



Cuckoo

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Description: Never give up on second chances.

Cuckoo has always been a jokester. He's the type of guy who sees humor in everything because, at one time, he never thought he'd ever laugh again.

It began in tender years when he found an old trunk full of costumes. A Beggar's Night filled with candy, secrets, and screams. Cuckoo can still hear the shrill sounds in his dreams.

And then there was her. His foster sister and the little angel he swore to protect. Cuckoo took those beatings for her. He lied for her. He gave up everything. . . for Katrina.

And then she disappeared. A ghost in the darkness. He never saw her again.

Twelve years later, Cuckoo still has all those costumes. He checks every corner and peers through every open door. Because he knows someday he'll see his angel again.

He just never expects to collide with her while riding his Harley.

Katrina isn't the little girl from his childhood, but he isn't the same boy either. They're both trying to shove the past behind a locked door.

But the funny thing about trauma? It never stays hidden. With Katrina's life in danger and the clock ticking, Cuckoo must find a way to keep her safe and end the bastard threatening them both.

And this masked vigilante role? It's one Cuckoo was born to play.

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Prologue Rain

Age fifteen—

“You sure we won’t get caught?” Katrina asked, tugging her jacket tighter around her pirate costume.

It was cold out tonight but not freezing. If she wasn’t so tiny, she’d be warmer.

“Nah. No one will be home until much later.” I shrugged off my coat and draped it over her shoulders. “Besides, it’s Beggar’s Night. Don’t you wanna play games and eat some candy?”

I mowed twenty lawns for enough money for us to sneak out and hit the carnival. I’d be pissed if we didn’t go.

“I didn’t dress up as Super Zombie for nothing.”

She giggled, and her teeth finally stopped chattering. “Perfect costume. Horror meets hero.”

“Exactly.”

“Like The Princess Bride in the Fire Swamp.”

“Yeah.”

I reached for Katrina's hand and held it, leading her along the streets filled with kids in costumes. She kept wanting to pause and stop for candy, but I had this evening all planned. We had to hurry.

"I've got tickets," I reminded her. "We're going to have a ton of fun."

It took forever for us to walk to the edge of town and enter the carnival, but you couldn't miss it if you tried. All the lights, loud machines, flashing signs, the whirring and shouts that accompanied the games, and the acts peddling to the attendees eager to gain butts in seats for the entertainment.

The first place I wanted to go was the Ferris wheel. "Come on!"

Katrina ran to keep up with me as I handed over our tickets, laughing as I had to help her climb into the seat of the pod. It swung as we entered, and I strapped us in, excited to see the carnival from the top.

"Is it super high?" she asked, nibbling on her bottom lip.

"Don't be scared. I'm here. I won't let you fall out."

She reached for my hand, but I slid my arm around her instead, tucking her close to me. She stayed warmer that way. Plus, she could see everything without being afraid of slipping out and falling to her death.

"Isn't it pretty?" I asked when we finally reached the top.

"It's breathtaking."

We could see the entire carnival from here. Every ride. All the food vendors. The games.

Katrina began pointing to things. Her bottom wiggled in the seat as she gasped.
“Cotton candy, Rain!”

“We’ll get some. Popcorn, too.”

She leaned over and kissed my cheek. “You’re the best!”

“Anything for you.” I meant it. Katrina and I weren’t related by blood, but we were family. As close as it got without sharing DNA.

But lately, I started to notice how pretty and sweet she was, and even her smile made my heart begin to race. It was weird.

I tried not to think of her like that as we rocked in our cabin. From this view, everything seemed so small. The world didn’t feel like it was caving in.

“Rain?”

“Yeah?” I asked, not looking at her.

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“I’m scared.”

Shit. When she told me things, it usually meant someone was hurting her or trying to, and it made me feel murderous.

“Don’t be. I’m here.”

“It’s not the ride.”

I knew it. “What is it?” Would I regret asking her?

“What if I don’t ever find my true love?”

“True love?” I nearly choked.

“Like in *The Princess Bride*. Wesley and Buttercup.”

“If you haven’t found him by the time you’re thirty, I’ll be your true love.”

I didn’t know what made me say that. Or promise it.

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

She rested her head on my shoulder, and I heard her sigh with relief. It was funny how words had so much power. They could hurt. Torture. Threaten. But they could

also heal and bring hope. Katrina taught me that.

I wanted to be her forever, her true love, because I needed that lifeline as desperately as I needed her. When I felt low, she was the only one who could make me laugh and smile. Katrina was the reason I bothered to dress up for Halloween.

“You’ll love me,” she whispered, “because that’s what true love is. Kisses. Holding hands. Popcorn and cotton candy. Rides on the Ferris wheel.”

I swallowed hard because as much as I wanted to deny it, I couldn’t.

“Giving me your coat because I’m cold. Hiding me in the closet.” Her voice cracked. “Taking beatings meant for me.”

Fuck. I trembled, hating that we couldn’t escape. I tried so many fucking times. They always found us.

“If we ever get separated, will you do something for me?”

Of course. She didn’t have to ask.

Wait. Get separated? What did she mean?

“Katrina?”

“Keep wearing costumes. Put a smile on your face. Wherever I am, I’ll think of you and know you’re doing it.”

“I promise.”

“Thank you, Rain.”

Her gratitude was more than all the things she mentioned. It was all the things she couldn't because we buried them deep down, covered them with concrete, and hid them so we didn't have to expose the deepest hurts.

"Always," I whispered back, watching as the Ferris wheel descended and reality rushed to meet us.

"Can we get popcorn and cotton candy now?"

I led her away from the Ferris wheel and toward the food stalls. "You can get whatever you want."

Seeing her smile when I answered? It was worth every penny.

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Chapter 1 Cuckoo

“What the fuck are you wearing?”

Fuck. That question never got old. I enjoyed it just as much every time someone checked out one of my costumes or outfits and decided to comment on it. Hell, it was the highlight of my day. It never failed to make me smile.

“Why? You want to pet my cock?”

Carrión snorted from the shadows. I nearly missed his big ass hiding out in the corner of the bar like usual. He was one of the tallest brothers in the club, and when he slipped into the light, it was always a bit jarring to see, especially since he usually had his crow perched on his right shoulder.

Raven shot me a look like his infant son could understand anything we said, including profanity or sexual innuendo. The baby was asleep in his lap anyway.

Crow shook his head, pouring a shot of whiskey. He tossed it back, smirking before he pushed the bottle aside and leaned back against the bar top.

Hawk snickered as he continued playing Solitaire. I watched him place a few cards down on the table. Hawk never glanced up, just kept slapping down more cards, but I knew he was tuned in to everything around him.

Talon folded his arms and ticked his chin my way. “Seriously? Why the rubber rooster?”

“Why not?” I countered, kicking out my boots as I leaned back in my chair. I was bored. Honestly, that was part of the reason I pulled out this particular hat when I woke up. It was a conversation piece.

Talon shrugged. “It’s a bit, uh, flashier than usual.” He gestured to the masterpiece I’d put together to compliment my cock hat.

Since the rooster was bright yellow and red, I found a polka dot shirt with a white background and bold colored dots all over it. I wore my cut over it, but I decided on black leather pants with flashy silver zippers, tons of pockets, and my red steel-toed boots. For fun, I added a red Superman cape. It attached easily to my cut since I fastened leather strips with Velcro around the shoulders and neck, then added Velcro to the cape. Boom! Fucking badass. I found silver cuffs on Amazon that reminded me of Wonder Woman’s and finished the ensemble with the fake metal bracelets. I fucking loved them.

Who said jewelry wasn’t masculine? Not me. Ever.

“I like to stand out,” I deadpanned.

Crow laughed. “And you do, brother.”

“It’s fucking fantastic,” Heron added as he squeezed my rooster, and it squealed. Loud.

“And here I thought no one would appreciate my cock today.”

Several groans could be heard from my brothers.

“You know, if Rael were here, he would be enjoying this way more than all you fuckers,” I pointed out, wishing I’d texted him and sent an invite.

Rael was my partner in crime and the S.A.A. for the Graven Bastards MC Tonopah, Nevada Chapter. Our club and theirs went back to the founding days when we put down roots in Henderson, Nevada.

“Yeah, I bet he would right before we kicked both of your crazy asses out of the clubhouse for the night,” Raven observed.

He had a point. Still. “You’re so fucking mean.”

Raven chuckled. “Yeah, but you’re not offended.”

Nope. Took a lot to piss me off. None of these men here ever bothered or annoyed me. I’d seen, heard, and experienced much worse in my youth.

Besides, the Roost, our clubhouse, was home. And the men gathered in the bar were my family. I found them at the lowest point in my life. Rook, Crow’s father, and the former president was like a parent to me. He stepped into my life and made it worth living again. I owed this club everything and would spill my blood for it. No questions asked.

My gaze swept over the room and the rare moment when the club members gathered together alone outside of church. The ol’ ladies had taken a spa day, and that left us time to shoot pool, drink, and get into trouble.

Raven wouldn’t do much except stare at his adopted son. Of course, not a soul here would ever say that boy wasn’t his. DNA didn’t mean shit. He loved and cared for that child and would raise and protect him as a father should.

I hoped one day, I would get the chance to do the same. I had a shit example of a father figure growing up, but one thing I learned since patching into the Devil’s Murder MC was that your past didn’t dictate your future. Almost every man here

overcame serious obstacles, trauma, and violence before they arrived at the Roost. We lived by our own rules and carved our fate with blood.

Outside, I heardcaw...caw. My crow agreed.

Of course, we were no ordinary men. With the unique ability to merge with crows, we all had different ways we bonded with our crows. Some of us could fully shift into the crow. Others could tap into their ability to see high above the ground or send them mobbing when a threat appeared. Hawk could partially shift. Crow could control a whole murder at once. Heron had the combined DNA of a phoenix, which meant he could literally rise from ashes. He did once.

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And me? Well, as a kid, I'd been confused. Heron and I had a similar experience in that we didn't have parents to help guide us through the process of growing up with and bonding with our crows. It sucked.

Heron floundered, growing angry, distrustful, and bitter when his adoptive parents died, and he was left to find his birth parents with little more than a thin connection to the past. He finally did after meeting his mate, Rebel. It was a hard road for him, but the club helped.

My experience was vastly different. I didn't give a fuck about my biological parents or why they chose not to keep me. I was placed in foster care the same day I was born. No one came looking, and no one gave a fuck.

Not until I met a little girl with big brown eyes, long braided hair, and glasses. Katrina, my foster sister. Just thinking of her sent a fresh wave of pain through my heart. She was ripped from my life, and when she left, she took my humanity and joy with her.

I became a heartbroken, angry, withdrawn teen in her absence. Her smile had been the only light in the darkness. If I thought shit was bad when she was around, it was ten times fucking worse without my angel.

Twelve years. That was how long it had been since I last saw her. I missed her every fucking day.

Unable to resist, I reached into my cut and pulled my wallet free. Inside, faded and creased, was a single photograph. A glimpse of a Halloween night that would forever

live in my memory. It was the last sunset I ever saw with Katrina.

Staring into her warm brown eyes, I smiled. She was only thirteen but already beautiful. It took her forever to decide on a costume that year, but she finally settled on a pirate.

I stood beside her with the setting sun behind us, both of us dressed for Beggar's Night. We always went trick-or-treating together. After eight years of sticking together like glue, we never missed a chance to get all that candy.

My arm was slung around her shoulders as she laughed. I wore a combination of costumes since she thought it was hilarious. To this day, I still switch things up because it reminds me of her and those times when we could be kids, laugh, and not be afraid of what the night would bring. I wore a zombie and Superman combo. Epic.

My thumb brushed over the image of the two of us, wishing I knew what happened to her. Was she adopted? Did she leave the state? Where was Katrina now? Was she happily married with kids?

Fuck. I didn't want to think of her with anyone else. It was stupid and strange, but I always felt like Katrina was mine. The idea of her living with another man, wearing his ring, or having his children pissed me off.

I shoved the photo back into my wallet and stuffed it inside the inner pocket of my cut. Reaching for a cold beer, I popped the top and took a long pull, hoping to dull the pain that always surfaced when I thought of Katrina.

"Hey, Cuckoo." Eagle Eye took the empty seat across from me and leaned his elbows on the table.

"Eagle Eye," I greeted him, not bothering to remove the grit from my tone.

“Your crow is fucking agitated.”

Huh? I blinked, feeling the link between us. Sure enough, my crow was squawking outside, belting out caws, and hopping from the ground to the roof and back again. He didn't like me retreating into my head and tuning him or my club out.

It wasn't intentional, but sometimes, I had to block everything in my head so I didn't lose my shit. It didn't matter if that meant my crow or the club or the whole fucking world. That was why I often used humor to deflect; I didn't like anyone looking too closely or trying to figure me out. I had dark, evil shit in my past. It needed to stay there.

“I've got him under control.”

Once I tapped into our connection again, my crow calmed—a little.

Eagle Eye snorted. “Sure.” He sat back, staring at me like he was waiting for something.

“Don't start prying,” I warned.

He shrugged. “I wasn't. Just thought I would offer my services in case you needed anything.”

“What do you mean?” I growled, shoving my empty beer bottle aside.

“I've seen you look at that old photo a lot, brother. If there's someone you want or need to locate, I can do it.”

“And if I don't want anyone to know about it?”

“I won’t say a fucking word, Cuckoo.”

“Even to Crow?” I pressed.

“Hell, if Pres asks, it’s his right to know.”

I nodded. “Yeah. Just Crow. No one else.”

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Eagle Eye stood. “Come on.”

“Right now?” I asked, surprised he wanted to get right to it.

“No time like the present.”

Yeah. He was right. Why delay?

I joined him in his office and shut the door for privacy. Eagle Eye had multiple monitors and keyboards, tech shit I would never understand or learn how to use. “What do you need to know?” Dropping onto the seat of one of his chairs, I faced him.

He sat in his chair and scooted to the desk, clicking keys as we spoke. “Give me everything you remember.”

I rememberedeveryfuckingthing. Of course, I didn’t say that.

“Katrina Simmons. Last name is probably different now. Born April tenth, twenty-five years ago. She was a foster kid and entered the system at age five. Lost both parents when a drunk driver struck the vehicle on the highway. No living relatives.Might have been adopted around age thirteen to eighteen. Not sure.”

“That’s a good start. Physical description?”

I closed my eyes, picturing her image in the photo. “Brown hair and eyes. She kept it long. Glasses. Cute little nose and light freckles. Petite.”

“That should do it.”

I nodded, blinking as I opened my eyes. “How long will it take to find her?”

“Given the specific parameters I have from you, hopefully not long. You’re welcome to leave, and I’ll text you when I have something.”

I considered it but declined. “I’ll only get anxious if I walk out that door.”

“I get it. How long has it been since you’ve seen her?”

“Twelve years.”

“Damn.” He cleared his throat. “You sure she wants to be found?”

I didn’t like the question, but he had a right to ask. After all, I was asking him to potentially do illegal shit and hack public records. “I believe she would want to see me.”

“Good enough for me, Cuckoo.”

The wait almost killed me. I tapped my thigh, anxious every second to learn what had become of Katrina.

Nearly an hour later, he turned to me with a grin. “I found her.”

“Where is she?” I asked, popping to my feet.

“I can’t answer that yet. I’ve found her foster and adoption files. Take a look at this and confirm for me.”

I peered over his shoulder, taking in Katrina's image at some of the most critical moments in her life. "It's her."

Fuck. She looked so young and scared.

"Shit!"

