us.

The large number of us versus them makes it appear that we're trying to intimidate the Shaws. We aren't intentionally, but it's an added bonus to the situation. Showing them how many people we have backing us and how few they have really puts things into perspective. If they're smart, which they claim to be smarter than us all, they'll agree to whatever the Council says and back the fuck off. Or I'll hunt them down and slaughter them.

Clover and I are seated directly across from the she-devil herself, Oxana and Jaxon, the eldest Shaw spawn. I don't know why Oxana is on the Council and not Jaxon. He always seems to sit on the sidelines and let Braxton and Oxana run the show. I don't really know much about him. He keeps his nose out of our personal business, and we rarely see him for much. I know from Griff that he is involved in business, but other than that, the man's kind of a mystery to me. Oxana, on the other hand, we all know way too much about. Her sociopathic tendencies, her love of the sick and twisted, her

innate ability to be hated by every single person she ever meets and yet still desired by men. I really wish they hadn't allowed her to fill a Council position. Unfortunately, the Council has no say over who is on the Council. Each family chooses their own representatives and appoints their replacements. Considering Braxton won't be able to ever have children, and I don't even know if Jaxon likes women, that leaves bearing children to Oxana. Those kids are going to be seriously fucked up in the head. I pity the poor bastard she convinces to father her demon spawn.

The meeting starts civilly and quietly. Neither the Shaw's nor we want to start the yelling first. The only ones talking are the other Council members until they get to the part where they begin divulging their decisions. Since we're in the McKinney's house, they lead the meeting today. Flynn McKinney, a man around Pop's age with a full greying beard and long hippie hair tied neatly at the base of his neck, commands the room's attention with his strong, steady voice. He's not a large man, but he's got a large personality and voice. Flynn's been summarizing the events that have led us here today and is just about to get to the good part. Why we're all waiting patiently and quietly.

"That is why the Council will not be taking action against Braxton Shaw, nor will we take action against Phoenix Colton." A chorus of expletives and arguments arise from all the Shaw's and half the Colton's behind me.

"Since no one is dead," Flynn continues booming over the ruckus to effectively shut everyone up. "and none of the accords have been broken, there's no reason for us to take action against either."

"No reason? They mutilated my brother. He can't even sit right. They should be punished." Oxana stands across from us, slamming her hands flat on the table. The lapels of her black fitted blazer shift open as she leans in. The woman thinks it's fashionable to wear a blazer without a shirt or bra underneath, and I get a glimpse of

way too much of her skin. Oxana may be horrifically beautiful but seeing so much of her exposed skin makes me want to vomit.

“Punished? For what? He got what was coming to him. We only did to him what he did to Clover. He deserves to be at the bottom of a lake. He’s lucky we let him live.” Beau steps forward from behind us and places his hands on the table, mocking her stance, staring her down. My cousin may seem like a soft-hearted pushover, and he is sometimes, but this is not one of those times. Beau can be just as hardcore and vicious as the rest of us when needed. He just chooses not to be as often as some of us like to be.

“Not to mention he tried to have us assassinated, byMarcoof all people. Perhaps he should have hired someone better. It’s so hard to find good help these days.” I add. No way in hell am I letting them forget that little detail. If they won’t do anything about what he did to Clover, taking out a hit on another head family is against the accords and a punishable offense.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. Neither my brother nor anyone in our family put out such a hit on you. I will not tolerate this insult. We are Shaw’s, and we deserve respect.” She shrieks back at us from across the table.

“You have to earn respect. Having the last name Shaw does not automatically warrant you respect, you vile excuse for a woman.” Disrespect is the greatest insult to a Shaw, and Beau just insulted and disrespected them in one sentence. Although they’ve done nothing in their lives to deserve our respect, they demand it. Which ironically makes us less inclined to respect them.

“As for the claim regarding Marco attempting an assassination, we have not been able to locate him or any of his security team. When and if he shows up, then we can address it.” Flynn states from his seat at the head of the table. Great, either the pussy ran away and is in hiding, fearing the wrath of the Shaw’s, or they already got to him and removed him from the equation. Should have known.

“You better watch yourself, Colton.” Turning her attention to Clover at my side, who hasn’t let go of my hand since we arrived, she continues her unhinged rant. “You too. You may be theirpet, but you aren’t a Colton. The accords owe you no protection.”

“Which brings me to our next order of business,” Flynn interjects before I get a chance to lunge across the table and rip Oxana’s tongue from her throat. I must have been gripping Clover’s hand like a vice because she squeezes my wrist with her free hand, and I relax my death grip.

“Since this has caused such an issue between you two, and with almost the entire Colton family vouching for her, Clover will now be a protected asset for as long as

she is working for or dating a Colton.”

Oxana and her father both protest vehemently at this. I could give two shits what they think about it. I’m fucking ecstatic. Now they can’t touch her unless they want to feel the full wrath of the Colton’s falling down on their heads. Grinning like a madman, I relax in my chair and let Oxana dig herself deeper into her own grave.

“What does that mean?” Clover leans in and whispers to me. Sometimes I forget she doesn’t know all the ins and outs of things.

“It means you will be treated like a Colton. You are protected from the other families just like we are. But if you do something out of line, you will also be treated in the same manner. All rewards and punishments the same as us.” Her brows knit together, and she cocks her head slightly. Apparently still unclear as to what that really means in this moment. “It means they can’t touch you without repercussions. Like me hunting them down and killing them.”

She mouths a silent “Oh,” nodding in understanding. Still holding tight to my hand like a lifeline, she watches silently as Oxana and Preston argue with Flynn. After a minute or two, he finally gets them to shut the hell up and sit down. Clover and I remain sitting quietly, watching the three-ring circus across from us. Clover doesn’t really know how to respond to it all, but I’m giddy as a schoolgirl wearing crotchless panties. This actually couldn’t have gone any better. I am more than happy to let Oxana dig herself deeper into her own grave. She’s doing a hell of a job at it without my help.

“This will be the last we discuss this matter. If anyone goes against our orders, we will not hesitate to clean house.” His tone is firm, and we all get the point. Leave the other alone and get on with business. It’s not exactly how I’d like to settle things, but it’ll have to do for now. Oxana turns her beady dark gaze to Clover and me and, in a low-level tone, speaks through her teeth.

“You might be safe for now, but you won’t always have the protection of the Council. Eventually, someday we’ll make sure you pay for everything. You and your family have been a blight on this organization for years, and I can’t wait to see you gone.”

“Enough, Oxana.” Preston, her father, clips sharply at her side, effectively silencing her. “Let’s go. I’ve had enough democracy for one day.” All the Shaw’s stand and exit under the watchful gaze of every Colton here.

I wonder what she meant by ‘I can’t wait to see you gone?’ Are the Shaw’s planning something? I wouldn’t put it past them, but they better have an army hidden somewhere because if they come after us, they’re going to be seriously outnumbered. Turning to Griffon as I leave, I give him a questioning look. Hopefully portraying what I’m thinking. I’m not sure if he understands it, but his face is calm and eyes piercing. He gives me one curt nod. So, I’m going to assume he’s getting my drift because that’s the last I’m going to concern myself with it. That area of business is Griffon’s territory, not my problem.

Leaving that hot mess in Griff’s hands, I turn back to my girl and escort her back to my truck. Keeping an arm around her shoulders the entire time, the farther we get from the conference room, the more I feel her relax. When we reach the truck, I stop Clover and turn her to face me. Wrapping an arm around her waist, I cup her cheek, rubbing my thumb along her soft skin.

“You doing okay, sweet cheeks?”

“Yeah, just a little dazed at it all. Still trying to get used to the whole – situation.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll get used to it eventually. We got plenty of time.” Those big sparkling ocean blue eyes stare up at me beneath long thick lashes, and in them, I see my future. My hope and desires for a future I never thought about before. Because

that's what she does to me. I'm not thinking about my next one-night stand or masking the sadness inside I didn't know was there because it was buried so deep under drugs, alcohol, and violence. It wasn't until I met Clover that I realized why I lived how I did. It'd been so many years that I'd efficiently smothered any emotions that weren't lust or anger.