"What is it?" I asked, growing anxious when I heard him curse. "She's alive, right?"

"Yeah, but that's about all I know."

"What do you mean?"

"Her records are sealed. I knew they would be, but it's strange. There's high-security clearance on them. They're associated with an old cold case file."

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Cold case? “The fuck?”

“Criminal activity, Cuckoo. Some serious shit.”

“I need you to find out everything you can, Eagle Eye.”

“I will. It’s gonna take time,” he warned.

“I understand.” I stomped toward the door, pausing before I opened it. “Once you know, contact me. I don’t care if I’m asleep. Wake me up. I want to know right away.”

“I’ll get the info, brother.”

“Thanks.”

I left his office with more questions than answers, and that never failed to piss me off. I didn’t like being taken by surprise, and I certainly didn’t like the idea that Katrina was alone and in danger.

Fuck. I needed a stiffer drink since this would be a long night.

Chapter 2 Katrina

“What subject are you researching?” I asked, lowering to a squat as I brought my eyes level with the petite third grader who came to the library with her class for the morning.

“Um, pandas.”

“Oh, I love panda bears. Don’t you?”

The girl nodded as her long, dark brown braids slipped over her shoulders. She smiled, a bit shy but also enthusiastic.

“I can help with that. What’s your name?”

“Emaley.”

“Oh, that’s a pretty name. I’m Katrina. Would you like help finding out more about pandas?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you know they live in China?”

Her eyes widened. “That’s far away.”

“It is,” I confirmed. “Pandas are special.”

“They’re my favorite,” Emaley confided.

“Then let’s see what books we have available for you to check out.”

“Pandas poop all day.”

I turned to the boy who joined us, blurting the words before grinning at Emaley.

“No, they don’t poop all day. That’s too much,” she argued.

“They poop forty times a day! I know. I saw it on the National Geographic show.”

Emaley stuck out her tongue. “Go away, Lucas.”

“It’s true. Ask the librarian lady.”

Emaley stared up at me, reaching for my hand. “Do pandas poop that much?”

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“They do,” I admitted. “It’s because of all the bamboo they eat.”

Lucas’s smile widened. “See.”

She glared in his direction. “You’re not very nice.”

He didn’t seem upset by her observation. “I can be nice. I’ll show you books on pandas.”

“You have to research too.”

“I will. After we find your panda books.”

Emaley scrunched her nose. “Fine.” She released my hand. “If you make me mad, I’ll flush your lunch down the toilet.”

Damn. What a violent little thing.

Lucas shrugged. “I won’t.” He held out his hand. “Come on.”

Emaley took it, letting him lead her toward the comic book section. I suppressed a laugh, knowing Lucas would be missing his lunch later today. Somehow, I didn’t think he’d mind. That boy liked Emaley enough to go hungry. It was sort of sweet.

I wasn’t any expert on men, but I could see by the way Lucas stared at Emaley, nearly hanging on her every word, that he wanted more than friendship. What did that mean when you were eight years old? Not a lot, but it was still cute.

It reminded me of one of my favorite book tropes. Childhood sweethearts and friends to lovers were my jam. I loved to read and have loved it ever since I was a little girl. My favorite stories were fantasy and romance. When you added them together, like the growing popularity of romantasy, it was usually a book I couldn't put down.

I had the perfect job, conducive to my obsession with books. Working in a library was a dream come true for a shy girl who lost her parents far too young and ended up bouncing around foster homes before I was finally adopted. Some of those memories were dark and painful, so I pushed them away, smiling at the elementary class students as they worked on their animal reports.

Our library served most of the northern section of Henderson, Nevada. With a population of over three hundred thousand, it boasted low crime, great schools, and a close proximity to Las Vegas without having to live too close to the Strip. The suburban life with all the amenities of a bustling city plus access to Hoover Dam and extensive outdoor recreation.

But Me? I never took much advantage of that. I wasn't an outdoorsy girl. Sure, I loved a cold dip in the pool on a hot day or a short hike through a local park. Those activities didn't take up my whole evening or weekend. Curling up with a good book, a cup of hot or iced tea, and my porch swing was all I needed to be happy.

By the time the third-grade class left, I had a mess to clean up. I didn't mind. It was my job and what I got paid to do. Since I took pride in my organizational skills and providing efficient access to the public, I felt it was my duty to sort and reshelve the books and ensure they were all tucked back into their proper place. When the next round of students arrived, they would find what they were looking for without hassle.

By the time my shift ended, I had emptied the return bin and cleaned up the circulation desk. The self-checkout areas were clear of clutter, and I picked up a few stray items to add to the lost and found we kept in the storage room. If anyone came

to look for something later, we could bring out the containers and let them dig through the clothing, electronics, etc., to find what they left behind.

Most of the time, people were honest. We had very little cause for concern. No one usually lost their shit at the library. The only issue arose from overdue fees, which were out of my control. Librarians didn't place those fines on books and other media, but we did have to enforce them. I couldn't remove the penalties. People had to pay them, and they were minimal most of the time.

"Hey, Katrina, are you heading out?"

I turned to my co-worker, Elizabeth. We called her Lizzie after her favorite character in literature, Lizzie Bennett. Who wasn't a Jane Austen fan? I had my own rare collection of her books on my shelves at home. "Yep. You coming?"

Lizzie nodded. "I've got a date tonight."

"You must be excited," I guessed from the way she nearly bounced on her feet as she approached.

"I am. Victor is sweet, charming, and just the type of guy I'll kiss on the first date."

I smirked. "He sounds awesome."

"Oh, I'll let you know for sure tomorrow."

I didn't doubt it. "I hope you have a great time."

We left through the rear entrance, walking onto the hot asphalt as the sun began its descent in the sky. Shades of marigold and bright orange shot across the horizon with few clouds to block the beautiful rays. It was the type of sunset that was perfect to

enjoy with a lover.

Not everything needs to be a swoon-worthy romance novel moment, I reminded myself.

Still, with what I did for a living and my obsession with books, it made sense that my head was often filled with romantic notions and daydreams of the perfect male. It couldn't be helped. Maybe someday I would meet my knight in shining armor.

But I doubted he would ever walk into my library.

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Lizzie waved as she opened her car door. “See you next week!”

I watched her start the engine and drive off, nearly speeding as she merged onto the street and zoomed through the yellow light. The intersection by the library was a busy one, and it was rush hour. She really took a risk, but if I had someone to rush home to, I’d do the same.

I walked to my cute gunmetal gray Chevy Trax, noting it was the perfect size for me and met all my needs. I liked a smaller, more manageable vehicle, and it had all the amenities. I got it for a steal last year when I traded in my decade-old Dodge. It might not be the most amazing car on the road, but I was thrilled to finally drive something new.

By the time I drove up my driveway and parked under the carport, the sun glittered on the horizon, casting everything in its wondrous shimmer. It was too pretty not to sit and watch from my porch swing, so I grabbed a big glass, dropped in a few cubes of ice, filled it with lemon and sweet tea, and parked my weary bottom on the seat.

I stayed long after the sun faded and the sky began to populate with bright, twinkling stars. Gently rocking, I enjoyed the quiet neighborhood as people headed indoors and retired for the evening. I’d long ago finished my tea and set the glass on the nearest table. Sinking into the cushions, I relaxed as the hustle of the day finally disappeared, and I could take in the pale glow of the fairy lights strung up around my porch in peace, the only illumination other than the moon and her starry companions.

If only I had someone to share this with, I lamented in my head. Maybe I should try a few dating apps again.

I doubted they improved since I deleted them, finding few I could match with that weren't looking for a hook up.

My phone buzzed with an incoming call, and I picked it up, glancing at the screen. My adopted mom, Sabrina. She was a sweet lady, and I felt lucky to have her in my life.

"Hi," I answered as I swiped right. "You're calling late."

"Hey, sweetie. Just thinking of you."

Aw, I loved hearing that. "I feel special now."

"As you should." I could almost hear her smile it was so big on the other end of the line. "So, I've got a dinner this weekend."

Uh-huh. There it was. The real reason she called me.

"Yes?"

"I've invited a few friends. You should come."

"Sabrina," I began, guessing she decided to hook me up with a potential date again. It was the third time in six months. "I'm not interested in dating right now."

"Honey, I know that's not true."

"Okay. I'm not interested in dating anyone you introduce to me," I clarified. It sounded harsh, but the last two times were a disaster. She didn't have a clue about what type of man I was attracted to or what I looked for in a guy.

“Your standards are too high,” she complained. “If you would just open yourself to the possibility.”

“Sabrina, my answer is no.”

“Fine,” she huffed. “I’m just looking out for you. I know you’re lonely.” She sniffled, and I felt guilty. “Could you maybe reconsider?”

I sighed. “Not this weekend.”

“Alright. I’ll move the dinner to next weekend. Okay?”

“Fine.”

“You’ll come?”

If I didn’t, she’d just keep trying. “Yes, but this is the last time. You need to agree. No more setting me up after this.”

“I can agree to that.”

Good.

“Just so you know, I still think you’re special. Every single day. I thought so the first time we met you with your pretty brown hair in braids and your little glasses perched on your button nose.” Her voice cracked. “I just want to be in your life, honey. I need to know you’re happy.”

“I know. I appreciate that, Sabrina.”

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Twelve years after the adoption, I still couldn't call her mom. I wasn't sure of the reason. Maybe it was because I'd been so close to my birth mother before she died. Even at five years old, I remembered her smile, the scent of her floral perfume, and her soft Soprano voice as she sang to me.

Sabrina was the opposite of that memory, but that didn't mean I didn't care about her. I adored her, even when she was being a pain in the ass. Like now.

"I'll see you soon. Love you, Kat."

Kat. I hated my name being shortened. Sabrina never seemed to remember. "Love you too."

The call ended, and I closed my eyes. I was glad that tomorrow was Saturday. I could sleep in and forget about work for a couple of days. One of the perks of my position and seniority was that I had the freedom to work the shift I wanted and avoid weekends. I still had to work one weekend shift a month, but the tradeoff was worth it.

I became a librarian during my senior year in college. The city hired me before I even had my diploma. Five years later, I had no intention of ever leaving. Being a librarian was the one thing in my life that felt perfect.

There might have been some truth in what Sabrina said. I was a bit lonely. Perhaps I was a little envious of Lizzie and her date, too. But all of the heartache in my past helped to erect a barrier I wasn't sure I could ever break down. Worse, I didn't think I wanted to be rid of it. There was something to be said about a safety net. Or, in my

case, a solid and heavy safety wall.

Pushing off the swing, I decided to head inside for the night. After all, I had episodes of a certain vampire show to watch, even if I liked the books more.

Chapter 3 Cuckoo

It took several days for Eagle Eye to get back to me. He woke me in the middle of the night, blowing up my phone until I answered. The fucking vibrations kept going off by my head, and the cell nearly fell off the nightstand before I managed to catch it.

A bit groggy, I grumbled a gruff answer. “Yeah?”

“Katrina works for the city, Cuckoo. She’s a librarian.”

A librarian. It made sense. Katrina always loved books.

“Give me five minutes.” I didn’t wait for him to reply, hitting the end button.

Groaning, I pushed off the mattress and dropped to the floor, doing a few sets of pushups to wake myself up. Once the blood was pumping, I popped to my feet and entered the bathroom. It took me less than ten minutes to shower before I snatched up my keys and phone, shoved them in my pockets, and shrugged on my cut.

Eagle Eye ticked his chin my way as I entered his office. “Wait until you see this. Katrina has an employee I.D. It’s a much better pic than her driver’s license.”

Nobody ever had a good driver’s license photo. That was common knowledge.

“Let me see.”

He pulled up both images, but I settled my focus on the City of Henderson I.D. My entire body awakened as a blast of heat shot through me. My cock swelled in my jeans, and every thought in my head focused on her pouty, perfect lips and those pretty doe-like brown eyes. She still wore glasses.

I lifted my hand to touch the screen, brushing my fingertips over her image. Fuck. Was her skin as soft as it appeared?

Outside, my crow grew loud with his chortles and caws. A loud kraa seemed to echo from the roof.

I shuddered, feeling a warmth and intensity I couldn't explain. It was like she locked onto me from that screen, and I was stuck in her tractor beam, zeroed in, and unable to escape.

I never had such a visceral reaction to a woman in my life. Every inch of me throbbed with want, longing, and lust. I needed to see her, touch her. NOW.

"Oh, shit," Eagle Eye laughed. "I know that look."

"What look?" I asked, far too distracted to glance his way.

"Like you just found your mate."

I jolted, but I couldn't tear my gaze away from Katrina. Jesus. Fucking. Christ. She was beautiful. Stunning, actually.

Wow.

"Bro, you need to stick your tongue back in your mouth."

I ignored his laughter, mostly because all I could think about was how Katrina was going to be mine, and I didn't care what I had to do to make it happen. If another guy tried to stake a claim, he'd face me and my crow.

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Katrina was mine.

“Oh, fuck. You’re serious.”

Did I say that last sentence about her being mine aloud or in my head? It didn’t matter.

“I need her address.”

Eagle Eye crossed his arms, clearing his throat. “You can’t rush into her workplace and carry her out like a caveman.”

“Why not?” Yeah, I was sort of serious.

“Because you’ll get arrested, Crow will get cranky, and we’ll have to bail you out of jail. How will you protect Katrina from behind bars?”

He had a point. “Fine. I still want her home and work addresses. Like you said, for protection.”

He shook his head. “Try not to spook her, bro. She’s not seen you in twelve years. She might not recognize you.”

“She will,” I replied with confidence. “I’m unforgettable.”

A chuckle escaped as he swiveled in his chair, typing keys so fast I couldn’t tell what the hell he was doing. The mouse moved and clicked at an almost inhuman speed.

“You need to get a life, Eagle Eye. That shit is freaky.”

He sighed. “I know.”

“Maybe you’re next,” I suggested.

“For a mate?”

“Yeah.”

“Hell no.”

I snickered as I heard his printer working, processing the information I needed on Katrina. “Thanks.” I snatched the sheet that printed, scanning over the addresses he provided.

“About the other thing,” he began as I took two steps toward the door.

“The cold case?”

“I’m still digging. It’s become a bit of a challenge, but I’ll get through the firewalls and security. Once I figure it out, I’ll contact you.”

“Appreciate it, brother.”

Excitement and anticipation bubbled under the surface of my skin, prodding me to hop on my bike and ride to Katrina as quickly as I could. The time was the only thing stopping me from showing up at her home address. At nearly four in the morning, it was too early to knock on her door.

Maybe I could just stalk her. There was no harm in that, right?

I left the Roost, striding towards my bike as I heard my crow drop from the sky. He landed close to my front tire, chittering at me with encouragement. We both liked the idea of staking out Katrina's house and ensuring our mate remained safe.

I held the printed addresses in my hand and scanned them again, closing my eyes as I sent the mental image to my crow. "Go to her house. Watch over her until I arrive."

He cawed and took to the sky, flying off with a flap of silky onyx wings.

Knowing my crow would arrive long before I did, I felt a sense of relief. He'd alert me if anything seemed off or dangerous. His priority was her safety. My crow would attack anyone posing a threat.

The ride to her address took twenty minutes. She lived on the northern side of town, ten minutes from the library where she worked. It didn't surprise me that she would be that close. Katrina had always been shy, introverted, and happiest when she was curled up with a book.

She made a career out of what she loved. Smart. Most people never figured out what they wanted in life until it was too late to switch. They ended up stuck in dead-end jobs and too much debt. Not my girl. I saw the profile Eagle Eye had put together. Katrina had minimal debt, and almost all her student loans were paid off. She'd gotten a lot of scholarships.