Not anymore. Now I can feel everything. The sadness and guilt over losing Robin, the fear of losing another woman I love, joy at every smile Clover gives me, and finally, love. Love for the woman who saw through my bullshit and called me on it. Love for the woman who apparently loved me even after knowing exactly who I am on the inside and out. The woman I love and will someday soon marry.

Chapter 26

Clover

After a morning of naked cuddling with Nix, he gives me an edible, his newest attempt to help me calm the anxiety of going outside and returning to normal. Today I need it. I have decided I need to go out and personally thank everyone who took part in getting me away from Braxton. Which includes Magnus, Zander, and Arrow. Beau, Rosie, and Lily were easy enough to thank since I live with Beau. Rosie and Lily have been spending practically every minute of every day with me. And I'm pretty sure I've thanked Nix plenty at this point. Then I plan on going to Faust and assuring him I'm good to go back to work. As long as I can bring Sloan. He seemed to like her, so hopefully, that will be okay.

I didn't get much time to talk to him or Griffon. When I was in their offices, I was either chewing their heads off or ushered out to let them chew each other's heads off. Since they were also instrumental in helping, I do have to thank them. Even if I don't think Griffon deserves a thank you considering his behavior, but it's the right thing to do, so I'm gonna do it.

Rosie will be coming over, and she'll be going with me. Because I will not be alone any time in the near or not so distant future. Not until I know I can handle anything that comes my way or Braxton is dead. Whichever comes first. Nix is helping me out on the handling myself. I have the bravado and sharp tongue, but now I also have my very own Kimber K6s .357 magnum. A cute little hammerless snub nose revolver with a walnut handle engraved with a four-leaf clover. I call her Lucky. Having her in my purse or in a harness under my jacket or shirt is much more calming than all the edibles in North Carolina.

Today since fall is finally sinking its teeth into the south and cooling us off, I'm able to dawn a lightweight denim jacket to cover my shoulder harness holding Lucky. I pair it with my black pleather leggings, black Doc Martens, and a long loose white shirt. Simple and comfortable. Makes me feel stronger and more confident when leaving the house.

First stop; Magnus, because we can get donuts and cookies at the same time. Lily is working the front counter when we enter Cherry's Pie Bakery. The smell of sugar and frosting invading my senses and instantly turning my stomach from twisted up hoses into a sweet, creamy filling. Whoever discovered the power of sweets in turning a sour mood sweet was a genius because my mood has improved immensely since stepping foot inside the bakery.

It's cute and retro, with white and light pink checkered floors, matching glitter pink and mint green vinyl booths, and chairs. There's an oversized chalkboard hanging behind large, rounded glass cases filled with colorful and delicious-looking pastries, muffins, and bagels of all kinds. Ranging from classic chocolate chip cookies to what looks like a rainbow unicorn macaron. It even has edible glitter sprinkled on top.

Wonder if I can sneak one of those on our way out.

"He's in the back." Lily lifts the end of the counter like the bar top at Colts and lets us

in the back. There's a section of the back kitchen area that's visible from the counter we pass by before making a turn into the real back area. Before we get two steps farther, a metal bowl goes flying through the air. It crashes into a large metal shelf where cooking utensils and a variety of sprinkles go flying.

“Woah. What the shit?” I duck out of reflex even though the bowl wasn't anywhere near us.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

“Fuck. I’m sorry, Clover. I didn’t mean to scare you.” Magnus approaches us, breathing a little heavier than anyone baking cookies should. His muscles are also tense and bound tightly over his arms and shoulders. The short-sleeve shirt he’s wearing so snug I can see every flex and strain. “You guys okay?”

“Yeah, we’re fine there, Hulk. What did the bowl ever do to you?” Rosie asks. The flying bowl of mix not disturbing her one bit as she crosses to pick it up off the floor. The side is dented, and the shelf is bent a little where it hit. Fuck, Magnus is strong.

Turning to face Hulk Magnus, I catch his jaw flexing and his hands fisting. Nostrils flare as he tries to control his temper with deep breaths. He’s not as big as Nix, but every inch of him is tight ropes of muscles. Slimmer than his cousin but nonetheless intimidating.

“Recipe isn’t turning out how it should. Doesn’t taste right.” He seethes between clenched teeth. Didn’t know he took baking so seriously.

Rosie fingers the bowl, swiping some of the mix on her finger, and pops it in her mouth. Eyes squinting, she tastes whatever it is he’s trying to make. Her eyebrows pop up in delighted surprise.

“Mmm. Tastes like pumpkin.”

“It’s supposed to be pumpkinspice. There’s a difference. I’m trying to make a new recipe for the fall macarons, and they aren’t tasting right.” Stomping back to the table, I follow as he wipes the flour, sugar, and whatever else off his hands.

“Well, it tastes fine to me.” Rosie fingers another mouthful of the mix and mmm’s in approval.

“Fine isn’t good enough. It has to be perfect.” Poor Magnus is really upset over this.

“Don’t worry, Magnus. I’m sure you’ll get it in no time. You’re baking is the best.” I try to ease some of his stress, but it only works minimally. The scowl is gone, but the tension remains. So does the heavy breathing.

“Sorry, you guys didn’t come here to watch me freak out over a recipe. What can I do for you?” his attention is now turned on me.

“I wanted to come and thank you for what you did to help me.” With that, he softens just a little bit more.

“Of course, I was happy to help. Nix really cares for you, and I wouldn’t let anything happen to someone we care about. If you or Nix ever need anything, just let me know.”

“Thank you, but I think you’ve done more for me than I could ever repay.” He squints at me while I fidget sheepishly.

“You don’t have to repay me, Clover. I did it because I wanted to help. Don’t think that you owe me anything.” When a mob family does you a favor, doesn’t that mean you owe them for the rest of your life or something? So why do all the Colton’s keep insisting I don’t owe them anything? When in reality, I owe them everything. Without them, I’d be dead, Braxton’s play toy, or worse still alone in Mississippi.

“Okay, but if you ever need help like baking or something, I’m your girl.” He smiles then catches Rosie still taste-testing the not pumpkin spice macaron mix and growls.

“Sorry to cut this short, but I need some air. I’ll see you, girls, later, okay?” He doesn’t wait for an answer before stalking out of the room. Hands clenched again, and shoulders pinched to match his pinched expression. He takes his baking really seriously.

“What’s up with him?” I ask Rosie, who finally stops eating the mix. She shrugs one shoulder.

“That’s just Magnus.” With no further explanation, we’re on our way out again. I was hoping to talk with Magnus more, but I did what I came here to do.

Lily lets me snag a few of the rainbow unicorn macarons and a few other flavors on our way out of the bakery before we leave to go find Zander. Rosie texted him earlier and found out he’s playing a pick-up game of football today at the local college with a few friends.

I devour six macarons on our way to the college football field. We park and make our way to the field. At least a dozen and a half guys are on the field, dressed in mismatched and well-worn but professional-looking football gear, including pads and helmets. I thought this was a casual game with friends, but this is not casual at all. They even have a referee.

When I ask Rosie about it, she explains that for these guys, this is casual. Apparently, Zander used to be part of an NFL team, the North Carolina Reapers. He played four seasons as a tight-end and, in his fifth season, tore his Achilles tendon. Even after surgeries and months of rehab, he wasn’t able to put the strain and torque on his ankle that professional football demands. Which unfortunately ended his professional career about a year ago. Since then, he’s been back working with CCS mainly to keep busy. He definitely doesn’t need the money. On occasion, though, he and his old buddies on the Reapers play a friendly game together with some local college kids like a community outreach thing.

We stand on the sidelines and watch the guys set up a play and call out some random numbers before hiking the ball and ramming into one another. I know football on a basic level but nothing more. I know it's a touchdown and a field goal. There's interceptions and sacks on the quarterback. Do I know what penalties are which and why grabbing is a no-no here but totally ok there? Not a fucking clue. Which means I can follow along just enough to enjoy the game.