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I was fucking proud of her.

I'd happily pay off the rest of her debt and ease her financial burden. It was the least I could do. After all, I didn't have many expenses, and I longed to spoil her.

I parked in the shadows across the street, shutting off the engine on my bike and staying hidden behind a variety of tightly clustered palm trees and a prickly bush. Every house on the street looked similar, with the same stucco exterior, two-car garage, and ranch-style floor plan. A cookie-cutter life where everyone followed the rules and no one dared to be different. A harsh assessment? Maybe.

But that life wasn't what I wanted, and I doubted it made Katrina happy. She might look like a good girl who followed the rules, dressed modestly and made all the right choices, but I remembered the wild, naughty side she let loose on Halloween and the nights when we were alone. She liked to ride my motorcycle and feel the wind on her face. Katrina lit up when she had the freedom to do so, and I made it my personal mission to get her on the back of my bike again, showing her everything she was missing.

I lit a smoke and waited for her lights to flick on. The neighborhood began to wake with the sun's emergence over the horizon in dazzling rays of marigold. Heat penetrated my cut, and the leather grew warm. Katrina was up. I could sense her movements, but my crow was quick to alert me.

Caws filled the air as he hopped along her roof, flapping his dark wings before he settled on a large frond of the nearest palm tree. His excitement and restless energy zipped through me, causing my fingers to drum on my thigh. We both wanted a

glimpse of our girl.

Was it a bit odd that I stood in the fading shadows and watched her place, knowing any moment a neighbor might notice? Sure. Did I care? Fuck no.

Katrina opened her living room blinds, and I cracked a smile as I saw her rushing around the house, flitting about the kitchen for her morning coffee, gathering her things for work, and hopping around on one foot as she slid her foot inside her shoe. Adorable.

I smoked three cigarettes before she finally emerged. The garage door opened, and she backed out of her driveway, pulling onto the street in a hurry. She must be running late. I checked my phone, and sure enough, it was seven minutes before her start time. She was cutting it close.

I tsked as I watched her garage door lower, and I rushed across the street, darting inside as I ducked and entered a few seconds before it shut. If anyone saw me, I wouldn't be recognized. After all, I'd chosen a perfect costume for the occasion.

Before I left my room at the Roost, I opened one of my costume chests and pulled out a desert ghillie suit. It became useful more often than I could count. I wore it over my cut and a black A-shirt, covering any identifying markers that could implicate the club. I kept it contained in my saddlebags until dawn, but after the sun began to ascend, I pulled on the cloth and settled the garment over me, ensuring I was camouflaged and blended in with the surrounding foliage.

But now that I entered Katrina's home, I shucked the hot and heavy costume and set it aside, draping the material over her supple couch. Her décor was so fucking pure. Whites, light grays, and tans. Pops of color with all her plants. Everything had its place. Perfectly organized. Straight lines. Pure.

Fuck, I wanted to move things around and break those sharp angles. I felt the sudden urge to splatter the ground with blood or cum or sweat just to defile it a little. I needed to leave my mark on her property, but more than that, I craved to do the same on her lithe, petite body.

Christ. I'd fucking lose it when I had the chance to finally fuck her. It couldn't happen fast enough.

Walking through her house with a stiff dick spurred on my lust, but I held myself in check. Today wasn't about getting off, although I would do it later with her name on my lips. Right now, I wanted to get to know Katrina. My fingers itched to touch every surface of her bed and dresser, to dig into her private belongings and see what I could find.

I walked into her room, taking note of the simple furnishings and additional plants as I opened her drawers. Everything was folded. Even her socks were paired.

My girl needed an intervention. She had way too much time on her hands. I would exhaust her on those pristine sheets and leave them stained with our combined fluids. I wanted her to fall asleep with my scent on her body and my cum drying between her thighs.

I picked up a pair of silky white panties, inhaling the clean scent of her detergent. She didn't use a floral scent. This was more like clean, fresh linen and rain.

Rain. Funny how it circled back to that. Tome.

I wondered if she remembered my name or how she always said my eyes reflected the moniker. She used to stare deeply into them as she held my hand, telling me that she could always tell my mood because of the storm raging within.

I pocketed her underwear, deciding to hold onto them for future use. The drawer closed as I pushed it silently in, spinning around to head into her bathroom. And that was when I was assaulted by her favorite scents and a hint of her musk. Linen, summer rain, clean, fresh sheets, a bit of citrus, and a little aloe. Fucking intoxicating.

The glass doors on her shower were so fucking clean I almost smacked into the glass before I slid it open and stood on the tile. Would my boots leave any residue behind? Enough for her to notice? I hoped so.

Katrina kept plants on her fucking shower windowsill. Wasn't she adorable? Who did that? My girl was so goddamn sweet she almost gave me a toothache.

I checked the bottles of her shampoo and conditioner, then her lotion, deodorant, and body spray—no deviation in scent.

My girl was a slave to her routine and schedule. Frowning, I knew I needed to stage an intervention. I'd mess it all up, and when she complained of the stressful chaos, I'd be sure to show her how much better life could be if she let it all go.

Things didn't improve when I searched her kitchen, finding cabinets and a fridge with all healthy foods. Tons of salad, fruits, vegetables, and fucking tofu. Get the fuck out with that shit. And there wasn't much like she didn't have much money for extras. I didn't doubt it. A single-income household, living alone with no help.

She needed carbs. It wasn't healthy to avoid the good stuff. Denial only worked when there was a reward or incentive involved. I could provide plenty of that. All the orgasms she wanted, free of charge. Goddamn, I couldn't wait to prop her ass on the counter, spread her legs, and feast on her pussy.

Yeah, being here in Katrina's house was fucking turning me on, but it also proved how desperately she needed me in her life. I spent a few minutes familiarizing myself

with how she arranged and organized her home, and then I left out the back door, stepping onto her patio.

Pulling out my cell, I dialed Eagle Eye.

“How did it go?” he asked, answering after only one ring.

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“Good. Lots of intel. Found out a lot about my woman.”

“You talked to her?”

“Not yet.”

“Shit. Did you break into her house?”

“No. I entered when she opened the garage door.” Not that I had to explain or defend myself. “Used the ghillie suit. I’m wearing it now.”

“Fuck, Cuckoo. That’s gonna be suspicious.”

“That’s why I need you to take control of all the security footage on the street.”

He sighed. “Done.”

“And I need to know the code for her alarm system.”

I wanted to set it for her since she must have forgotten when she left. Who knew if some creep would try to sneak into her place after me?

“Give me a minute.”

“No problem.”

I let him work, scanning the area of her backyard, which, in Nevada, never consisted

of grass. Sand, decorative gravel, and a few palm trees took up most of the space. A few chairs, a table, and a firepit were all that remained within the gated space. Out front, I noticed a swing during my surveillance.

“Okay, got it. It’s four letters and two numbers.”

“Give it to me.”

“R-A-I-N-1-2.”

A stupid grin stretched my lips. She never forgot me.

My crow chortled before a loud caw filled the air, and he dropped from the sky, hopping beside me. He chattered as we enjoyed Katrina’s security code. My name plus the number of years since we last saw one another. She must have updated it recently.

“Thanks, brother. I appreciate you.”

“Just don’t get yourself arrested. I’ll deny any involvement,” he laughed. “Crow can just kick your ass.”

I snickered. “Yeah. Okay.”

We ended the call, and I walked back to Katrina’s door, set her alarm, and returned to my bike. I stashed the ghillie suit before I started the engine, eager to get moving. There was only one thing left to do now.

Time to meet my angel face-to-face.

Chapter 4 Katrina

The morning shift had been busy. I had several classes return for their school projects, a few people signing up for new library cards, a guy complaining about \$3.42 in fines, and a co-worker called off, leaving me to handle most of it. By the time I headed to my hour lunch, I was starving and thirsty, my feet ached, and I wanted a few minutes alone.

I grabbed my purse and headed outside, removing my name tag and stuffing it inside my purse before I walked toward my car. As luck would have it, I didn't get far. Only a few yards away from the library entrance and into the parking lot, I felt my phone vibrating inside my pocket.

Snatching it free, I noticed my supervisor's name. "Darlene," I answered, slowing my steps. "I'm just heading out to lunch."

"I know, sweetie, but I wanted to ask you about that literacy program for the homeless we talked about last week. It's been so busy today, and I'm leaving soon for a meeting downtown."

Shit. I forgot to type up a proposal for that. "I'm working on it. All the information is stored on my laptop, but I left it at home today."

"Oh! That's fine. Maybe you could bring it on Friday? I won't be back until then."

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Whew. “Yes, that’s fine. I’ll have it ready.”

“Thanks! You’re a gem!”

She hung up, and I stuffed my phone into my purse, not paying attention to the crowded parking lot or the sudden high-pitched screeching sound that made my head snap up in time to catch the motorcycle grinding to a halt a few inches from where I stood.

I sucked in a breath as my eyes widened, backing up a few steps and nearly stumbling in my haste. Pissed and fueled by adrenaline, I opened my mouth to yell at the stranger to slow down when I locked onto a set of stormy gray eyes that were as familiar as my heartbeat.

My jaw dropped. I didn’t expect this. I didn’t anticipate seeing my foster brother again after twelve years.

Blinking, I closed my mouth, staring as he watched me, not at all bothered by the fact that he nearly ran me over. Oh, God. He was here. Right in front of me. No longer existing in my dreams or memories of the past.

Rain. In the flesh.

He straddled his bike, tall and intimidating, as he gripped the handlebars of his motorcycle with black leather gloves. I saw the vest he wore and noticed the tight black shirt underneath. Dark denim over thick, muscular thighs. Shitkicker boots. Colorful ink on his bare arms.

And, wow, that smirk that haunted me since I was a little girl.

“Rain,” I breathed.

He didn’t blink. Didn’t move. “Hop on.”

What?

I shook my head, backing up a step. I wasn’t getting on this death machine!

“Angel, hop on the back of my bike. We need to talk.”

His angel. I never forgot the nickname he gave me.

“No.” I wasn’t sure he could hear me over the engine.

“Katrina,” he growled, sounding more vicious than the iron beast he rode. “Get on. Now.”

Shit. I slung my purse across my torso and ignored the people glancing our way. My gaze briefly slid over the pavement, and I noted the black skid marks from his tires. He really did almost hit me.

Disgruntled by that knowledge, I shot him a dirty look before I hiked my leg and ungracefully climbed on, nearly colliding with him. I was out of practice, awkward, and embarrassed. I’d only ridden with Rain when we were teens, which was reckless enough. I shouldn’t be doing this now.

His chest vibrated with laughter as I slid my arms around his waist, tucking my body close to his because this scared the shit out of me. I remembered how fast his Harley could go on the open road. Rain loved the speed and freedom. At one time, I did too.

“Hold on tight,” he ordered before pulling back on the throttle. We lurched forward, rumbling through the parking lot of the library and merging onto the street.

I had no idea where he was taking me. I tried to ask, but he acted like he couldn’t hear me. I tapped his shoulder, but he shook his head, grabbed my hands, and held them against his stomach.

Sighing, I knew what he meant. Don’t ever let go. Rule number one. He taught me that many years ago. My safety relied on my ability to keep my bottom on the seat and my hands on his body. Wow, that has so many meanings now.

It wasn’t until he rode through my neighborhood that I began to realize our destination. When he pulled onto my driveway, I dropped my hands as he parked. The shock of the truth took hold as I realized he knew where I lived. The engine shut off, and silence engulfed us. I didn’t move as he stood, lifted off his helmet, and hung it on the handlebars.

“Katrina.”

I lifted my chin, meeting his gray eyes that felt more like quicksilver now as they swept over me, heating with something I couldn’t begin to understand.

“Come on, angel. I’ve got lunch.”

Lunch?

He moved behind me and opened his saddlebags, pulling out paper bags with a sub logo on them. “You need to eat.”

I did. Somehow, it didn’t seem important. “You’re here.”

Wow, that sounds lame.

“Katrina, I know this is a shock. Just come inside, eat, and we’ll talk. Okay?”

Finally, my head and body got it figured out. I climbed off the bike as he held out his hand. Placing my palm against his, I didn’t say a word as he slid his fingers through mine and led me toward my front door.

“I’ll just get the alarm.”

He nodded.

Since he didn’t release my hand, I used the other to reach into my purse for my keys, open the front door, and step inside. I punched in my code, wondering if he saw it.

Rain gestured toward my kitchen. “Have a seat. I know you’re tired.”

I didn’t ask how he knew. Did he come into the library?

Exhausted, I dropped onto one of the stools at my kitchen island and set my purse on the couch on the way. “We need drinks.” I pushed off the seat to stand, but Rain shook his head.

“No. You stay there. I’ll grab it.”

Sighing, I listened. “Thanks,” I mumbled as he slid a cold Diet Coke my way. I popped the top and took a drink, setting it aside as I watched him chug a water bottle,

belch, and then grab a Coke for himself.

“It’s hot out today,” he explained as he joined me, taking the seat on my immediate left. “Here, I got you a salad and a club sandwich.” He opened one of the bags and slid them to me.

I noticed my favorite dressing, a raspberry vinegarete. The club sandwich was also one of my preferences. “How did you know?”

He shrugged. “Eat.”

I took a modest bite as he watched me, feeling like I was being studied under a microscope as I chewed. After another bite, he seemed satisfied and opened the other bag.

Rain had a footlong sub, two bags of chips, an apple, and three cookies. He ate it all as I sat there, slowly chewing as he devoured his food. It wasn’t gross. Some people chew with their mouths open, but he seemed to make an effort for me. I was just a slow eater. Always had been.

When we both had our fill, he turned toward me and dragged my stool closer until I sat between his thighs, facing him.

“I waited a long time to find you.”

Wow. Really? I wasn’t sure he would ever care. Just because I had a crush on him at thirteen didn’t mean he remembered me as anything more than an annoying younger foster sibling. Sure, we had moments where we clicked. I would be lying if I said we weren’t each other’s lifeline during those dark days, but he owed me nothing.

“Tell me what that look means,” he ordered gruffly.

“What look?’ I asked, a little too sassy.

“The one where you scrunch that adorable little nose and look wounded.”

Wounded? I looked away, too exposed to remain in his direct sight.

“I didn’t leave you.”

“I know that.” I was adopted.

“I never forgot you, either. I swear it, angel.”

I dared to finally meet his gunmetal eyes. “Why are you telling me this?” Shaking my head, I wanted to know why he tried to locate me. Or was this all a coincidence?

“Because I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere.”

“And that means what?” This didn’t make sense.

“You want to know what I want from you,” he discerned. “That’s not complicated. I just want to be in your life, Katrina.”

“Why?”

He lifted his hand and brushed his thumb over my jaw. “Because.”

“That’s not an answer. It’s too vague and noncommittal.”

His lips twitched. “Yeah, I suppose it is.”

“You’re not going to say more, are you?”

He shook his head. “Not yet.”

I pouted, sticking out my lower lip because I felt ridiculous, left in the dark, and like a child being denied dessert or something sparkly and pretty. He dangled it like a scrumptious morsel and denied me the pleasure of experiencing it. “You’re mean.”

A dark chuckle escaped as he held my chin, refusing to let me turn away. “No. I’m delaying my response for a time when it will make better sense.”

I snorted. “Why? Are you stalking me or something?”

His grin widened.

Oh. My. God. He was! “Rain!”

“As much as I love to hear you say my name, I don’t go by Rain anymore.” He tapped a spot of the leather vest on his chest. “See? My road name is Cuckoo.”

Cuckoo. Huh. It worked for him.

“So, I can’t call you Rain?”

“Well, that’s just for when we’re alone.”

“Like now,” I pointed out.

Those gray eyes of his nearly glistened with silver. “Yeah, angel, we are.”

Outside, I heard a crow cawing. It grew louder, hopping outside the kitchen window. How odd. I didn’t notice many crows before today.

“Are you a biker or something?”

“Yeah, I am. I’m a member of the Devil’s Murder MC.”

That sounded ominous. And dangerous. “Oh.”

“Don’t worry. You’ve got my protection. Always. Me and my club.”

Wait. I frowned. “Why do I need protection?”

He shrugged. “You don’t. Right?”

No, of course not. “Why would I?”

“Exactly. Why would you need it, angel?” He hung on my answer, wondering if I was hiding something.

“I’m not hiding anything, Cuckoo.”

His lips thinned, losing the playful smile. “I believe you, Katrina.”

It didn’t look like it. “I’m a librarian, Rain, err Cuckoo. I’ve never even gotten a speeding ticket. I always obey the law.”

He released my chin and sat back, folding his arms across his chest. “Yeah, I thought so.”

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Okay. Not weird at all.

“Well, thanks for lunch.” I moved to slide from the stool when he dropped his arms and placed his palms on my knees, forcing me to remain in place.

“We’re not done.”

With what? Our conversation? “I think so since you have nothing else to say.”

“Baby, you need to watch that sexy little mouth.”

I rolled my eyes. “You going all alpha biker on me?”

“I seem to remember you liking it the last night we spent together.”

I gasped. “Cuckoo.”

I was thirteen. He was my first kiss. My first crush. The guy who convinced me I was worth loving after the worst years of my life. Did he ever cross a line? No.

We were so young. It was innocent. But had we remained in the same household through our teen years, I couldn’t say it would have stayed that way. He had a pull I couldn’t resist. A magnetism I still found hard to deny.

“Yeah, angel?”

I couldn’t indulge in this conversation, especially when he’d given me so little. I had

no idea why he was here or what he wanted from me. “I need to go back to work. My lunch break is almost over.”

“I’ll take you.”

I nodded as he leaned back and watched me stand.

“You’re wearing a helmet this time.”

“Agreed.”

“And in the future, too.”

No problem. Safety was a big issue for me.

Wait. “Are you saying we’ll be seeing each other again?”

His wicked grin was the only reply.

Chapter 5 Cuckoo

Katrina wanted answers, but I preferred to wait until I knew more about the connection to her past, her parent’s death, and the criminal case that possibly placed her life in danger. I didn’t want to spook her. I believed my sweet little librarian when she said she wasn’t hiding anything. But that only concerned me more since that meant she was oblivious to any threats.

She needed me to stick around, and that was what I planned to do. After dropping her off at the library, I watched her walk inside, the sexy swish of her ass far too distracting, and swiped across my phone, dialing one of the prospects.

“Goose,” I greeted as he answered. “Need you to ride to me. Got a job for you. I’m texting the address. Make sure you’re armed.”

“I’ll be right there,” he promised.

No questions. No hesitation. That was why Crow would patch him in when it was time. Goose and Robin would both be voted in. The club could use some new prospects soon.

Goose arrived in twenty minutes, which meant he left immediately after receiving my call. Good. “Hey, what can I do for ya?” he asked as he parked beside my bike, shutting down his engine.

“Look through that window.” I ticked my chin toward the rectangular glass panels that stretched across the front of the library. The city had built it inside an existing shopping center, so all the glass let in plenty of natural light. I assumed that was the point when you wanted people to read and check out books.

“I see people reading, browsing, and relaxing,” he observed.

“And what else?”

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He scanned the interior, a little slower this time. “Librarians.”

Bingo.

“See the one standing in the children’s section?”

“Yep. She’s pretty.”

“She’s mine,” I growled, spooking him enough that he jolted.

“Shit.” He swallowed. “Sorry.”

Yeah, watch it.

My crow flew overhead, chittering as he heard the exchange.

“Her name is Katrina. You don’t take your eyes off her. You gotta go piss, eat, or do something, and you call Robin to take your place until you get back.”

“Understood.”

“If you see or hear anything suspicious, inform me right away.”

“I will.”

“I’m going back to the Roost. I need to talk to Crow.”

Goose nodded. "I'll text when she leaves."

"You text me any and everything. She takes a break, eats, has any rude customers, or appears upset. That list isn't finite. Got it?"

"Yeah. I'll make sure you get my notes."

"See that you do." I started my engine and backed out of the parking space, pausing to peer inside the library.

Katrina chose that moment to lift her head and stare in my direction. A timid smile lifted the corners of her lips. I could see her cheeks flush from here.

See you tonight, my angel.

The ride back to the clubhouse didn't take long since my mind was occupied with Katrina. I thought over lunch and how I surprised her, not giving her a chance to refuse a hot meal and ride on my bike. Of course, she thought I nearly bumped into her. Couldn't be further from the truth. I'd never risk injuring her. I got close, but I had full control the entire time.

Still, she should have been paying attention and not rushing through a crowded parking lot without being aware of her surroundings. We'd have to talk about safety, especially since I couldn't shake the thought that something wasn't quite right. Ever since Eagle Eye mentioned that cold case, I've been on edge.

That was the reason I rode straight to the Roost. Crow needed to be aware of shit, and the longer I waited to fill him in, the crankier he'd get about it. As soon as I parked my bike, I headed inside, ignored the bar, and knocked on Crow's door.

"Come in," he hollered, sitting back in his chair as I opened the door and entered his

office. “Thought I’d see you today.”

Oh? “Why?” I asked, sinking onto one of the two chairs in front of his desk.

“Because you’ve been anxious as fuck. My crow feels it.” His thick arms folded across his chest. “What’s going on?”

I should have known he’d sense it. His ability to tap into the emotions of his men was one of the reasons he was such a damn good president. Better even than his pops, Rook.

May he rest in peace and raise hell in the afterlife.

I leaned forward, slapping my palm on his desk. “I found her.”

Crow arched a brow. “Your foster sister?”

“Yeah.”

“Huh,” he grunted. “Where is she?”

“She’s a librarian and works for the city.”

“Damn. Didn’t figure it would be that easy.”

“Me either,” I admitted, feeling like a fool because I should have looked for her sooner. I wanted to ask Katrina if her adoptive parents had been good to her and if she’d had a normal life after the hell we survived as kids. There was so much I didn’t know. Twelve fucking years. I still couldn’t believe it had been that long.

“There’s something else.” Crow ticked his chin toward me. “Tell me what’s going on.”

“Did you talk to Eagle Eye?”

“A little. Heard about the cold case.”

“Katrina’s parents were killed in a car accident. Drunk driver on the highway one night while she was at home with a babysitter. Somehow, I don’t think it’s that simple. She didn’t have any surviving relatives, so Katrina went into the system. That’s how we met.”

“I remember the story,” he assured me.

I cleared my throat, hoping what I was about to say was wrong. “What if it wasn’t an accident?”

“Fuck, Cuckoo.”

Exactly. Fuck.

“Eagle Eye says the case files have a high-security clearance. He’s having trouble accessing the data.” I pushed out of my chair, agitated by the idea. “Katrina could be a target if I’m right.”

“What are you saying?”

“She needs my protection.”

“I see.” His probing stare settled on me, discerning what I needed. “By extension, you want the club’s protection.”

“I do,” I confirmed.

“Cuckoo,” he began, but I didn’t give him a chance to deny me.

“She’s my mate,” I stated simply, watching his eyes widen.

“But she’s your sister.”

“Myfostersister. We’re not blood-related,” I replied with more than a bit of snark. Why did everyone get hung up on that? It wasn’t gross. I didn’t lust after her until we were adults. That only happened once I saw her government I.D. on EagleEye’s screen. Wasn’t my fault she grew up to be a beauty or that my crow recognized her as ours with such fierce determination. “She’s mine, Pres.”

“I can’t make this decision on my own. We take it to church.”

“Tomorrow?” I clarified.

“Tomorrow. Noon.”

Perfect. I had time to stalk my obsession, err woman, and then convince my brothers to vote in my favor. Protecting the innocent was never an issue. It was the risk to the club. That was why Crow was still staring me down.

“The club will always have your back, Cuckoo.”

I knew that.

“But you’re asking the club, asking me to be okay with a possible enemy we don’t fucking know about yet.”

I cleared my throat, understanding his concern. “I get that, Pres. I do. But if I’m right, and this same enemy murdered Katrina’s parents, they’ll come after her. I won’t let her remain vulnerable and unprotected. I can’t fucking risk her, Crow.” I used his real name to emphasize my point. “Would you allow that to happen to Bella?”

His ol’ lady. His fucking pregnant mate.

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“No,” he growled, slamming his fist on his desk. “But you could be bringing war to our doorstep right when we finally found peace. Undertaker’s bullshit and that fucking loser Hammerhead put enough stress and pressure on the club. Half the members have ol’ ladies and babies on the way. For fuck’s sake, Cuckoo.”

I inhaled a deep breath and slowly released it. “I’ll talk to Rael.”

Crow threw up his hands. “I’m not going to the Reapers in Tonopah every time this club has shit to deal with.”

I knew I pissed him off with that statement, but the Graven Bastards were our allies. Not to mention the fact that they reaped souls and hungered for the chance to rid the world of scum. Hell, so did we. “It’s what they do, Pres.”

His head tilted back, and a heavy sigh followed. “Don’t make me fucking regret this, Cuckoo. If Katrina wasn’t your mate, we wouldn’t be considering the club’s protection right now.”

“I know.”

Did that mean the Devil’s Murder would have allowed her to be harmed? No. But we wouldn’t be placing her home under surveillance twenty-four hours a day or providing a shadow that tailed her wherever she went. And if anyone tried to hurt her, they would face our crows. That was a given.

But when a mate was involved, that changed everything. Our crows mated for life. Once we bonded to our female, that was it. Every focus centered on her well-being,

protection, and care.

There wasn't a choice. Our crows insisted on it. So I knew Crow understood my position. I didn't have any other option. There wasn't a debate. I had to protect Katrina. If and when I discovered a threat, I would act on it.

My crow began cawing outside. His fierce agreement riled up the other crows outdoors. I heard wings flapping as the murder took to the sky, catching the dark cloud of onyx out the window as it briefly blanketed the sun.

He didn't leave with the murder. My crow remained close. A single kraa belted from his throat. He already staked his claim on Katrina. To him, there was nothing that mattered more.

Crow scrubbed his hand down his face. I knew that expression. He understood my stubborn refusal to back down. Hell, when he met Bella, he didn't give any of us an option to refuse or debate her protection. Of course, the club had been targeted in that instance, not just Bella and her sister, Bree.

"Whatever happens, I accept full responsibility, Pres."

His hand dropped from his face as Crow shot me a glare. "Fuck off with that, Cuckoo. You're my fucking brother. If you need me, I'm there. Same with the club."

Then taking this to vote in church was just a formality.

I nodded. "I appreciate it."

"Which means we need to know what's in that cold case file."

My thoughts exactly. "Agreed."

“I’ll speak to Eagle Eye. If need be, he’ll reach out to Xenon.”

Xenon was the tech expert and hacker for the Tonopah Graven Bastards. He helped us on multiple occasions in the past. When his efforts were combined with Eagle Eye’s, they were unstoppable. Downright frightening if you asked me.

Two geeky dudes who could make you disappear in the blink of an eye. Or, even worse, destroyed completely. No one wanted to piss off Xenon or Eagle Eye. With a few keystrokes, they had the ability to alter an entire life.

Blinking, I realized how useful that could be. Maybe Katrina should change her identity. She couldn’t be found if she didn’t exist. It was an attractive option. One that I would keep to myself for now.

“Fuck, it’s scary as fuck when you smile like that,” Crow muttered.

“Just thinking about my options if a threat surfaces.”

“Don’t do anything stupid, Cuckoo.”

“Do I ever?” I asked, feigning innocence.

“Shit,” he laughed, leaning back in his chair. “Get the fuck outta here.”

I left his office, entered the hall, and passed by the bar on my way out. There was only one person I wanted to see, and she wasn’t off work yet. I had time to kill until five when Katrina would leave work. Until then, I decided on new ink.

I knew exactly who to go to for my newest tattoo.

Diablo, the cleaner for the Tonopah Graven Bastards, was a fucking magician with a

little ink and a needle. He owned and operated several of his own shops. It had been a year since I walked into Revelations Ink.

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I couldn't wait to immortalize Katrina on my skin like she had on my heart.

Chapter 6 Cuckoo

The bell above the door dinged as I entered Revelations Ink. Jacey stood at the counter, talking to a customer. She was one of the best tattoo artists in the shop and in high demand. When I came here, only two people were options. If it wasn't Diablo, I waited for Jacey.

She spotted me and smiled, letting me know she'd be right with me. I stood to the side, letting my gaze sweep over the framed designs and wall of art. The detail and level of artistry was jaw-dropping. Diablo took photos of all his pieces when they were finished, but he framed the ones he loved most and added them to the walls around the shop.

It was a hell of a sales pitch, especially if you were on the fence about what you wanted or the size of the piece. When you saw the level of skill used, it didn't take long for people to book an appointment or decide.

Me? I already knew what I envisioned, so I stood around, waiting for Jacey to finish, thinking Diablo must be off today.

"Hey, Cuckoo," his deep voice greeted me as I spun, grinning when I saw the big fucker with his ripped jeans, close-fitting white t-shirt, and his shoulder-length dark hair. He'd grown it out since we last met, and the thick strands brushed the tops of his shoulders.

“Diablo. How the fuck are you?” I asked as we hugged, slapping each other on the back.

“Good, man. Real good.”

“And your family?”

“Gina is pregnant. We’re having a boy,” he declared, nearly puffing his chest with pride.

Damn. Diablo, or Dio as those closest to him called him, always wanted his own child. He loved Rev and Olivia, who were Gina’s kids from a previous marriage, but he longed for a kid with his own blood. Diablo also had an older son, one he loved and cherished like his own. Thunder was an adult now, but he stayed close to one of the most influential men in his life.

“Congrats! I’m thrilled for you.”

“Appreciate it. Rev and Olivia are excited.”

“And Thunder? How’s he been?”

Diablo tapped his heart. “Struggling a bit. Life, brother. But he’ll figure it out. He’s smart. And he’s always right here.”

“Which means you’ve got his back,” I added.

“Yep.” He ticked his chin toward me. “You lookin’ for new ink?”

“Yeah. An angel with my mate’s name.”

He blinked. “You found your mate?”

“Uh, yeah, I did.” I couldn’t help the big, goofy grin on my face.

“Well, that’s a fucking reason to get inked, brother.”

No shit. “You gonna inflict pain on me or what?”

He laughed. “Step into my studio.”

When he said studio, he meant it. Diablo had everything you could need for crafting designs, tracing and transferring them to customers, and airbrushing with the richest, deepest colors. He had the best coil and rotary machines and comfortable chairs. The lighting was usually bright, but I left my shades on.

Diablo was the only tattoo artist I let freehand designs on my skin. I didn’t trust anyone else not to fuck it up. It only took one “oops.” That shit was permanent.

“Tell me about the angel you want.”

He pulled out a sketch pad and began drawing.

“Gothic but pretty. Maybe some dark shading and a crooked halo. I’ve corrupted her.”

Or I will be. Soon.

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Diablo chuckled. “Okay. Give me a minute.”