Zander is playing his old position, offensive tight end. He sees us and waves before resetting into position. Another ten minutes goes by while they play. I watch Zander. He plays well. I can tell he favors one side over the other. Trying to keep the strain off his bad ankle. Once or twice it's obvious it slows him down or hinders his playing. I can't imagine what it would be like to be a professional football player and have your career cut short because of an injury. From what I know, he didn't go to college, barely graduated high school, and football was his life. The only thing he loves more than his family.

They break, and every tall, built, sweaty guy swarms the sideline. Each removing their helmet on their way, and they are a handsome bunch of guys if I do say so. Rosie seems to agree with me as I watch her stalking them with her eyes. Watching their every move but making no effort to flirt or seduce them with her killer curves. Instead, she just watches with veiled interest. Not sure if she's really interested or if she just likes the view.

Zander catches my eye that classic Zander smile plastered across his face. Looking happier than he did before. Skin glistening in the afternoon sun as he strips off the pads down to a t-shirt. The edges of his tattoos peek out from the collar and reach down his arms to his elbows. I don't get a good look at it through all the sweaty men and giant body pads.

Before he comes to meet us, he chugs a bottle of water and wipes off his face and neck sweat. Thank fuck because he gathers me in his arms and squeezes, lifting me

off my feet in a giant bear hug. I knew he was a great hugger. He smells like sweat, hot man, and mint. Although I wasn't expecting one, I more than welcome it. Hugging him back as well as my short arms wrapped around his bulky body can. He's just as big as Nix, at least.

Finally, after holding me for a little longer than Nix would have been comfortable with, Zander sets me on my feet and gives Rosie a similar squeeze but without picking her up.

"So, what do I owe this honor?"

"I wanted to come and thank you in person for what you did for me." Since we're out in public, I won't mention any specifics. I don't know who these other guys are and if they know anything about the Colton's and their businesses.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

“It’s not a problem. We’re family. It’s what we do.” My heart nearly jumps out of my throat, constricting my words and suffocating my lungs. He thinks I’m family. I realize they all do. They all treat me like I’m one of them, without question. With each passing day and hour, I spend with these people, I too feel like I’m one of them.

They may be violent and crazy and carry guns that see more action than a Bruce Willis movie, but they’re my people now. My family.

“Thanks. I appreciate that, and I know Nix does too.” We’ve obviously made it clear to everyone that we’re a thing now and seeing each other exclusively, so I don’t have to hide it anymore. And if it wasn’t obvious from the sleepless nights and massive search party he sent out for me, then they weren’t paying close enough attention.

“Nix is a great guy. A little rough around the edges, but you get used to him. I know he cares for you and would do anything for you, but that doesn’t mean he can’t be a jackass sometimes. Don’t mind his little tantrums.”

“Oh, don’t you worry. I know how to handle him.” I give him a wink and a grin. “But I’m still not forgiving you for the club incident.”

“Oh, come on, that was like forever ago. Can’t a guy get a break?”

“No. You ruined my night.” Crossing my arms over my chest, I try my damndest to look mad. It’s hard, though, since I’m smothering a smile.

“I highly doubt that. From the look of things on your way out, it was probably a great night.” He gives me an all-knowing Cheshire grin. Damn him and his cousins for

being so close. Nix probably told him all about it. And now my cheeks are turning red.

There's nothing I can say to that, so I button my lips, and thankfully Rosie interjects. Asking about his ankle and who's winning in their game. She also asks about some of the other player's relationship statuses. Zander looks unsure if he wants Rosie to be flirting with the guys or not. I get it. Pro athletes are even bigger whores than Nix was. Not sure I would want a sibling or relative of mine to get involved with them either if I knew how many notches were on their bedposts.

We stay through their half-hour break for half time and chat some more with Zander and a few of his football buddies. A couple he brings over and introduces seems he likes them well enough. I can also see the sadness in his eyes when they talk about going back to practice with the team. It being the beginning of the season, they're all slammed and working their asses off to prepare for the season ahead.

Rosie and I promise to come to watch a home game soon since apparently the Colton's have a lift time VIP box. Didn't know they were such football fans, but I guess they would be if one of them was a player. He probably still would be today if it weren't for his injury. Then we leave to go find the last person on my list to thank today.

Stepping through the front door to Robin's Nest, Nix's tattoo parlor, the bell dings above, and the familiar sight of the shop's lobby greets us. The front of the studio has large multi-paneled windows with dividers that make them look like a checkered board. The front of the shop and windows are all painted black to match the interior wall across from the exposed brick wall. Large, framed art hangs on the black wall. I assume they're all original works done by the artists who work in the shop.

Other than Nix and Arrow, there's a few other tattoo artists here. Spread out in their own stations separated by half walls to break up space and designate them into their

own workspace. Nix has his own private space in the back where I went before when he filled in the color on my arm. He still had to color in the matching underbust sternum tattoo. We just haven't really had the time lately with everything.

Today Arrow isn't behind the front counter. A lilac-haired girl with tats covering almost every inch of exposed skin sits on a stool typing on a tablet. She's thin but curvy and has a diamond stud piercing in each cheek like sparkling dimples. We approach the antique-style wood counter. It's black with the Robin's Nest Logo painted in white across the front.

"Hi. How can I help you today? Do you have an appointment?"

"No, we're here to see Arrow." Arrow, who is back in one of the station areas, pops his head up, hearing his name, and shines a million-dollar grin at us.

"Clover! It must be my lucky day to deserve a visit from such a beautiful lady." Rosie scoffs in mock offense.

"And what am I? A flaming bag of dog shit?" Arrow chuckles and makes his way to us as we meet him by the black couch against the brick wall. Across against the black wall is a matching twin but in blood red. I don't know who decorated the shop if it was Nix or one of his sisters or cousins, but it's very stylish yet edgy. A balanced mix of vintage and modern with a dark twist.

"Of course not. You're my beautiful Rose bud." His embrace is softer than Zander's but just as warm and welcoming. I know Arrow better than the others because he's been in the bar much more frequently. Especially when Braxton was stalking me and Nix couldn't be there. Arrow was always ready and willing to take up sentry guarding me. He hugs Rosie after releasing me, and we all sit on the black velvet couch. It's one of those tufted wood-trimmed ones that looks like it belongs in a castle in Transylvania. While Rosie sits in the matching armchair with one of those backs that

curves over the top and makes it look like a throne. It's freaking sweet, and I kind of want one for the house now.

"Did you realize that I'm a way better tattoo artist than Nix, and you want me to ink your skin now?" He's all on dimpled smiles and charm. Wearing ripped white jeans that are splattered with tiny drops of every color ink, but it's all focused on the front and mostly the thigh area. It looks like he drips his tattoo ink on them while he works. His long-sleeved grey shirt is pushed up to his elbows displaying his black and grey tats.

"No, because no one is better than Nix." I gush sardonically, and he gasps, pressing his hand to his chest like a preacher's wife who just heard the f word. He knows I jest, but I also kinda mean it. Nix is my boyfriend, so I have to say he's better. Even though it's true.

"Well, if you're not here for my subpar tattooing, then why are you here?"

"I wanted to thank you. For everything you've done for me. Keeping an eye on me at the bar and helping liberate me from that asshole." His face softens, and a rare moment of seriousness crosses his baby blues.

"I just wish I had been there that day so I could have kept him from getting to you. I keep kicking myself for not making sure you got to and from work safe while Nix was busy."

"It's not your fault Arrow. I've had to come to terms with the fact that it's no one's fault but Braxton's. I thought the same. If I had just let Rosie pick me up, if I had just listened to Nix or checked outside before leaving. There's a lot of if's and should have's, but it doesn't do any good to regret what's already done and in the past. There's nothing we can do now to change it. Only learn from it and move on. I'm here now, and that's what matters."

A small and slightly sad grin curves Arrow's lips. Reaching out, he grabs my hand and squeezes reassuringly. Telling me that if I ever need someone to call at three in the morning because I needed help, I could call him.

"I'm sorry, Clover. For everything that happened to you. You're too good a person to deserve any of it." I can't respond because if I open my mouth, all that will come out is a blubbering sob because I'm trying to hold back the tears. Arrow rubs the back of my hand softly, then breaks into his panty-melting brilliant smile again.

"Now, don't go crying. It'll only make me want you more. Then I'll have to lure you away from Nix with my manly charms." With a wiggle of his eyebrows and a gleam in his eyes, my mood instantly shifts from teary-eyed to laughing out loud. Arrow is always good for a laugh and inappropriate comments.

We sit talking this and that for a little while longer in the lobby until Arrow's next appointment shows up, and he has to say goodbye with another hug and peck on the cheek. He's really lucky Nix isn't here right now to see him.

Driving back home, I feel lighter and happier than I have in over a week. The stress and guilt shedding from my body and leaving me new and fresh. More optimistic for tomorrow.

Chapter 27

Clover

It's been almost two weeks since Nix served Braxton a little punishment for what he did, and I'm finally back behind the bar. Getting back into my normal routine, but with a few minor changes. Such as I always have Sloan and Lucky with me. Lucky tucked inside my shoulder holster, which is visible in the bar because Faust approved it. Sloan in the corner at the end of the bar behind a baby gate until she learns to follow and sit and listen to commands. And not pee on the floor. She's pretty good about letting me know, but she still has an accident or two here and there.

Secondly, for now, I don't go anywhere alone. Ever. I don't argue this time, and Beau, Rosie, Nix, and even Lily are always available to ride with me whenever I need to go somewhere.

If it weren't for Nix getting back in the shop to tattoo, he would probably be with me all the time. But I know he misses tattooing. He still does his job for the Syndicate, but tattooing is something he has to do. He's drawn to it, and it feeds his soul. There's no way I could keep him from it.

Since I returned to work, we decided I would only work afternoon shifts until I feel comfortable working after dark. Nix is trying to only go on deliveries during my shifts so he can be with me at night as well. Once things settle back into place, and I don't require round-the-clock chaperoning, we'll go back to working nights and crazy hours. Weirdly Griffon has been accommodating to shifting schedules around mine and Nix's requests for now.

I went to meet with him and Faust after we left Arrow at Robin's Nest last week. We had a very long and in-depth heart-to-heart. I said my piece, I thanked them both, and answered a few more of their questions about the whole ordeal. They didn't ask me to expand on the sexual things that transpired, thank goodness. It was hard enough to tell Rosie about them. I don't think I could repeat them again. I just want to put it in my past and forget it.

That's what I'm doing. Getting back to my life and not letting what Braxton did follow me around like a dark cloud waiting to rain on my parade. Fuck the rain. I'm going to live no matter the weather.

In the bar, things are as they were before. None of the patrons know the truth, and none ask why I was gone for a few weeks. Most of them probably didn't even notice. That's exactly how I want it. They don't need to know my personal business. Rosie sits at the end of the bar drinking a glass of sweet tea and going over some inventory sheets. Lily is next to her, sipping a hot tea and eating an early dinner. In my absence, they had to hire a new server quickly to help with not only my absence but Rosie and Beau's for those days they were looking for me or staying with me after. Which means now Rosie doesn't have to serve unless she wants to. The new waitress is pretty good, actually. Hasn't spilled any drinks on anyone yet, so that's good in my book.

I'm in the middle of pouring a draft beer when I hear the door open, and it takes me a second longer than normal to look up since I don't want to spill the draft. When I do, I see a face almost as threatening as Braxton's. His right-hand man. I never learned his name, but I'll never forget his face. Tall and strong as any personal bodyguard should be, clad in a black suit with a white button-up. An obvious bulge under his suit jacket where his gun rests in wait. Short, shaved hair and beady dark eyes. He looks like an ex-professional wrestler or something. He was one of the two who helped abduct me and was the one who came into the prison penthouse Braxton locked me in. He knew what Braxton was doing and helped.

The irrational fear of him taking me right here in the middle of the bar explodes in my chest like an atom bomb. Two seconds before I register Beau at my side, Lily and Rosie watch like hawks from the end of the bar. He's not stupid enough to try it here with so many witnesses and three Colton's watching. With all my panic and fear, I hadn't noticed he was carrying a small black box with a green bow wrapped around it.

Watching me watch him, he walks straight for me. I react before he can reach the bar. Drawing my gun from the shoulder holster and pointing it straight at him.

"Get the fuck out." My voice is a lot calmer and more commanding than I thought I could manage.

"Whoa, easy there." He holds up his hands in surrender, the box still gripped in one. "I come in peace." I sense Beau's presence more than I see him. I can't see anything but this brute right now. The edges of my vision turn red. He doesn't draw his weapon that I know he has on him somewhere, but he's primed and ready if I need him.

"What are you doing here?"

"Just delivering a package." Slowly he reaches out without stepping closer and sets the black and green box on the bar in front of me, returning his hands to the surrender position.

"Ok, you delivered it. Now leave." Rosie bites out at him from his side of the bar, Lily flanking her. I'm pretty sure the people in the bar are all watching us, but no one moves or says anything. Either they're too scared or know this is the norm here.

Mister Wrestler bodyguard grins and backs away, lowering his hands and turning to leave without a word. Immediately Rosie is across from me, hands on the bar top.

“Okay, who is he, and why do we hate him?” She asks.

“He works for Braxton.” I holster my gun and continue quietly. “He helped take me and knew where I was the whole time.”

Before I can say anymore or even look at the box he dropped off, Beau turns to look at a man sitting at a high top nearby. The man is watching us carefully, and when Beau jerks his head towards the door, the man needs no other instruction. He stands and walks out behind Braxton’s guard. I don’t know what they are going to do, but I don’t give a damn. Whatever it is, that fucker deserves it. Just as much as Braxton does. It’s one thing to stand by and watch as someone gets beat up. It’s another to watch a girl get abducted, locked in a room with no exit, and raped.

Nearby sitting at the bar, a man and a woman whisper talk loud enough for me to hear.

“What the hell just happened?” The woman asks. She doesn’t sound frightened but curious and excited. This must be her first time in Colt’s.

“Happens all the time here. Just ignore it and drink your beer. Trust me, you don’t want to get involved.” Her male companion answers.

“This is my new favorite bar.” She says in awe. I ignore their chattering and turn my attention to the box in front of me.

It’s the size of a small shoebox. The black is matte and as dark as Braxton’s soul. The green ribbon is silky and a vibrant emerald color. Tied in a big fluffy bow on top.

“What do you think it is?” Lily asks from over Rosie’s shoulder.

“Does Braxton know how to make pipe bombs?” Rosie adds.

“Probably. After what Nix and I did to him, I wouldn’t doubt he would try something so cowardice.” Beau steps up to my side, and we all stare down at the box, not quite sure if we should open it or not.

“Excuse me, can I get a refill, please?” Some guy asks from somewhere. I don’t look up from the box to see. Rosie answers for us.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

“You can fucking wait, or you can get the fuck out.” Wisely the man shuts up and waits silently.

Beau carefully picks up the box and shakes it next to his ear. We all take in a collective breath, holding it, waiting for a tick and boom. Nothing happens.

“It’s too light to be a bomb. There’s no ticking or rattling.” He sets it back down on the bar top, waiting for me to open it.

Reluctantly I pull at the green ribbon and remove it before sliding the lid off the box. On top of the matching green tissue paper is a black card envelope. Pulling out the card, I read it to myself slowly.

You will always be mine. My ripe strawberry. I can’t wait to taste you again. See you soon. Braxton.

My stomach curdles as if it’s filled with spoilt milk. I want to vomit.

“What does it say, Clover?” Lily’s soft sweet voice pulls me out of the sinking vortex his words sucked me into. I hand her the card because there’s no way I can say those words out loud. She reads, and her soft features harden into a scowl. I’ve never seen her scowl. She’s a little scary if she wants to be.

“Oh no, he did not.” Rosie is reading the card along with Lily now. Beau snatches it and sneers before ripping it into tiny shreds of paper.