I watched his hand move over the paper as he created the image, shading and adding detail in less than five minutes. When he showed it to me, I nodded. “Her name is Katrina.” I spelled it out. “Cursive or script font.” I didn’t have to tell him to make it legible. Diablo was a professional. That would have been insulting.

He added Katrina’s name. “How’s this?”

Wow. “Fuck. That’s perfect.” He captured her innocence along with her beauty and wild, fierce personality without ever having a description or meeting her.

I shrugged off my cut, draped it over a nearby chair, then ripped off my shirt. Settling against the seat, I lay back as Diablo set the sketchbook in his work area. “Nearly ready. Just need to gather a few things.”

“Take your time.” My woman would be a few hours. I had plenty of time.

“Where do you want her?”

My angel? “Chest. Left side, close to my heart. There’s lots of ink, but you can place her above Poseidon.”

“Cool. Like she’s flying above the god of the sea.”

“Exactly.”

Technically, I had both Poseidon and Neptune inked on my skin. Poseidon stood over the sea, holding up his hands and calling forth a storm on my chest. On my left arm, a closeup of Neptune's face with beard, tentacles, and cloudy, haunting eyes was struck through by a bolt of lightning that cut across my bicep. Sharks and other sea creatures floated in the ocean on my right arm. A beautiful siren opened her mouth in a seductive song.

All the ink was colorful, but my favorite one before this angel was Neptune. Well, other than the crow.

I relaxed as Diablo began to work, letting my thoughts drift to Katrina as the needle pressed into my skin. I could forget about the pain. That was easy. My childhood had been an excellent teacher.

But that wasn't where my thoughts drifted as I closed my eyes. I slowly receded into the past, forgetting that the man who held the needle had mystical powers when he connected with blood. Diablo had already seen parts of my childhood, but he never saw Katrina.

Not until now.

She was only five years old when she entered the foster home I had the misfortune of being assigned to six months earlier. Whenever a new kid was dropped off, they arrived with a duffle bag of possessions that never held much value. The other kids who coveted nice clothes, jewelry, and new toys would confiscate or steal anything that did.

Katrina had come with a shiny suitcase, and every child in that home envied her pretty pink coat, clean clothes, the golden heart-shaped charm on her necklace, and the meat on her bones that proved she was loved and cared for.

I knew in an instant she needed me. Being three years older, bigger, and much smarter, I was wise in ways she'd never experienced. So when I shoved my way through the boys lining up to steal from her, daring any of them to touch the little angel with brown pigtails and big, fearful eyes, she never hesitated when I held out my hand.

That little girl's chin wobbled right before she held up her suitcase. No words. No pleading. Not a single tear fell.

But oh, I could feel the sorrow in the depth of her eyes because I saw it in the mirror of her soul. And right then, I knew I would kill anyone who tried to hurt her. I'd drag them into hell before I let a single scratch mar her porcelain skin.

She blinked up at me, so doll-like with her innocence, so pure and broken and sad. My heart nearly punched a hole through my chest. For the first time since I set foot in this hellhole, I felt something stir in my chest. Emotion, but much more. A tingling sensation that ran the length of my body. The urge to shelter her nearly overwhelmed me.

I made a silent vow to protect her as I wrapped my hand around her suitcase and then took her empty palm in mine. She gasped as I clenched her hand and led her away from the others. I took her to my room upstairs, where the bullies couldn't reach her.

She was so tiny. Her little arms were no bigger than twigs. I knew just the place to hide her. When the monsters hunted in the night, they wouldn't find the little angel hidden by shadows. I'd make sure of that.

"What's your name?" I asked as I brought her in and closed the door, setting her suitcase on the floor by my dresser.

"Katrina," she whispered.

“Who’s that?” Tommy asked, reading a comic book he stole from a kid at school. He was a thief and a liar, but he didn’t hit girls, so I let him bunk with me.

“My friend,” I growled. “You don’t touch her.”

“I know. Geez.”

“If I’m not around, you protect her. Okay?”

He snorted. “What’s in it for me?”

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“I’ll give you my afternoon snack every day.”

That made him perk up. “Deal.”

Katrina sniffled, and I knew she wanted to cry.

“I’m not going to hurt you. Tommy won’t hurt you either,” I assured her.

The sacrificed snacks were worth it.

“But the others?”

“I won’t let them.”

She nodded. “What is your name?”

“Rain.”

She blinked. “You smell like a summer storm.”

Tommy hooted.

I lifted my middle finger and flipped him off. “Shut up.” Looking at Katrina, I smiled. “I’m going to set up your bed.”

Her head tilted to the side before she glanced at the room. The space allowed bunk beds, two dressers, a lamp, and a closet. Nothing else. She noticed.

The little angel was smart.

I turned to Tommy. "Give me your extra blanket."

"The fuck?"

I smacked him. "Don't cuss in front of her. She's little."

"I'm not little," she fired back.

All three of us knew she lied.

Tommy grinned. "She'll be alright." He pulled a blanket off his bed and tossed it to Rain. "I get hot anyway."

"That's why you don't need two of them."

I opened the closet and cleared out some of the junk, picking it up and placing it on the shelf above the clothing rod. We didn't have much, so there was plenty of room inside. With the floor clear, I spread the blanket around, making a little den for her to snuggle in like a little bunny. I was the only one with two pillows, and I gave that up for her, too, placing it on one side and her suitcase at the other end.

"There. You're all set."

She bit her lip. "I don't want to take off my coat."

"You don't have to do anything you don't want except sleep in there, so I know you're safe."

She seemed to think it over and nodded her agreement. I watched her lay down and

settle, pulling part of the blanket around her and pushing her back against the wall. It made me sad that she already understood that danger existed and that she had to protect herself like that.

“How old are you?” I asked as I sank to my knees.

“Five,” she whispered.

“I’m eight and a half.”

“I don’t like the dark,” she confessed. “Monsters hide in closets.”

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“No.” I shook my head firmly, wishing I could spare her the truth. “They come out and hunt at night. You’re safest in the closet. They won’t find you there.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

Her little shoulders lost some of their tension. “Okay.”

“For this to work, I need to close the closet door most of the way. I’ll leave it cracked,” I assured her, seeing her eyes round with fright. “It’s to keep the monsters out.”

Her chin wobbled again like it did when she first arrived, and I reached out, patting her on top of the head because I heard that was how you comfort someone. It worked.

Katrina closed her eyes. Her little hand rose to her face, and the two fingers closest to her thumb slipped into her mouth.

I didn’t judge her. We all wanted to feel loved and safe. It just wasn’t possible in this house.

Tommy was asleep by the time I stood, barricaded a chair against the door handle to our room, and turned off the light. I slid beneath the blanket on the bottom bunk and hoped Katrina would spend her first night in hell without nightmares.

“Fuck, Cuckoo,” Diablo swore, pulling me back into the present. “I didn’t mean to

see. Shit.”

“Katrina,” I replied. “You saw how we met.”

“Yeah, man. I felt your bond with her. It was strong from the start.”

“It still is.”

He swiped over my chest, wiping away the blood. “I’m done.”

I guess we both got lost in my memory of the past.

“Take a look, brother. It’s bitchin’.”

He cracked me up when he used words like that. I stood up and faced a full-length mirror on the wall. He was right. “It’s fucking bitchin’,” I agreed with a laugh.

“I’ll say. It’s give me a chub.”

I lifted my hand and flipped off Rael as he walked toward me. “Don’t start your shit.”

“Aw, bad day, honey?”

I shook my head, unable to hold back laughter. “Actually, we need to talk.”

His grin faded a little. “You good?”

“My girl needs help.”

“Then let’s talk about it over food. I’m fucking starving.”

“What about Nylah and the kids?”

“I’ll be able to eat again when I’m home,” he assured me.

“Then we eat.” I turned to Diablo. “This is fucking fantastic. What do I owe you?”

“A soul to reap.”

He was serious. I never paid for ink with money.

“Done,” I agreed. “I’ll let you know when I find the right one.”

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“I’ll hold you to it.”

No one wanted to be indebted to a Reaper. I’d make good on that promise.

I skipped my shirt and shrugged on my cut, following Rael outdoors. “I need caffeine for this conversation.”

“Then get your ass on your fucking bike, man. Let’s move.”

In the bright afternoon sunshine, it was freaky as fuck to see him straddling his motorcycle, wearing a black shirt, jeans, his Graven Bastards MC cut, black leather gloves, and face paint. Rael liked to wear black and white skull-themed makeup. Every day. All day.

Halloween was year fucking round with this crazy fucker.

I loved it.

It certainly complimented my costumes.

Chapter 7 Katrina

“Ouch!” I shouted, pulling back my hand from the edge of the cookie sheet, wincing as I felt the heat on my finger and the resulting burn. Rushing to the sink, I turned on the faucet and let the cold water sluice over the skin. “Dammit. I just wanted a chicken quesadilla.”

I glanced at the offending metal pan, sighing as I heard a knock on my front door. Turning off the water, I shook off my finger, trying to ignore the throbbing pain. A second knock, slightly more persistent, followed the first.

Cuckoo. It had to be. I wasn't expecting anyone else.

I didn't bother looking through the peephole, reaching for the knob, and opening the door with a smile. It faded when I noticed the guy in a white polo with a gas company logo on the left above his heart. He held a clipboard and wore aviator sunglasses. I couldn't see his eyes because of the mirrored, reflective surface.

"Hi, sorry to bother you this evening, but we're checking all the houses on this street for potential meter usage errors. I'd like to take a quick peek at yours if that's okay."

Uh. Okay? I nodded my head. "Sure."

"Thanks. I'll just be a few minutes."

I watched the guy spin around and walk down the steps, turning to the right as he disappeared around the corner.

Weird. I didn't think they worked after six in the evening.

I closed the door and returned to the kitchen, plating my dinner and adding sour cream and salsa for dipping. Just as I stuck the cookie sheet in the sink to wash, I heard a knock and figured the gas company service technician was letting me know what he found.

When I opened the door, I found Cuckoo. He stood with a dopey grin on his face. Unlike earlier today, when we met, he wore a costume with his leather vest. Blinking, I slid my gaze over the brown leather chaps he wore over his jeans, the gun holster

stuffed with pistols, and the mismatched shirt he wore underneath. It was one of those gag shirts you can buy at places like Spencer Gifts, where an image was pressed on the front. In this case, it was a bare, muscled chest with tufts of dark hair, a black bowtie, and pierced nipples.

The funny part? It molded to his chiseled body like a second skin. It made me wonder what he looked like underneath. Did Cuckoo have as much ink on his chest as he did on his arms?

“Hey,” I greeted him with a smirk. “Nice outfit.”

“I thought you’d appreciate it.”

Oh, I did. “Come on in. You hungry? I just made a chicken quesadilla and am willing to share.”

He held up one of his hands, clutching a large white paper bag. “I go you In-N-Out Burger.”

My palm slapped over my heart. “I love you.”

His lips curled into a grin so wide I saw the dimple in his left cheek pop. “Someday, you’ll mean it.” He winked before joining me inside.

I let his comment go unanswered, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t affected by it. My heart rate picked up speed, and I swallowed loudly, focusing on the food instead of my reaction.

He remembered how much I loved my fast-food burgers, fries, and chocolate shakes, but only from In-N-Out. Growing up, we didn’t get to indulge often, but whenever he had a few extra bucks in his pocket, Rain would treat me. It became our favorite place

to eat.

I still couldn't drive by one of the restaurants without thinking of him. Knowing he never forgot filled my chest with warmth. My foster brother turned out to be full of surprises but also a creature of habit. Just knowing he still wore costumes outside of Halloween made me smile.

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It was our thing.

Wistfully, I followed him into my kitchen. “I’m starving, but you’ll have to eat my quesadilla now. I’m stealing all the yumminess in that bag.”

He snorted. “You’ll share? How thoughtful.”

I eagerly ripped open the paper bag as he set it on the counter, popping a fry into my mouth. A moan escaped. I couldn’t remember the last time I stopped for In-N-Out. I tried to eat healthy, limiting my consumption of processed, salty, and sugary foods. But this? It was too delicious to pass up.

Rain, err Cuckoo, laughed. He unwrapped a burger and handed it to me, opening up packets of warm ketchup to dip our fries in. We stood side by side, devouring the food and enjoying it vocally while we stuffed our faces.

“Oh, wow,” I giggled after I burped. “This hit the spot.”

“Good to know.” He picked up all the trash and tossed it in the can, reaching for one of the triangles of chicken quesadilla on the forgotten plate I left on the counter. After dipping in sour cream and salsa, he took an enormous bite.

I watched him eat, shaking my head at the amount of food he could shove down his gullet. I’d forgotten his ravenous appetite.

“You still eat a lot,” I observed.

“You’ve no idea.” He sent me a lecherous smile.

“Well,” I began, not quite knowing how to answer him. “Did you just come over to bring me dinner?”

“Nope.” He took the empty plate to the sink and rinsed it before shutting off the water. “Thought we could play a little game.”

Game? I frowned. “What kind of game?”

“Truth or dare.”

Uh, hard pass. “No.”

He shrugged. “How about we catch up on the last twelve years? You tell me your secrets, and I’ll confess mine.”

Not likely.

“I don’t think there’s a lot to tell.” He frowned. “At least on my end,” I added.

He ticked his chin toward my couch. “Come on.”

I trailed behind him, taking a seat as he scooted closer.

Cuckoo’s arm draped across the top. With his fingertips, he lightly caressed the bare skin along the back of my neck. “Still so soft,” he murmured.

“Were you ever adopted?” I blurted, shifting slightly as his fingers fell away from my skin. I shivered, both by the absence and by the hint of longing left behind.

“No.” He leaned back, briefly focusing his attention out the window. “I ran away at seventeen.”

He did? “Were you okay?” Did something happen to him? Was he hurt? More than usual?

“After you left, I got pissed. Shit got worse.” A muscle in his jaw ticked. “As soon as I could get the fuck away, I did.”

Outside, I heard a crow cawing. It wasn’t like the sound earlier today. This was melancholy. Almost haunting.

Now that I thought about it, I heard crows whenever he was near me. As kids, we used to joke that only blackbirds cared about us since they followed us wherever we went.

I reached for him, placing my hand over the one gripping his knee. “I’m sorry.”

His head snapped to the left, pinning me in place. “Don’t do that. Don’t ever fucking apologize for shit that isn’t your fault.”

Okay. I tried to pull my hand away, but he held it, threading our fingers.

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“It’s not you, angel. It’s all the shit in the past.”

I knew, and I understood. “You don’t have to explain. I was there, remember?”

He clenched my fingers tighter. “You were always able to do this.” He sounded calmer.

“Do what?”

“Chill me the fuck out when I’m riled up.”

True. “You have a short fuse,” I joked.

“And you’re too sweet.” He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Tell me whoever adopted you treated you well, Katrina.”

“They did.” For the most part. “Clifford and Sabrina are good people.”

His shoulders lost some of their tension. “I’m glad.”

“I hate that we never got a chance to say goodbye.” I glanced at my lap, avoiding his direct gaze. “It felt so jarring. I hated it.” That was an understatement. It devastated me to lose Rain and his protection, friendship, and the blossoming love we felt for one another. Was it taboo? Maybe. But we learned to lean on one another at a young age. It made sense we formed a strong bond.

“It fucking gutted me,” he growled.

I lifted my chin, staring into his tortuous expression. “Me too.”

We sat in silence for a minute, mulling over the past.

“You went to college.”

“I did. Library science major. It’s a good fit for me.”

“My bookworm.” He bumped his shoulder against mine. “Remember reading *The Princess Bride*?”

“Which time?” I asked with a laugh. “But we probably watched the movie more.”

“We did.”

I rested my head on his shoulder. “This is nice.”

“That’s because we’re not discussing any of the hard shit.”

“I know.”

“But either way, I’m with you. That makes me happy.”

I felt the same. “Me too, Rain.”

It was so hard to call him Cuckoo sometimes. It was an adjustment that would take time.

“You can call me Rain when we’re alone. Just you. No one else.”

He didn’t want that connection to his past. It made sense. I hated those awful

memories of how we suffered as kids. Even now, I shoved it all behind a locked door in my mind, refusing to open it up and expose myself to the pain.

“I’m honored you trust me with it.”

“I trust you with my life.”

He said it with such conviction that I knew it wasn’t a lie.

“You need to know the gravity of those words, Katrina. I’m the type of man who trusts only his club. No one else. To extend my circle to include you is a big fucking deal.”

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I lifted my head. “I get it. I trust you as well. Always have.”

“That’s why we’re the real deal, angel.”

God. When he said stuff like that to me, I just wanted to melt into a puddle at his feet. It was so romantic and fierce and better than a romance novel. He made me feel like nothing and no one was more important, beautiful, or special. In truth, Rain always spoke to me this way. He’d been loyal, protective, and kind to me when I arrived at the foster home.

I never forgot how he pulled me through the darkest days of my life. “Sometimes, I think you’re right.”

“Then I’ll just have to convince you until it’s all the time.”

I wondered if he was joking. It didn’t seem like it. “We’re not kids anymore, Rain. You’re not obligated to me.”

“No,” he agreed. “I’m not. Angel, I’m here because this is where I want to be.”

My heart made a little pitter-patter in my chest. “You still take my breath away with the words you say.”

And the conviction behind them. He’d always been intense.

“That’s only because you know I’m being honest.”

Probably.

“I saw a gas company truck outside your place when I pulled up. Everything okay?”

I forgot all about the service tech. “He knocked on my door and said he needed to read the meter for accuracy.”

Cuckoo nodded. “Ah.”

“You wanna watch a movie?” I asked, trying to keep him in my house a little longer. I couldn’t explain it, but since he showed up at the library, I’d been feeling emotional. His presence helped soothe the frayed edges.

“The Princess Bride?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll make the popcorn while you set it up.”

And just like that, we fell into a familiar and comfortable routine. Somewhere in the middle of the movie, I fell asleep.

When my eyes opened, daylight streaked across the sky in various shades of blue, fading the stars as the moon lowered to the horizon. Held against a solid, muscled chest, I realized I was lying on top of Rain. His arms circled me as he breathed deeply, keeping me close as we both rested.

Since it was Saturday morning, I didn’t have a reason to wake him. No shift at work. Nowhere else I had to be.

I closed my eyes, letting his warmth surround me.

It didn't take long to join him.

Chapter 8 Cuckoo

I spent the night with Katrina. Hell fucking yeah.

When my eyes opened, I nearly jolted, worrying about why I didn't feel her pressed against me any longer until I heard the shower and water splashing in her bathroom.

I groaned as I sat up, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. I'd been knocked out, dead to the world, which was fucking unheard of for me. I never slept well, not since I was a kid. The insomnia got worse after Katrina was taken away.

But being with her last night relaxed me. It must have been enough to drop my defenses and become vulnerable. That shit wasn't good, especially since I still didn't know what was happening with Eagle Eye and the cold case regarding Katrina's biological parents.

My phone began vibrating inside my cut, and I reached inside, pulling it free to glance at the screen. Crow.

"Hey, Pres."

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“I know you’re not gonna miss church,” he growled.

I checked the time, hopping off the couch, when I noticed it was 11.35 a.m. Shit!
“I’m on my way, Pres. Got caught up.”

He snorted. “Yeah. Get your dick wet later. Need you here fucking an hour ago.”

The bastard. “Yeah. I’m comin’.”

“I don’t wanna know that shit.”

He hung up, but not before I could hear his laughter.

What a dick!

I stood and stretched, pulling on my boots and lacing them up as Katrina left the bathroom. She wore a big, fluffy pink robe and piled her head in a matching towel. It was cute. “Hey, angel. I gotta run.”

Did I want to leave? Hell no. My woman was fresh out of the shower in a fucking robe, nearly naked, and smelling good enough to eat.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah. I’ve got church.”

“Church?” Her confusion made me smile.

“It’s a mandatory meeting. All members.”

“Oh.” She blinked, nibbling on her lip before she rushed into my arms. “You’re coming back soon?”

“Yeah. Later.”

“Okay.”

I tilted her chin up, holding it in place as I stared into those chocolatey, sweet eyes that could hypnotize me in two seconds flat. “Need you to listen about something.”

She frowned.

“The world isn’t a safe place, angel. Be aware of your surroundings and trust your gut. Don’t take any risks.”

She snorted.

“I’m serious, Katrina.”

“Fine. I’ll be careful, aware, safe, bored, and waiting for you.”

“Naked?” I asked, unable to hold back the question.

Her eyes widened, and she smacked my arm. “Cuckoo!”

Laughter spilled from my lips. Corrupting her would be so much fun. “Hey.”

“Yes?”

“Give me a kiss, angel baby.”

Her lips twitched, but she couldn't fight her smile. Katrina slid her hands up my chest and circled my neck. I wrapped my arms around her, holding her in place, fighting the urges in my body, prompting me to take this to the next level. We didn't have time. At least, not until later.

With the softest of caresses, her sweet lips met mine. It was so fucking intoxicating to taste her mouth and too irresistiblenot to stroke my tongue along hers, sweeping into that warm cavern until a little moan escaped. The sound she made shot straight to my dick.

“You're making it hard to leave.”

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She leaned back and dropped her arms, nearly dazed by our kiss. Could she be untouched? As pure and ripe for the taking as she appeared? Because fuck me, I wanted to be the one to show her pleasure and watch the wonderment spread across her beautiful, delicate features.

I slid her hand over my crotch. “All yours. Every hard inch.”

“What if I’m too scared to take it?”

“Then I’ll help you.”

“Is that a turn-off?”

“Hell no, angel. It’s a turn-on.”

Satisfied, she shyly nodded. “Text me later.”

“I will.”

After another kiss, I left her, forcing myself to leave before I picked her up, yanked the robe away, and feasted on her pussy. With a raging hard-on, I sat on my bike, starting the engine as I caught Goose across the street, hiding out in an SUV with tinted windows. He was smart enough to watch her place without riding a motorcycle. It would tip off Katrina. But it could also alert anyone who intended to stalk or harm her.

I heard my crow titter when he flew overhead. Not me. I can stalk my woman all I

want.

He flapped his onyx wings and landed on Katrina's roof. I saw him land as I left her driveway, knowing I had two protectors watching over my angel while I attended church.

I arrived at the Roost with three minutes to spare. "Hey, Pres," I greeted him as I entered and shut the door behind me. The rest of the members were already seated. Good. I could move this along and get back to Katrina. Maybe I'd make it before she got dressed.

Wishful thinking.

Crow sent me a dirty look. He was frustrated and didn't hide it. "Church is in session." He banged the gavel, calling the meeting to order. "We got shit to discuss. Cuckoo, you've got the floor first."

"Thanks, Pres." I turned to my brothers. "I found my mate."

Eagle Eye was the only brother other than Crow, who was not surprised.

"Holy shit!"

"Hell yeah."

"Another one bites the dust!"

I laughed at their antics. "I've been looking for her twelve years."

The room quieted.

“Most of you know I had a rough childhood. Foster homes. Bad shit.” I cleared my throat. “Katrina was at the house that haunts me.”

I’d never opened up before and wanted them to hear this, trust me, believe me, and know what I needed without hesitation.

“We relied on one another to survive for eight years until she was taken away. I lost her.” Fuck. I hated thinking about how deeply that wounded me. “Took a long ass time, but Eagle Eye helped find her.”

My brothers pounded the table, showing their support.

“But there’s a problem.”

I explained about Katrina’s parents, the cold case file, and the security placed on the information, making it almost impossible to find the information we needed.

“So, what you’re saying,” Raven interjected, “is that her parents were murdered?”

“I think so.”

Crow shook his head. “We don’t know who did it or what they want.”

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“Cuckoo.” I turned to Hawk. “Are you asking for the club’s protection for your mate?”

“I am.”

More than a few began talking strategy while others grew agitated. They understood what this meant. The club was risking exposure and vulnerability with an unknown enemy.

“I know this is a big ask,” I began.

Talon shot to his feet. “No. It’s not. Katrina is your mate. She’s an ol’ lady now. We protect our own.”

Crow lost control of the room as men agreed with Talon, and the noise level rose. He whistled, piercing the air with a shrill blast as we all shut the fuck up. “That’s better.”

I smirked.

“We take this to vote. Needs a majority to pass.”

We knew how it went down.

“We protect Katrina, Cuckoo’s mate. Yes or no?”

The vote was unanimous.

My angel was now as protected as one of the club's members. No matter what happened, she wouldn't be alone.

I left four hours later, a bit inebriated and feeling good. Every one of my brothers had my back, and that was a fucking beautiful thing.

KATRINA WASN'T HOME.

I sat on my bike, my headlight facing her garage door, and checked my phone. "Fuck."

Goose had texted that she had left over an hour earlier. He followed her across town, where she parked her car and entered a private residence. I met him at the end of the street, demanding answers.

"She's safe. I only saw an older couple and guy inside."

"What guy?"

"Don't know." He shrugged. "He was here when she arrived."

"Stick around," I grumbled. "I don't want any more surprises."

"I will."

I didn't hide my arrival. In fact, I made a show of revving the engine, rolling up the long driveway, and shutting my bike down. I'd been so busy today that I actually wasn't wearing a costume. I showered after church and shaved, making myself pretty as fuck for my woman.

So, when I stood at the front door, wearing my desert camo tank, cut, jeans, and

boots, I knew I looked fucking good. Hopefully, I'll be intimidating, too, with all my ink. I needed this motherfucker in the house to recognize I would squash him like a fucking bug if he tried anything with my angel.

My fist pounded the door as I stood, unwilling to move until someone let me in. When the door swung open, I glared at the guy in a white polo and khakis, who shot me a disapproving look. "I'm here to see my woman."

Yeah, I growled the words.

He smirked. "Who? Sabrina? She's been happily married for three decades, or so I heard."

This prick. I didn't bother answering him; I just forced my way in, shoulder-checking him as I moved forward. He slammed into the wall and grunted. Pussy.

I heard voices and turned left, immediately settling my gaze on Katrina. She stood with a couple I assumed were her fosterparents who adopted her. They seemed nice. Clean. Polished. Proper.

Shit.

Katrina smiled as she saw me. "Rain. I'm so glad you could make it."

Yeah, angel, I'm here.

"Wouldn't miss it, sweetheart."

Her gaze cut to the couple watching us. "Sabrina. Trent. This is Rain, my—"

"—boyfriend," I cut in. "Nice to meet you both. I've heard a lot about you."

Trent gestured to my clothes. "You ride a motorcycle?"

"Yes. I'm part of a motorcycle club. We ride for leisure." And a way of life.

He didn't judge me but seemed curious. I could live with that.

"Make sure she always uses a helmet."

"I do," I assured him. "I won't risk her safety."

Sabrina smiled, but I could tell the idea of Katrina riding on the back of my bike scared her. "Oh, my. Is it safe?"

I didn't have to answer that question.

"With Rain it is," Katrina promised.

Sabrina remained doubtful.

“Harleys are deadly,” a male voice intervened.

I smirked. “So are those pants.”

Trent coughed to hide a laugh.

Ha. He had a sense of humor.

I wish I had worn one of my costumes. I bet they all would have gotten really uncomfortable.

Katrina must have thought the same thing because she glanced my way, biting her lip to keep from giggling.

I grinned before I reached for her hand, gently tugging her closer. This was a statement. I wasn’t going anywhere.

Trent seemed to get it. I caught the thoughtful expression on his face. He knew I was staking a claim.

Sabrina seemed anxious. Maybe she was just high-strung. “Let’s, uh, go eat. Everything is ready.”

I followed Trent and Sabrina, grinning at choir boy in his khakis as he fumed.

What claim did he think he had on my woman? The fucker was lucky to be living.

“Who’s the stiff?” I asked Katrina in a low voice.

She snickered. “Carmichael. Sabrina set us up.”

Ah. “Well, I think he knows it’s not happening now.”

Carmichael stomped around us, intentionally bumping into me, only as he did, he shoved into her, and it sent Katrina forward. She stumbled and nearly fell as I held her up. Picking her up, I brought her into the formal dining room and placed her bottom on the closest seat.

Two things happened fast afterward. The first? I kissed her. The second? I took care of this douchebag.

Snarling, I rushed forward and grabbed him by the collar, shoving his back into the nearest wall. “You ever touch Katrina again, I will end you. Don’t ever make the mistake of hurting a female because if it’s not me around, some other guy is going to be thrilled to kick your ass.”

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Carmichael clawed at my fists, but I didn't budge, nearly cutting off his airway.

"Nod, and tell me you understand."

He frantically bobbed his head.

I lowered my voice. "I will fucking find you, asshole, and you will regret ever trying something like this again. My club can make you disappear."

His eyes widened further.

"Get the fuck out of this house, and don't ever come back."

He yanked his shirt back in place as I released him and glared.

Trent took a step forward. "Out. You're not welcome here, Carmichael."

Good for him.

Carmichael rushed from the room, cussing us all out.

Christ. What a fucking piece of shit.

Trent turned my way. "I don't have a problem with you dating my daughter as long as you keep her safe. Treat her right. Any complaints? I'll come after you myself, and I don't care how cocky or strong you are. Feel me?"

Hell yeah. I really liked Trent. “Yes, sir, I do.”

“Good.”

“Trent!” Sabrina finally hissed.

“Honey, in all the years we’ve raised our little girl, I’ve never seen a man come to her aid like that. It says a lot about Rain. He’s welcome in my home anytime he wants to come in.”

She blinked. “Okay.”

Damn. I guess I was wrong about who controlled shit in this house. Trent had my respect. Plus, he seemed to genuinely love and care for Katrina. Same with Sabrina.

I returned to her, kneeling in front of her chair to look her over. “Where are you hurt?”

“I’m fine.”

“Where?” I growled, not letting her pass on the answer.

“I banged my knee.” She winced. “It’ll be a bruised.”

I picked up her hand and kissed it. “Want me to chase him down? I’m happy to do it.”

She shook her head, amused. “No. I think you handled it.”

“Hell yeah, I did. Always. No one touches or hurts you. Never again.”

She blinked, and I could see the emotion churning in her eyes. “Thank you.”

“What do you mean? Again?” Sabrina asked.

I lifted my head to answer. “We were in the same foster home.”

She gasped. “The bad one?”

“Yes.”

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Trent gripped my shoulder. “This makes a lot of sense now, son. Thank you. I know you protected her then, too.”

“I did.”

With that bit of knowledge revealed, Sabrina hugged me.

Wow.

“You will always be welcome here. Both of you.” She straightened and headed toward the kitchen. “Now we should eat. You’re both skin and bones, and I need to feed you.”

Funny how that had multiple meanings. We needed emotional nourishment as desperately as we needed the food.

Sabrina stood, and I hugged her against my side. “Want some aspirin?”

“It’s probably a good idea.”

I kissed her temple. “I’ll take care of it.”

As we ate, I held her hand, and for the first time in my life, I almost felt normal. But hell, I preferred to be a little cuckoo.