“Fucking dirtbag. Seems he may need a refresher course in manners already.” He

says to himself.

Returning my attention to the green tissue paper, I have a guess as to what I'm going to find underneath. It causes me to flinch a little, reaching in and digging through the tissue until my finger brush against it. The smooth leather, the cold metal, and this time there's something delicate and ruffly. Pulling out the collar, I see Braxton has stepped up his game in the fashion accessories department. This collar is crisp black leather trimmed with delicate green lace ruffles. Dangling from the center ring is a clover-shaped tag. The arrogant bastard even had it engraved.

Property of Braxton Shaw.

Yeah, fucking right. That's never going to happen ever again.

"That fucking asshole. I'm gonna kill him." Beau is practically growling through his teeth. It warms my heart to see them as pissed off as I am. Their rivalry with the Shaw's is much deeper and long-standing than mine. Yet we're both ready to say fuck it and take him out.

"Same," Lily adds quietly. Her face is flat and serious. Her normal soft warmth is gone, replaced with a cold indifference I didn't know she possessed. I suppose all Colton's possess it deep down.

"Not necessary. If I ever see him again, I'll fucking kill him myself." Gripping the butt of Lucky, who is securely holstered back under my right arm. I'm still not one hundred percent sure what being a protected asset means or what repercussions I might suffer if I kill him. But at this point, I'm willing to find out.

With my newfound resolve, I pull a small metal wastebin from under the bar and set it on the counter. Tossing the collar, box, and tissue inside, I dump whatever alcohol is nearest over it. We always keep matchbooks behind the bar for the smokers, and I

grab one striking a match and dropping it in without hesitation. A flame erupts from the metal bin as the contents crackle and burn inside.

“Best bar ever.” I hear the woman from before whisper yell to her friend. This time I glance up to see what the woman looks like. She’s pretty. Big thick curly brown hair cascades around her oval face. Light eyes sparkle as she watches the flames coming from the trash can. Intrigue and carnal delight shining behind pinprick pupils.

Her instinctual draw to the fire and chaos making me pause and watch her. To see someone on the outside looking in and desiring the madness and anarchy that is now my life, a feeling all too familiar to me. I, too, was once on the outside, in the normal world of nine to five’s and following the rules. It was dull and lifeless. No matter what happened with Braxton, I would never change a goddamn thing. I would take the bad that comes with being part of the Colton’s because I would much rather live with Nix and feel everything life has to give me than skirt the edge of life and be safe.

My eyes leave the brunette and turn to stare at the fire, burning my past and heating up my future.

Chapter 28

Braxton

The ache in my balls finally subsides as the painkillers kick in. I’m finally able to sit without wincing after a couple weeks of recovery. Nix and Beau did a number on my ass, and I have plans to pay them back. I will not let them ruin fucking for me. I still can’t get hard without wincing. Once I can fuck again, I will. Ridding my body of the memories of coming a dozen times by Nix’s hand. First, I have to get back to top shape and replace all the men they slaughtered when they came through to take my pet away from me.

I thought I would hear something after I sent her the new collar. Not a fucking peep. Clint never did make it back that day, though. Probably should have seen that coming and sent someone less important. I couldn't pass up the opportunity to disturb Clover by having Clint deliver the box. I knew seeing him would trigger her, and I wanted to throw her off balance. From the reports Clint was sending me, she was doing well and back to work. I couldn't have that. She needed to be broken. I hadn't given up on breaking her yet. The collar would do that to a degree, but I wanted to push it a little bit farther. For that, I lost my best guard and head of security. One of the last of my original security detail left. Now my second in command's second is the head of my security.

The ranks haven't been fully replenished yet, but we're getting there. Currently, three new guys are stationed in my penthouse watching over my little impromptu celebration. Doc said I still can't fuck, but my balls are almost back to their normal size and color. Still don't know what the long-term damage is, but I hate kids anyway. Never fucking wanted them, so not being able to spawn tiny demon babies is no skin off my nose.

So, to celebrate and distract me from the remaining throbbing in my pants, I had The Jewelry Box send over a few girls to entertain me. It relaxes me to watch them and make them do my bidding. Maybe I'll even let one of the new guys participate since I can't yet. Fucking might be off the table, but watching is still on the table. The itch to take and control scratches at the back of my mind, and I need to do something to placate it.

The lights are dimmed, and two women stand on the raised platform in the center of my living room. Touching each other and gyrating against one another to the rhythm of the music playing. The third girl sits on my left, tits pressed against my arm and her hand resting gently on my thigh.

The past couple of weeks have been hell, and I'm just glad to be home and not having

to wear sweats anymore. All my pants were too tight and restrictive on my swollen testicles, so joggers and sweats are all that I could wear. Not to mention sitting was a literal pain in the ass. To be able to wear my own slacks and not have to sit on a cushion-shaped like a fucking donut is well worth a celebration.

The half-naked girl next to me pulls a pill from her cleavage. It's small, round, and pink and, from anyone else's perspective, just looks like an aspirin. If they were to look closer, they would find the image of a serpent in the S shape. The logo for the Syndicates pills. It's how we know what's ours. She slips it on my tongue, and I welcome the rush. When the molly clings to my bloodstream, I melt into the couch. The brunette at my side in the pink sparkly thong watches me with matching sparkling eyes. I'm not sure how much time passes, but the world is a rainbow of colors and light twinkling around the two playing tonsil hockey in the middle of my living room.

I'm half bombed when I check my security just to make sure they're focusing on their job and not the girls.

"Weren't there three guys here tonight?" I ask my new head of security, who stands to my right and off to the side. I haven't learned his name yet. But I could have sworn I hired more than two guys. Either that or I'm trippin' balls. I vaguely hear footsteps and talking, then only the music again.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:02 am

My eyelids are getting heavy, and everything in the room is out of focus, like a kaleidoscope spinning the world into colorful shapes and fractures. I just need to close my eyes for a minute. When I open them again, everything is just as much out of focus, and my head feels like a helium balloon.

Weren't there three girls before? And where did the other security go?

"Where the fuck is everyone?" Another black-clad figure walks through the room. I think it's my head of security, but I really couldn't tell him from a gorilla right now. The figure is walking away from me, so that's good, right?

My eyes are so heavy, and in the time it takes me to blink again, which must have been a lot longer than half a second because now I'm alone. No strippers, no security.

What the hell is going on?

I need to stand to find my gun and find those stupid fucks I hired, but my body isn't listening to me. Instead, it sits limply on the couch. Arms resting at my side, I can't even twitch my finger. What the fuck was in that molly?

A moment or twenty minutes later—I really can't tell how much time is passing now—another black figure enters my line of sight. I can't bring them into focus. They're wearing a hood and face mask. Completely covered in black head to toe, including gloves. This probably isn't good. There's nothing I can do in my current state but stare and speak.

"Who the fuck are you? Doesn't matter. Get the fuck out before you regret it."

Considering I'm as threatening as a coma patient at the moment, they don't listen and continue their slow, purposeful stalking toward me. When they finally get within ten feet, a shiny piece of metal in their hand comes into focus. A knife. Large, jagged along one edge and curved slightly at the tip.

That's when I see their eyes. Deep dark blue against pale white skin is all I can make out. Everything is still shifting in and out of focus.

"Why the fuck can't I move?" I mutter to myself, not so much expecting the hooded figure to answer. A gleam shimmers in their eyes. I have a feeling they're grinning under that face covering. They remind me of a ninja. Everything inside my head is jumbled, and nothing is making sense.

"Who are you?" The figure kneels down at my feet cocking its head to one side, watching me. Raising the gloved hand, not holding the knife, they pull the black fabric down off their nose. Revealing their face, but whatever they slipped me has me seeing double and spinning.

"I'm your executioner." A distant, distorted voice says. I don't think they're distorting their voice—I think my brain is. Forcing concentration, I will my vision to still and focus so I can see who the fuck thinks they can threaten me. The world actually does as I command, and their face comes into view clear as day. The large knife held between us, dripping red.