Chapter 9 Katrina

Three days after the dinner with Trent and Sabrina, I stood inside my kitchen, washing dishes. I often skipped the dishwasher because using it for only one person seemed silly. I didn't dirty a lot of pots and pans except on the weekends when I did meal prep. Eating out had gotten too pricey, and I preferred nutritious meals that were easy to pack up and bring to work. I only skipped bringing my lunch on Fridays.

Everyone needed a cheat day.

For me? It was usually fried chicken or pizza.

But since this was only Tuesday, I had a portion of homemade chicken noodle soup in the microwave heating up. It was hot as Satan's ass crack outside, and I didn't want anything heavy to eat.

I heard the ding on the microwave and finished up, drying my hands off as I left the dishes to dry on the rack. As I did so, I happened to glance out the window and noticed my neighbors staring at my front yard.

How odd.

Was the gas tech back to reread my meter?

I peeked out the front window and found the issue. Cuckoo stood outside, smoking a cigarette as he sat on his bike. Wearing dark sunglasses, his leather vest, and a costume, he was quite the sight.

His outfit of choice? A hodgepodge of outlandish pieces.

In bright white bold white letters on his black shirt was EMOTIONAL SUPPORT SNAKE. A big white arrow pointed down with a red snake curled inside it along with the words: Caution. He spits.

I rolled my eyes. He really did have a wicked sense of humor.

Instead of jeans, he wore snakeskin red leather pants. I didn't know how he survived that material in this heat. But hey, at least he went with the same theme this time. Well, sort of.

On his head, he wore a black top hat with large peacock feathers poking the air in shades of turquoise, gold, and iridescent blue. The eyes seemed to watch over the whole neighborhood. It had to be intentional.

As I opened my front door and stepped out, I saw my neighbors straining to see what I'd do. Cuckoo tossed his cigarette to the ground and stomped the cinders with his black shitkicker boots. Across the street, another neighbor walked out, watching us as he sipped from a mug.

Sigh.

"What are you doing?" I demanded, placing my hands on my hips. "You're going to freak out the neighbors."

He shrugged, not fazed by their curiosity. "So?"

"You can't stake out my house like this."

"I'm not staking out your house."

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I pursed my lips. “Okay. What is it? Stalking me?”

“Well, yeah, angel. It’s my job to ensure your safety.”

“From your bike? In my yard?”

“Yep.”

“While wearing costumes?”

“Angel, you gotta care a little less about what people think.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Not from where I’m standing.”

“Cuckoo,” I groaned, shaking my head. “Go home. Ride your bike.” I’d invite him in, but he seemed on edge. The calm tone never fooled me.

“Can’t do that, beautiful.”

I tilted my head back. A long sigh escaped my mouth. “Fine. Come inside.”

“All night?”

“Yes. All night. You can stalk me from the couch.”

“Done.” A stupid, goofy grin twitched his lips.

“Don’t go thinking this means anything. I’m just avoiding trouble from my neighbors and the police.”

“I understand, angel.”

“Stop calling me that,” I snapped, irritated with his smug smile and his cocky stare. “Don’t make me kick you out.”

He slapped a palm over his chest. “You wound me. I won’t do a thing to get evicted.”

Uh-huh.

“I remember what you were like as a teenager. Rebellious. Sarcastic. Sneaky.”

“You forgot sexy, lovable, and irresistible.”

“In your dreams,” I quipped in response.

“Oh, don’t worry, baby. You’re front and center in all mine.”

“I regret saying yes already.”

Cuckoo rolled his bike up my driveway, pausing as I opened the garage door. “Thanks, beautiful.”

Once his bike was secured, I clicked the button on the opener and closed the door. We entered my house, and I instructed Cuckoo to remove his shoes while we stood in the mudroom.

“As you wish.”

I startled, snapping my head up to stare into his eyes. “You used to say that often.”

We must have watched The Princess Bride a hundred times growing up. Countless popcorn fights. Way too much sugar. And late nights, cuddled with a blanket, sneaking with the sound low because we snatched every opportunity to be happy whenever possible, no matter how small.

More than once, we got caught. Rain, err Cuckoo, always shouldered the blame and took the beating that followed.

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My microwave beeped, reminding me of my dinner.

“What are you having?”

“Soup.”

He frowned. “Soup? That’s it?”

“It’s plenty to eat for dinner on a hot day.”

“Angel, you need protein.” He winked. “How about I order some food for us?”

“It’s not my cheat day. That’s Friday.”

“So?”

“I have a system.” It kept me healthy, and I avoided gaining weight.

“Sweetheart, live a little. I can have In-N-Out here in fifteen minutes.”

Shit. “You don’t play fair,” I pouted.

“Then just say yes, feed me, Rain.”

He was so silly. “Feed me.”

“Rain,” he added.

OMG, he was annoying. “Rain,” I spat with sarcasm.

“You’re adorable when you get irritated.”

“It happens a lot when you’re around. It did back then, too,” I reminded him.

He laughed. “It sure did.”

Cuckoo ordered for us, and I took out my soup, allowing it to cool so I could cover it and place it back in the fridge. I hated wasting food. We never got enough growing up in foster care, and that spilled over into my adulthood, influencing how I budgeted, ate, and viewed every aspect of shopping, preparation, and storage of food items.

“Stop scrunching your nose.” He reached for my soup, dumped it in the sink, and held out his hand when I rushed to his side. “You don’t have to worry about your next meal.”

Was that what I was doing? No. “I just don’t like to be wasteful.”

“Listen.” His calloused palms rested against my cheeks. “I will sell everything I own, even my bike,” his voice cracked, “before I let you go hungry for one fucking hour. You understand me, angel?”

Just like he gave me his pillow and set me up with a bed in the closet on the day we met, Rain never stopped providing what I needed. I had no idea he would become my shield, protector, and family. Without him, I would never have survived that house.

“Yes.” I blinked back tears. “Stop sacrificing for me. It’s all you’ve ever done.”

“Because you’re all I want.”

I blinked, trying to hold back a tidal wave of emotion that threatened to drown me. His fingers brushed my jaw.

This was happening too fast.

I tried to wrap my head around the situation and maintain control. I had objections, dammit. Good ones, too.

I stepped away, letting his hands drop. “You smoke. It’s a disgusting habit.” I lifted my chin, refusing to look away from his relentless stare.

“I’ll never touch another cigarette. Scout’s honor.”

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I snorted. Like he was ever a Boy Scout. “You own a gun.”

“It’s only for protection. I swear, angel.”

“You ride too fast on your Harley. It’s reckless.”

“I’ll fucking obey every law when you’re with me.”

Frowning, I was running out of reasons to push him away. “We’re siblings.”

His lip curled into a snarl. “We’ve never been related by blood. Who cares if we lived together for a short time as kids? It doesn’t mean shit.”

That annoyed me. “It doesn’t mean shit, huh?” I shoved at his chest, but he didn’t budge.

“That’s not what I was sayin’, beautiful, and you know it.” His arm slid around my waist, drawing me closer. “I’ve always felt protective of you and missed you. Those eight years we spent together mean fucking everything, Katrina.” He tapped his chest right over his heart. “Never forgot you. Not one fucking day.”

“You cuss too much,” I blurted, hating how much truth he exposed with his words.

“I can’t promise that’ll change, my angel. I’ll sure as fuck try.” He grinned. “Oops.”

“You’re hopeless.” I rolled my eyes at his silly expression.

“Baby, I’m it. It’s me and you. Just like it used to be, how it was always supposed to be,” he emphasized.

“This is moving too fast.”

“Then let’s take this at your pace. Slow as you want, Katrina, as long as it still ends with me and you together.”

“Don’t you think that’s a bit cocky?” He assumed way too much.

“Baby, I’m confident enough for the both of us.”

“What if you decide I’m not what you desire anymore, and you don’t want to wait for me to figure this out?”

“Not fucking possible.” He shook his head. “You don’t get it yet, but you will.” His lips brushed mine. “You’ve always been mine, Katrina.”

“Yours?”

“Yeah, baby. I knew the day we met that you were special.”

“That doesn’t mean that I belong to you.”

“You’re wrong.”

“Cuckoo. This is crazy. God, what we went through. The shit that almost destroyed us.” I nearly choked as some of those horrid memories tried to surface.

Darkness. A late night with a full moon. Men in masks.

I shivered. “Rain.” My voice faltered.

“Come back to me. Close that fucking door, baby. You don’t have to open it right now. Not ever if you don’t want.”

“What if I stay like this forever?” I asked, daring to bare a deeply buried secret.

“Like what?” his voice was little more than a whisper.

“Afraid.”

His expression appeared tortured. “Fuck. I’m here. I fucking swear. You don’t have to be scared. I won’t let anything happen to you. They won’t come back.”

They. The ones we never named or mentioned.

I could feel little spidery cracks beginning to appear in my mental walls. The foundation was rocky, and it wouldn't take much to punch through, exposing every heinous, horrific detail that we tried to hide, shattering the only barrier that kept my sanity intact.

"I can't be found."

He held me so tightly that I almost couldn't breathe, and I still wanted more of him. His promises. His protection. His presence soothed every nightmare and blocked every monster from attacking me. He was my dragon patrolling the castle. My dark knight brandishing his sword to ensure I remained unharmed.

What I needed, what I couldn't forget, was the eight-year-old boy who decided within seconds that a tiny five-year-old girl had no one to champion her, so he became her vindicator. Her rock. The pillar that held her up when she threatened to fall.

"Hide me, Rain."

Outside my house, I heard the cawing of crows. Not one. Not five. Dozens. They rose in a cacophony of sounds and pitch that felt like I had stepped into a horror movie and the murder was ready to take flight, eliminating the evil presence threatening humankind.

If only that were possible.

“I can do better than that.” His head lowered as his mouth pressed to mine, lingering before he pulled back slightly. “I’ll make you forget.”

“How?”

“By focusing on us. You’ll be so consumed with pleasure that those memories from the past can’t reach you.”

“Then show me.”

His eyes dilated.

“Please.”

Chapter 10 Cuckoo

If she wanted to forget, to get lost with me, then I’d make it happen. I picked her up, fusing my mouth to hers as her legs bent around my waist. Not caring if the food got cold before we could eat it or even if it arrived yet, I carried Katrina to her bed.

If she had any doubts as to what we would be doing, she had a chance to back out or say no as I lowered her back to the mattress. I released her, standing beside the bed as I shucked my cut and draped it over the bench in her room. My boots and clothes followed. The costume pieces piled on her dresser. I spread my things around her room, needing to see my presence integrated into every aspect of her life.

I didn’t want to control her; I wanted to be her umbrella, her shield, and when she needed to forget, I’d be the one to give her all new memories to replace the nightmares.

Like today.

“Your tattoo.” Her gaze swept over my new ink. “You got an angel with my name on it?”

I did. “To remind me of you. So you’re always with me,” I confessed.

Her hand rested over her heart.

In that moment, our fate was sealed. We’d never be apart again.

“Get naked, angel. I want to see you spread your legs wide for me.”

She blinked, slowly removing every item, shyly averting her gaze. “Okay.”

When she was nude, I sank to my knees and tugged her to the edge of the bed. “I’m going to eat this delicious, pretty pussy, and you’re going to come all over my face.”

“Rain,” she gasped as I dove into her core, immediately thrusting my tongue inside the warm, wet cavern I longed to fuck. She tasted fucking amazing. Clean from a recent shower. I couldn’t detect that any male had been inside her recently.

Good. I’d kill a motherfucker for being where I belong.

Katrina’s hand threaded my hair, pulling on the strands as I pulled out my tongue and slid two fingers inside her. She was so fucking tight I wasn’t sure if I could fit three.

“How many men have you let fuck you?” I asked, growling the words.

“Rain.”

“Tell me.”

“None.” Her cheeks flushed with the confession.

“You’re a virgin?” No fucking way. She was twenty-five.

“No.”

I fucking froze. Every muscle in my body tensed. “Who forced themselves on you?”

She lifted onto her elbows, meeting my snarl. “It’s done and over.”

“The fuck it is,” I roared, trying to stand as her thighs clenched around me.

“You know when it happened. I don’t have a hymen because of it.”

Oh, fuck. Fuck. FUCK!

That night. The last night we spent together. Whentheycame and tried to rape a thirteen-year-old girl.

Their hands were on her, fingers inside her.

They STOLE from her.

My head and heart rebelled. I saw red.

I could hear my crow losing his shit outside the window, his soul as shattered as my heart.

“My angel.” I wanted to weep for her.

I should have found her sooner. I left her briefly to buy cotton candy after the Ferris wheel. A perfect night had turned into a nightmare when she vanished in the crowd.

When I found her, I nearly killed the men who pinned her down. Without the help of my crow, I might have been too late.

“Come back to me, Rain.” Her fingertips grazed the side of my face. “Come back to me. Love me. Fill me.” Her voice held a pain I wanted to obliterate. “Don’t leave me empty.”

I didn’t know if I could set aside the rage boiling under my skin and flowing through my veins. This moment should have been special, but it was tainted by a sect of men who believed that sex with children gave them a spot closer to their god in heaven.

I’d kill them all. I would hunt every single person that belonged to the Sect of Primordial Light, and I would enjoy their suffering before I had the reapers step in and send their souls to hell for eternity.

Rael would join me. He already agreed to it.

“Come back, Rain. I need you.”

Fuck.

I lowered my head, resuming my feast and driving my fingers inside her again, stroking as I flicked my tongue over her clit. When she began to writhe, I knew she was close.

“Please,” she begged, her soft, pouty lips parting as her heart raced.

I could see the frantic pulse in her neck, betraying the effect I had on her. “Try again,” I ordered gruffly, slowing my movements and nearly pulling my fingers from her pussy. She wanted me? Katrina needed to tell me. Describe it. Fucking make me believe her.

“I-I don’t know how,” she gasped, grinding into my hand.

“You do.” I locked my eyes on hers. “Say the words. Make them dirty.”

Her breath hitched. “Dirty?”

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“Yeah. Make me believe you want this. Describe what you want.”

She reached for my wrist, wrapping her delicate fingers around my flesh and holding it in place. “Touch me. Use your fingers and pump them inside me. I want you to make me come.”

Hmmm. Not bad. “And your clit?”

Her hand slid down her stomach before dipping lower to rest over her clit. “I’ve got that part.”

Damn. “Good Girl,” I praised before giving her exactly what she wanted. I never broke that relentless stare we both seemed to hold and need.

When her thighs began to shake, she moaned my name. Not Cuckoo. The name she’d known me as a boy. Fuck. It was naughty, taboo, and it fucking turned me on.

“Rain.”

Rain. The name that my foster father said tainted me. A name only given to an unlovable and unruly child. The same name associated with dark skies, misery, and bad omens. My entire existence had been summarized by cruel words and mental breakdowns.

And then there was my angel. My sweet, innocent Katrina.

She touched me when no one else would. She gave me compassion when only disgust

and hate had formed. She brought light into the darkness.

Katrina trusted me, cared for me, loved me.

She did back then, and she did now. I needed her to realize I'd always loved her, too. Was that love romantic? Now, yes. Back then, no. It had been born out of necessity. A coping mechanism that we both latched onto because we had nothing and no one else.

Her soft, warm brown eyes remained on me as I removed my fingers, licked the slick from her pussy from every digit, and then draped my body over hers.

"I need you, Katrina."

"Show me, Rain. Let me feel what it's supposed to be like between consenting adults."

Fuck. "I will," I promised, kissing her pillow-soft lips.