Is that blood? Is it my blood? Am I bleeding?

I don't have time to ponder these pointless questions because I know that face.

"I know you." The words are garbled and filled with liquid sounding like I'm gargling water while I speak. A cold chill runs through my entire body, and the overwhelming need to sleep washes over me. I'm so tired and cold. If I could just rest

a minute, then I can get up.

Everything grows quiet and cold. I can't see my penthouse living room anymore. The music has gone silent. Then the figure comes into crystal clear focus inches from my face, grinning a wicked smile.

“Colton.”

Chapter 29

Phoenix

Returning to work at the shop has been great and also not. I would much rather be at the bar with Clover. Sitting drinking a draft beer and watching her sweet ass sway as she pours drinks and chats with customers. But my cousin says it's unhealthy to obsess. I told him to shove it. Until Clover agreed with him, saying that I should get back to work. She's got plenty of backup, and when Braxton's guard delivered that collar, she held her own, and my family was there to support her.

She was particularly horny and demanding that night when I got home. Practically mauling me the second I walked in the door. We christened the pool table that night. I've never wanted someone so badly that I couldn't wait to get inside her long enough to get into my room. There was no way we were going to make it very far that night. Remembering the way she lunged at me and stripped me down to nothing within seconds has my blood pumping south. Maybe we could do that again tonight? Although I'd like to avoid the balls this time. They got way too close for comfort.

Hearing them clack around from the momentum of my thrusting was oddly arousing. Hearing the actual effects of my dick pounding into Clover. We had started propped against the side. Clover's legs tightly locked around my waist and ended completely sprawled on the green top. Balls rolling into things they really shouldn't, but fuck was

it worth it.

I should really stop thinking about fucking Clover while working. It's extremely distracting cause now I have a wooden log in my pants that might frighten the guy I'm tattooing if I were to stand up. I don't think he would appreciate me getting turned on while inking his chest.

I'm working on a glorious piece of art, a full-headed lion—mane and all. Fur is fucking hard and requires a lot of concentration and focus. Shaking my mental images of my girl coming under me and around me, I return my attention to the lion on Leo's chest. He's one of the many who work for the McKinney's farm, growing weed and handling operations.

As soon as I'm back in the groove and my stiffy is gone, Arrow bursts into my private room and blurts.

"Did you hear?"

"Hear what?"

"About Braxton." I stop my tattoo gun and turn slowly to face Arrow. At the moment, there are only two things that boil my blood, Clover naked and writhing, and Braxton's name in my presence.

"What about Braxton?" I more growl than speak the words. Arrow looks at Leo in my seat then back to me.

"He's dead."

“Dead? Who the fuck killed him?”

Arrow shrugs and shakes his head. “No fucking clue.”

“What do you mean you have no clue?” Again, Arrow turns his attention to Leo, unsure if this particular subject matter is appropriate to be talking about in front of him. My patience is running thin, and I need to know everything he knows—now. “For fucks sake, Arrow, he works for the McKinney’s. Spit it out.”

“They found him dead in his penthouse.”

A surge of relief, joy, and anger flood my system. I wanted him dead, but I wanted to be the one to deliver the sentence.

“What kind of dead?” I ask.

“Slit throat. Cut ear to ear. No signs of a fight. He was found sitting on his couch. —covered in his own blood—but there wasn’t any on his hands. He didn’t even try to stop the bleeding.”

“And no one’s claimed the kill?” Usually, if one of the higher-ups is taken out, there’s someone somewhere who wants to claim victory. To either threaten or control, and the Shaw’s had a lot of enemies.

“No one. So far, everyone’s staying quiet.”

“What about his security?”

“They were all knocked out prior to it. None of them know what the fuck happened. There were a few strippers there, from what I heard, and I guess one of them lured a couple of the guys away. After that, they don’t remember much. Just waking up, finding the girls gone and Braxton dead.”

“Anyone been able to find the girls?”

“Nope. Vanished.”

“Shit—I really wanted to be the one to take that dick head out.” Setting my tattoo gun down, I remove the black latex gloves and run my hand through my hair. Standing to pace, my nerves are on edge. I need to move before they burn through my skin.

“I know, but someone else beat you to it.” Arrow, still standing near the door he burst through shifts to sit on the empty stool nearby.

“What’s the council doing?”

“Fuck if I know. Probably nothing yet. The Shaw’s will obviously think you did it.” He doesn’t expand on the why since we’re in front of Leo. I’m sure the story will circulate through the families and Syndicate in due time. Right now, however, it’s still unknown to most.

“If I’d done it, they would fucking know. I’d plaster it on a billboard for all to see, so they knew what happens when you fuck with a Colton.” From behind me, Leo’s deep voice surprises me when he asks his own question.

“Who do they think did it, if not Phoenix?” Arrow and I both turn to face him. He’s still reclined in the chair, tattoo half done on his chest. He just stares right back at us. Guys got balls. He’s not a head family member nor a top position in the ranks. Just one of the many worker bees in the hive.

“Um, I guess maybe Archer making a power play. Fuck, it could have been an ex-girlfriend or disgruntled employee. He wasn’t exactly known for making friends. Could be anyone.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” Leo agrees, smirking. One more for the anti-Shaw train. Good to know. Then it hits me.

“Does Clover know?”

Arrow furrows his brow. “Not sure. I just found out and came to tell you.”

“Okay, call Beau at the bar and find out. I’ve got to finish up with Leo.”

“On it, boss.”

Arrow leaves, shutting the door behind him, and for the next couple hours, I’m so out of it I don’t even realize I’ve finished the tattoo. Ironically one of my best. Guess when I just let intuition take over is when I do my best work.

On my way out, Arrow informs me that Clover does know. Rosie told her. She’s at home now, waiting for me.

I find her sitting on the couch talking with Rosie when I get home.

“Is it true, Nix? Is he actually gone?” Clover stands and crosses the room to meet me. Eyes wide and curious.

“As far as I know, yes.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:03 am

“Did you do it?” She doesn’t waste any time. She knows I wanted to, and then he shows up dead. Makes sense.

“No. Unfortunately.” I wrap my arms around her and bring her in closer as she nuzzles close to my chest.

“Do you know who did?”

“If I did, I’d send them a fucking fruit basket and a thank you card.” Her lighthearted laugh mixes with my deep, menacing chuckle. Honestly, I really would send them a thank you. Whoever did it has saved us a lot of trouble.

Looking up from my arms, Clover smiles and doesn’t seem the least bit concerned about his death.

“You okay with all this, sweet cheeks?”

“Hell yeah, I am. Whatever that asshole got, he deserved a hundred times over. I’m glad he’s gone. The world is better without him.” Her sweet face is soft and relaxed. Not a single sign of fear or apprehension. Jesus fucking Christ, this woman is perfect.

“Shall we celebrate then?”

“Yes.” Her face once again lights up in a wide smile as she bounces out of my arms.

“What should we do?”

“How about a drink first, then whatever you want?” I’d give this woman anything she

asked for. No matter where or what, I'd get it and present it to her on a silver platter, just to see her smile. That vast radiant heart-stopping smile that makes me weak in the knees like nothing ever has.

I don't know what greater power or cosmos brought her to me or me to her—either way—I'll be forever in its debt because having her in my life has given me so much more than I could have ever wished for.

Chapter 30

Clover

Two months later.

Nix and I are having our customary Sunday brunch at Cherry's Pie Bakery, he is having whatever specialty donut Magnus made this week, and I'm having a pumpkin spice cream cheese-filled muffin. Halloween is days away, and I'm enjoying all the spoils of the holiday. Including the perfected pumpkin spice macarons.

Life with Nix has been an amazing roller coaster that I want to ride on repeat, and he lets me whenever I want to. Luckily, I haven't had to pull out a gun at the bar recently, but I still carry it, just in case. In this family, the need to have a loaded weapon is more frequent than most. I've gone back to working nights, and so has Nix. Pretty much everything is back to normal if there is such a thing.

Nix and I now share his master bedroom. My old room is just another guest room again for when the girls want to crash over. He insisted I move into his room. He was not having the separate beds thing. I don't mind. I was happy to oblige. He does so much to make me happy I could never say no to something that makes him happy. He asks for so little. Except when it comes to sex, he asks for everything in bed, and I give it to him.

By now, I've met almost all of his family and no longer need a flow chart to remember who's who. Rosie was right. They've all accepted me into their little bubble— like one of their own. Now I have the family I was searching for in all the wrong places before. When all I had to do was slink into a bar on a Tuesday afternoon dripping with sweat from the Mississippi heat. Never would I have imagined agreeing to Beau's offer would lead me here. Eating pastries in a retro-style bakery with a man who loves me enough to violently sodomize a man and whom I love without reservations.

The same man who sits across from me shoving his face with his third candy corn donut. For such a hard-edged man, he has his soft spots. Most of which he reserves for me.

I reach across the glittery white diner table, swipe a smudge of frosting off his chin,

“Hey, that's mine.”

“Not anymore,” I say, popping my frosting-covered finger in my mouth. The orange frosting is sweet and tastes uncannily like candy corn. I don't know how Magnus does it, but he's a miracle baker. Nix grins and licks the remainder of the frosting from his lips. This reminds me of how he licked my neck and nipples not ten minutes ago in the bakery's bathroom. Don't judge me. Nix is hot, and I can't help myself sometimes. He started it anyway. It's not the first time we've had a pre brunch quickie in the bathroom. I think Lily is starting to catch on. She gave us the single eyebrow lift. I know what you just did look when we came out. Sorry, not sorry, Lily.

Glancing up from my muffin, I catch Nix snapping a picture of me on his phone. He's been doing that a lot lately. Sneaking a picture here and there a few times, even taking a selfie of the two of us. I didn't take him for the always taking pictures kind, but then again, he's a lot different now than he was when we first met. Nothing really comes as a surprise to me anymore. I smile with a mouth full of muffin, and he clicks

another picture.

The chimes ring above the door as someone enters, and a moment later, Arrow plops down next to me, followed by Magnus next to Nix. He isn't baking today, but he's here to join us for brunch anyways.

"You guys had sex in the bathroom again, didn't you?" Arrow smirks at us. We must have been sending knowing looks at each other or something because we hadn't even said hello yet, and he knew.

"I have no idea what you're talking about. I would never do such a thing in public." I feign ignorance, turning my attention back to my muffin so he can't see the smirk I'm trying to hide.

"Sure you would." I catch Nix grinning at me, mischief and amusement dancing in his golden eyes. "Twice even."

My foot makes contact with his shin under the table as I scowl at him. My cheeks most likely turning pink.

"Ow." He grimaces but with a big ass grin on his beautiful face.

"You guys are disgustingly adorable in the worst way." Arrow, one of my new besties, nudges me with his elbow. Turning to face Magnus before he continues embarrassing me. "Do you know that last week I walked in on them, bare assed and bent over his tattoo chair?"

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:03 am

“Arrow. What the hell, man?” and now my face is completely crimson.

“Owww. What? You obviously wanted to get caught, or you would have locked the door. Owww. Stop kicking me.” He scowls at Nix, who is obviously the one kicking him.

“I’ll stop kicking when you stop talking.” Nix turns and winks at me. I don’t think he’s ever winked at me, and I’m pretty sure my ovaries just exploded. Fucking hell.

While I’m hiding my eyes in embarrassment, so the others don’t see how much I enjoyed that quickie in Nix’s private tattooing room at his shop, I notice through the curtain of my hair that Magnus’s eyes are not fixed on me as I expected. Instead, he’s looking over my shoulder without lifting his head. Only his eyes shift from left to right like he’s tracking movement. As subtly as possible, I turn to look over my shoulder to see what or who he’s watching.

In his line of sight, I see the cutest leggy blonde practically floating into the bakery. Her thick blonde hair is tied up in two messy buns on top of her head. I think there’s a pencil or two shoved in them. Possibly holding their shape. It’s quite sweet. Overall, she’s sweet. Floral baby doll dress paired with an oversized cardigan and high-top chucks. Not my style, but it looks good on her.

The taller woman approaches the counter and chats with Lily, getting a to-go coffee and a bag of mixed pastries. Her smile is warm and welcoming, and Lily’s eyes shift over the blonde’s shoulder in our direction, but she’s not looking at me. She’s looking at Magnus, looking at the blonde. Lily’s eyes shift back as quickly as they left. The sweet blonde woman pays and leaves without looking around or noticing Magnus

watching her. I can't see where she goes once she leaves without breaking my neck, so I turn back to watch Magnus. The man is smitten. It's so obvious. There's longing and a sad desperation in his lovesick gaze. Poor guy. She didn't even notice him. Wonder if she ever has, or if he's ever even spoken to her?

Clearing his throat and returning his attention to our table, he redirects the conversation. "So, has anyone heard anything more about Braxton's killer?" We all shake our heads. The council has been trying to figure out who it was since that day. No one has taken claim for it, and they haven't been able to find any evidence to point to who might have done it. Obviously, the Shaw's continue to blame the Colton's and point fingers at Nix and even me. I don't blame them; we are the obvious suspects. A version of our story spread through the Syndicate by now, so everyone knows we have beef with them. However, the security cameras at the bar and Nix's shop prove that we had nothing to do with it. We have solid alibi's, and there's nothing they can say that will change that.

Since Braxton had a long list of people who hated his fucking guts, it's been hard to narrow it down. At this point, I don't know that they'll ever know who did it. Unless someone comes forward and claims responsibility.

"Still nothing. From what I hear, the council is going to put this to bed and stop looking. They just keep hitting dead ends. So, what's the point?" Arrow shrugs one shoulder and takes another bite of his apple fritter that Lily brought over and deposited in front of him.

"Good. He's not worth all this time. The only people who care he's gone are his parents and siblings. Even then, I don't think they're that torn up about him actually being dead. I think they're more pissed that someone was able to get the drop on a Shaw than the fact that Shaw was Braxton. It could have been any Shaw, and they would have reacted the same."

“What about Oxana and her little power trip?” Ever since we met with the council before Braxton’s untimely demise, that woman has scared the ever-loving crap out of me. I can see pure evil in that woman, and she obviously wants to take control of the Syndicate.

“For now, the Shaw’s are being carefully watched. Most of the council is in agreement that they are skating on thin ice. We can’t outright remove them. They do produce all the narcotics, after all. Without them or at least without their carefully cultivated cook houses and production, we wouldn’t have anything to sell.” What Nix doesn’t say is that they can’t get rid of them until they have control over their part of the Syndicate. They can’t remove the Shaw family without the allegiance of their people. So, for now, they stay but under a watchful eye. Which means if they step out of line, the council will be watching.

We all know this, and after our obligatory update, we move on to more important topics, like Sloan and her Russian commands, Magnus and him spending more time at the Bakery, and of course Arrow’s flavor of the week named Donna. He’s talked about so many girls since I’ve known him that I don’t even listen to him anymore when he starts rambling about who he’s dating now. Nix might have been a serial one-nighter, but Arrow is a serial dater.

The late morning turns to afternoon, and everyone leaves one by one, heading to wherever it is they need to be on a Sunday afternoon. Arrow scurrying off when the elusive Donna, a full-busted mini skirt-clad stiletto-wearing blonde, appears. They walk away Arrow’s hand on her ass, groping shamelessly. Magnus to I don’t know where. He just says his goodbyes and drops a peck on my cheek on his way out, that Nix almost growls over. He doesn’t like it when people touch me. Even his family that he knows would never try anything.

Nix and I are last to leave, saying goodbye to Lily and grabbing a bag of pumpkin spice everything to go. I’m sure I’m going to gain a hundred pounds eating Magnus’s

baked goods.

Exiting the bakery, Nix holds open the door and waits for me to pass, wrapping a hand around my back and following me out. Ever since everything that happened, whenever we're together, he always has a hand on me. Making sure I'm still there. Not only does it reassure him, but it puts me at ease as well.

Stepping onto the sidewalk, we make our way to his motorcycle parked at the front. I finally got to take my ride on his bike with him. Before settling on the rear seat, I secure the precious pastry cargo in my purse, and Nix slides in between me and the bike. Sitting sideways on the driver's seat, he wraps me in his arms and between his legs.

His lips meet mine in a sweet kiss that tastes just as sugary sweet.

"I am the luckiest man on the fucking planet. You know that?"

"Oh really? Why is that?"

"Because I have you." He whispers in my ear, his lush lips skimming across the flesh of my ear. Sending a chill down my spine. No matter how many times his lips are on my body, he always manages to send a ripple of elation through me.

With his body twined around mine and his lips on my skin, I feel complete here in the parking lot of his family's bakery. The cool autumn breeze lifting my hair to tickle his neck, there is nothing more in this world I could ever want. Our lives aren't perfect, and there's a lot we're still learning about one another. But I do know this; I love this man, body, and soul, and he will always own mine. There's no other man that keeps up with my snark and can make me melt under his touch. He may have some anger issues, and I might not trust anyone whose name isn't Colton, but together we're perfect.

Perfectly matched, perfectly flawed, and a perfect fit. Confirmed by how my body locks into place against his. Nix's lips pressing soft kisses along my pulse as his hands find their way to my ass. We probably look like two horny teenagers making out in the parking lot, and I couldn't give a fuck.

"I love you, sweet cheeks, and I'm never letting you go. You're mine now. Forever."

"I love you too, my prince charming. And I'm not going anywhere because you are mine."

Claiming his mouth with mine, I seal our declaration in a kiss. A kiss that promises many more kisses. Many more moments, minutes, hours, and days together. A promise of loyalty, love, and stability.

Epilogue

Phoenix

Okay, tonight is the night. I'm going to do it. Don't back out now, man. It's a big decision, but it's the right one. You've prepped for this all day. You love her. You want to be with her and only her. So why wait? Just ask her. There's no way she'll say no. She loves you. You can do this.

I silently hype myself up for what I have been planning to do since the moment I knew I loved her. It's only been a handful of months since the whole Braxton incident, and since then, life has been more than I could have hoped for. Clover has been happy working at the bar and living in my home, our home, with me. She still looks over her shoulder every now and then when she thinks she's being watched. Eventually, it'll be out of habit rather than fear. Instead of looking back wearily, fearing what she may find there, one day, she'll look back strong. Daring whatever or whoever might be there, to even try to mess with my girl. She is strong, and we both

know it. I could always see her strength. Her strength of character and the strength in which she loves.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 6:03 am

There's no half-assing things in our house. Oh no. We see things all the way through. Like tonight, I'll see this all the way through. I already bought the ring. Now I have to give it to her. No one and I mean no fucking one, not even me, would have ever thought this day would come. Me asking a woman, whom I love, to marry me. Shit, six months ago, I wouldn't have fathomed that I would ever get married. Or that I would ever love someone with all my heart that I would be willing to give up everything for them.

For the first time in my life, I have planned something special for a woman. I've thought of her before myself ever since I met her. Putting another person before yourself because of love is a strange but enlightening feeling. Tonight, I've made dinner for my girl and brought her a dozen Christmas cookies from Cherry's. She's had such a sweet tooth lately, eating anything I can bring her from the bakery for weeks.

Beau graciously gave us the house for the evening so we could be alone. Though, if things go well, we will end up at the bar and most definitely not alone. Sadly, I had told dipshit Arrow my plans to propose, and he told everyone. Now they are planning a surprise party for us at the bar after she says yes. If she says yes. Of course, she's going to say yes. I'm Nix Colton. No woman tells me no. Well, actually, Clover tells me no all the time. But not when it counts.

Making sure I have the ring still in my pocket, I double-check myself before leaving the garage. I had to hide the ring deep inside one of my toolboxes. It's the only place in the house she never looks. Straightening my spine and taking in a steadying breath, I open the door leading back into the house, finding Clover, my little chipmunk, already curled on the couch. Sloan is nearby on her bed on the floor by our

minimalist Christmas tree. I haven't put up a Christmas tree in my entire adult life. Sometimes Beau would put one up decorated in only white lights. But when my girl said she hadn't had a proper tree since her mother died, you bet your ass I went out and bought her the biggest fucking tree I could find. Got ripped off two hundred bucks for the damn thing, but to see the look of pure joy on her face was well worth every penny. We bought a couple boxes of antique ornaments from a local shop to decorate it along with a strand of new L.E.D. lights. You know the kind you can choose what color you want them to be and make them flash and twinkle.

Flickering red and green lights fill the room with a Christmas cheer I didn't know my life was missing. It's all surreal, and although not as torturous as I expected it to be, we've had the damn thing up since the weekend after thanksgiving at Clover's demands. I'm already ready for it to be new year's, so we can chuck the thing to the curb. I'll indulge my sweet cheeked chipmunk but only for so long.

Clover steadily eats her way through the box of cookies in the twinkling lights. The girl sure has been eating a lot lately, and the weirdest shit too. I caught her dipping pickles in chocolate frosting the other day. Gross.

"Sorry I couldn't wait for you. They just looked so yummy." My little chipmunk fills her cheeks with frosted sugar cookies and tries to talk through the crumbles.

Brushing off Clover's inherent bottomless pit of a stomach, I make my way over, taking the spot on the couch next to her.

Just do it, man, don't be a chicken shit.

Clearing my throat, I take the box of cookies and set it on the table, taking both her hands in mine to stop her from reaching out for the colorful trees and Santa's. She's still chewing the last mouthful and swallows while staring up at me with big round eyes and smiles sweetly.

“What is it, Nix?” She doesn’t sound worried or concerned in the least. Just curious. Curious as to why I’m staring at her silently while forcing her away from her sugary treats. Okay, here goes nothing.

“I wanted to show you something. I had it done yesterday and wanted to surprise you with it.” Gently I release her hands and reach over my head to pull on the back of my shirt. Lifting it off over my head.

“Mmmm. I like where this is heading.” Clover comments as I’m halfway through removing the plain black t-shirt.

When the shirt is completely off, I see her eyes shift from lustful ready to pounce me to confusion and surprise because I just revealed to her my newest tattoo. Directly in the center of my chest over my heart is a black, grey, and yellow surrealism tattoo of something she knows all too well. The bumblebee girl she drew the day I first learned of her artistic skills. The first time I saw her draw. The first thing she ever drew after moving here. The first piece of her art that we framed and hung in the foyer. Along with dozens of others since. Her eyes instantly begin to brim with tears.

“It’s beautiful, Nix.” Clover’s fingers tenderly caress my still inflamed skin around the ink now permanently marked on my chest.

“I got it for you because you are a part of me now and always will be. Somehow you crawled your way into my heart that I thought I no longer possessed and planted yourself there. This is just a reminder that I am yours no matter what. I love you, Clover, and I want to give you everything. Everything you could ever want. I’ll build you a studio where you can paint to your heart’s content. I’ll be your sex slave for the rest of my life, but can you give me the one and only thing I want?”

Sliding off the couch, I land on one knee, pull out the ring box from my jeans pocket and open it to her. Revealing the three-carat blood-red ruby engagement ring. Clover’s hands fly to her mouth to cover her gasp. The brimming tears from seeing

the tattoo are now full while tears of what I hope to feel is joy. She still hasn't said anything or answered my question, so I continue.

"Will you marry me? Clover Jones, and just give me you? All I want is you." For a much too long minute, she is silent. Staring at the ring, eyes shifting between it and me. Tears spill out of those beautiful blues. Like a beauty queen trying to not mess her make-up, she waves her hands to dry her eyes. It's not working, but I don't care. To me, she is the most beautiful woman in the world, and waiting for her answer is tearing me apart from the inside out. Then she gives up and wipes them away with her sleeve and snuffles.

"On one condition." She finally says.

"Of course, anything, name it." Clearing her throat, she looks me straight in my eyes and smiles softly.

"Instead of building me a studio, can you build a nursery?"

The End