When I entered her, I could tell it was all new to her.

"It hurts." She bit her lip. "But I want more."

Maybe I was corrupting my sweet angel and tarnishing her halo a little.

I began to move, picking up speed and thrusting harder because I never felt anything more perfect than her tight, welcoming pussy. Using one hand to leverage myself on the mattress, I used the other to caress her skin, roaming every inch within range. When I slid down her belly and over her clit, she jolted.

"Feel good?"

Katrina nodded.

“I’m going to make it even better.”

“Faster,” she pleaded, gripping my arms as her nails dug in.

We lost ourselves in one another. A bomb could have gone off outside her home, and neither of us would have noticed. Our kisses grew hungry. Our touch needy.

And when she came, I joined her, unable to hold back as I shuddered. I filled her, giving her all of me. I’d never done that before, never had unprotected sex. There would never be any barrier between us.

Pulling out, I rolled to the side and rested my back against her pillows. My hand reached out, and she didn’t hesitate to rest her head over my heart, one leg snug between my thighs.

“Well?” I asked. “Worth the wait?”

I could feel her smile against my skin. “Yeah.”

It was then that I noticed my crow’s kraa filling the sky. His joy filled my heart as I held my woman close.

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I had a reason to celebrate. I was finally mated.

“THERE’S SOMETHING WE need to talk about.”

“Oh?” Her voice still sounded sleepy, although we’d taken a nap. “What is it?”

“When I asked Eagle Eye to look for you, he found your foster and adoption files.”

She lifted her head, resting her chin on her hands to make eye contact. “Well, I suppose those aren’t hard to find.”

“No, not really,” I agreed, “but when they’re sealed and have high-level security attached to them, possibly national security level concerns, it raises red flags.”

“Red flags? What do you mean?”

“Your parent’s death is a cold case. An unsolved murder.”

She gasped, scrambling to sit up. “Rain! How could you keep that from me?”

“I just found out this afternoon. Eagle Eye finally hacked into the files.”

Her eyes widened. “Isn’t that illegal?”

“Well, yeah, baby.” I pulled her closer, kissing the tip of her nose. “You do know I’m a biker outlaw, right?”

“Like that show on cable?”

I sighed. Everyone thought pussy and breaking the law, and Harleys were all that bikers were interested in. Oh, and partying.

They were significant, but not all we liked.

“No, not quite like that.”

She giggled. “You just got offended.”

I did. A little. “We’re getting off topic.”

“I know. This is scary, Rain. What does all this mean?”

Part of me wanted to keep her sheltered and in the dark, unaware of the threat that existed. I didn’t want her to look over her shoulder every minute of the day or be afraid to leave the house.

“I’m concerned that whoever killed your parents is still out there, and you’re in danger.”

Her expression said everything: shocked, fearful, and angry. “But why?”

“I don’t know, but I’m working on it.”

“Don’t sugarcoat it. It won’t help me.”

“I hope it’s nothing.” I kissed her, needing her to understand that I wasn’t leaving her side until we figured this out. “I’m sticking around until Eagle Eye can find out everything we need to know.”

“I’m a librarian. No threat to anyone. I’m as boring as it gets,” she joked. “I think you’re wrong. No one is out to get me. I don’t have any connections, Rain. No family.”

“You have me,” I reminded her.

“You know what I’m saying. No money. No connections. Nothing of consequence.”

“I’ve seen those dolls you crochet.”

She loved needlework and all types of crafting. Art. Scrapbooking. Journaling. My sweet angel was a creative person.

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Katrina snorted. “You haven’t seen the peens.”

Peens? “What the fuck is a peen?”

She giggled before her hand slid down my stomach, wrapped around my semi-hard cock, and gave me a sharp stroke.

“You sayin’ my good girl makes naughty toys?” How fucking adorable.

“For book signings and friends, yes.”

“You go to book signings? And bring cocks made out of yarn?”

I couldn’t wrap my head around that concept.

“Rain, it’s a joke. You know, ha, ha, funny.”

“For what purpose? You can’t get off on plushies.”

Katrina lost it. Laughter spilled from her lips as she doubled over, holding her sides as tears spilled over her cheeks.

Personally, I didn’t get it. How could you stuff penises made out of yarn up a vagina?

“Katrina.”

“It’s not for masturbation, Rain.” She kept laughing, shaking her head. “It’s too funny that it was your only thought. It’s for décor. A conversation piece.”

I scratched my head. “So, you don’t use it?”

“Not the way you’re thinking of, no.”

“Then why the fuck do you make them?”

She patted my cheek. “For conversations just like this one.”

Right. “You’re gonna tell all your book friends, huh?”

“My book besties adore you. Don’t worry.”

“I’m never going to a book signing,” I declared.

“You will. Someday. I’ll bribe you with orgasms.”

I tackled her, pressing her back against the mattress. “How about we start on that now?”

“I can live with it.”

All I needed to hear. I slid two fingers inside her pussy, delighted to feel her already wet for me. I pumped them a few times before withdrawing, too eager to feel her wrap around my dick to linger. Lining up the crown of my cock, I pushed inside her with a groan.

“Fuck, baby, you feel good.”

“So do you.”

I cradled her face, lowering my head to kiss her. “I’ve got you. I’ll protect you no

matter what happens.”

“I never doubted that, Rain.”

Her confidence and trust soothed the feral part of me that wanted to lock her away so no one could harm or take her from me.

“We found our way back to each other. Nothing can break us apart again.”

I fucking hoped she was right.

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Because I wouldn't hesitate to burn down the world for her, send the crows to mob anyone who threatened her, or even kill to keep her safe and by my side.

Chapter 11 Katrina

"I think it's time I brought you to the Roost."

"Your clubhouse?"

"Yeah." Rain slid his leather vest on, pocketing his phone, keys, and wallet. "I want to show you off, angel."

"To who?"

"Everyone." He shrugged. "Not kidding. The whole fucking world needs to know I've claimed you, and you're mine."

"Is that what the last couple of days have been about?" We barely left my bed. I was a bit sore but in the best way possible. Did I have any regrets? None. Not with Rain, my protector. And none with my Cuckoo, the overprotective, possessive biker. He was two sides of the same coin, and I loved him. Truly.

Had the intimacy between us proven it? Yes. But we loved one another as kids, forming a strong connection, and it was a natural progression to fall in love as adults.

I couldn't imagine life without him. It would be so boring.

He sat beside me on the bed where I'd been watching him dress. "Yeah, I claimed you, Katrina, but the last few days have been about proving how I feel about you."

"I know. Me too."

His fingers caressed the side of my face, dipping as his thumb brushed across my bottom lip. "This mouth. I want to feel you wrap those sexy as fuck lips around my cock later."

"Only if you promise to fuck me hard afterward."

He blinked. A grin slowly widened his lips. "Fuck, baby. When you talk dirty, all the blood rushes from my head to my dick. All I can think about is ripping your clothes off, spreading those sweet thighs, and giving you all nine inches of my cock."

"You've corrupted me," I joked.

"Oh, I know, and it's fucking intoxicating."

"You certainly came inside me a lot last night." I tilted my head, staring into those stormy gray eyes I adored. They held such warmth, desire, and conviction. I wondered if that would change when I brought up the subject of children. "You're going to get me pregnant."

"Oh, I hope so." His eyes flashed silver. "The thought makes me hard."

"You want kids?"

"I do."

"But after all we went through, do you think we'll be good parents?" It made me sort

of nervous.

“Yeah, I think we’ll be fucking amazing parents because we’ll love our kids, and we’ll protect them. The way we should have been protected.”

“I suppose you’re right. The thought of them out there wanting any kids we have is terrifying, Rain.” I had to blink back the sudden tears that surfaced. “I’d kill to keep our children safe. I’d hurt anyone who came after them.”

The force of that emotion was crazy, considering we were talking about hypothetical, not yet conceived children. I’d never been a violent person, but I knew I would become one if Rain or my babies were threatened.

“Angel, I think you’d be fucking fierce. I don’t doubt it.” He kissed me, letting it linger before his forehead rested against mine. “I’ll rip apart anyone who threatens us and order the crows to feast on their flesh.”

Gruesome, but effective.

“You’ve always had crows follow you around. They used to sit on the branches of nearby trees and watch over you.” A distant memory, trying to push through my mind, sent a shudder through me. “They cawed and smacked into the glass in our bedroom. I remember that night.”

His breathing accelerated. “Baby, let it go.”

“If we don’t ever confront these nightmares, they’ll continue controlling us.”

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“Fuck.” He leaned back. “The pain.” He doubled over like he’d been punched in the gut. “Fuck, Katrina.”

“They bent you over and hurt you. I had to close my eyes and slap my palms over my ears. But inside, Rain,” my voice faltered, “inside my head, I screamed.”

“I did, too.”

I threw my arms around him, holding him close because I knew the toll and havoc it caused on his soul. The horrible, shattering agony that stripped away our childhood. We’d been robbed of so much. “I love you, Rain. Give me the sorrow. Let me take it away.”

A sob shook loose from his chest before he clutched me against him, burying his head in my neck as I felt his tears. What happened to us, it never should have been possible. It left a jagged hole in our hearts that we’d had to live with our entire lives.

“I love you, Rain. It’s okay. I’ve got you.”

Something settled inside me. As he dared to expose his vulnerability, I realized we could help one another heal. Maybe that was what we had been destined to do. The reason he reentered my life at this time. We needed each other.

Together, we could face the past and finally overcome it.

“I love you,” I repeated for a third time, letting all the conviction I felt power my voice and add determination to the words. “We’ll get through this.”

He didn't say anything for several minutes; he just held me in an almost brutal embrace before finally lifting his head. God, that stormy sea in his eyes sent pains shooting through my chest. No one should ever suffer that horribly.

Cuckoo released a deep breath. "I love you so fucking much, Katrina. Thank you." His mouth brushed over my lips. "I'm so fucking lucky."

"I think we both are, my biker boyfriend," I teased.

"Your biker mate. Your forever," he corrected.

"I can live with that."

CUCKOO SHUT OFF HIS engine and stood, reaching for me as I lifted the helmet from my head. "The Roost is special to me, to all of us." Crows cawed overhead, and I watched them land on trees, the roof, and nearby structures as he interlaced our fingers. "It's our clubhouse and our home. Come on. I want to introduce you to everyone."

I really needed to ask him about all these crows later.

Cuckoo led me inside the Roost, and we entered the bar, which greeted you as you stepped inside. I supposed it was built that way for functionality since the biker brothers probably needed a drink before they went to their rooms or church. Cuckoo mentioned how they often hung out and played pool or darts in the common room. It seemed like the hub of the Roost.

It was crowded as we entered. People stopped what they were doing to stare at us, and all conversations ceased.

Cuckoo slid an arm around my shoulders and grinned. "This is Katrina, my mate."

A couple of heartbeats passed in silence before a figurative bomb went off. The room erupted in cheers as men raised glasses in celebration. Quite a few walked toward us, slapping Cuckoo on the back. Some shook his hand. Others grinned and joked, giving him a hard time.

He took it all in stride.

I laughed when he got pulled away. It didn't take long to be surrounded, smiling at the women who approached me.

"I'm Bella, Crow's ol' lady." A gorgeous brunette with long legs pointed to a blonder, shorter version of herself. "This is my sister, Bree."

"I'm Raven's ol' lady," she informed me.

"You'll get used to this," another blonde announced. "I'm Callie, Hawk's ol' lady."

"And I'm Crow's sister, Gail." I had seen a photo of Crow and some of the guys on Cuckoo's phone. "Mated and ol' lady to Talon." She had dark raven hair like her brother.

"Don't forget me!" A redhead wearing long braids that cascaded over her slim shoulders approached, nearly tackling me with a hug. "I'm Rebel, Heron's ol' lady."

"Nice to meet you all. I'm Katrina."

"Oh, he's waited so long for you," Bella gushed.

"You're gorgeous!" Bree added.

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“Uh, thanks.” I could feel my cheeks growing warm.

Callie looped her arm around mine. “Come have a drink. We want to hear all about how you tamed Cuckoo.”

I snorted. “He sort of did all the taming and stalking,” I revealed.

Several giggles followed.

“I believe it,” Rebel laughed.

“He’s not wearing a costume today,” Gail observed. “You must have distracted him.”

I bit my lip to keep from diving into a subject I felt too shy to discuss. I’d never had a lot of female friends. None that were close. It was strange to be surrounded by all these women. A bit intimidating, if I was honest, but I didn’t dislike it.

“We’re a lot, I know,” Bree observed, leading me to a seat. “But you should know we’re all so excited for Cuckoo.”

I could understand. “I’m happy to be here and meet everyone.” I felt eyes on me and lifted my head, immediately locking onto Cuckoo’s intense gray stare. I nodded, smiled, and watched his shoulders relax.

“He’s so in love with you,” Callie remarked dreamily. “I remember when Hawk used to watch me like that.”

“He still does,” Rebel pointed out.

“I know.” Callie giggled. “It’s so intense.”

“I hope we’ll see you around often. Come over whenever you like,” Bella encouraged. “We’re here nearly as much as the men.”

“If not more,” Gail added.

“I’d like that.” And I meant it.

I heard someone clear his throat and turned to my left, finding an older man sitting on a candy apple red scooter, holding a cane, and smiling as he jolted to a stop. He might have jarred the table as he bumped it.

“I’m Lucky Lou.”

I held out my hand, and he shook it. “Katrina. Nice to meet you, Lucky Lou.”

He shook my hand and then patted it with his other one, holding me in place. “You’re an old soul. Familiar, too. What’s your last name?”

“I was adopted. Don’t remember much about my birth parents, but they did have the last name Rossi.”

He blinked. “Rossi?” It left his mouth on a croak.

“Yes. They died seven—”

“—teen years ago. Drunk driver. Accident on the highway.”

“How do you know that?” I asked, shocked.

“Because Katrina, dear, you’re my cousin’s daughter.”

Silence engulfed us.

“I have family? Alive?”

Lucky Lou nodded, tears filling his eyes. “You sure do!”

I didn’t know what prompted me to rise to my feet, rush this older man, and tackle him in a hug, but I did it without hesitation. He hugged me back as fiercely, sniffing as the two of us held on.

“You’re all I’ve got. You’ve made this old man happy.”

Aw. “Me too!”

I separated from Lucky Lou, dashing the tears from under my eyes. “How come you didn’t find me?”

Sadness descended on his features. “I thought you were gone. The coroner’s report said you perished with your parents.” He stared at me intently. “But I’d know you anywhere. You’re a Rossi. I can see it. Same eyes as your mother, but you’ve got the Rossi good looks.” He managed to wink. “If I wasn’t all gray, you’d notice.”

I didn’t care about that and told him so. “I have family.”

“Your uncle Lou is gonna look after you now.”

Cuckoo joined us. “She’s your niece?” He seemed as surprised as I felt.

“My blood. That’s all that matters. The last Rossi.” He straightened in his seat. “She’s got family now, son. I’ll make sure she’s looked after.”

Cuckoo nodded. “She’s got me, Lou.”

“Both of us. But the Rossi name carries weight. We’ve been senators, lawyers, and successful businessmen. A few were outlaws.” He winked at us. “But we’ve got a hell of an empire built that still brings in revenue.”

He held out his hand, and I accepted it. Lowering his voice, he glanced around, and I noticed everyone had dispersed to give the three of us some privacy.

“I’ve never heard of the Rossi empire,” I admitted.

“You should, but that’s alright. What’s important is that you know you’re still listed as heir.”

Heir? I blinked.

“Over thirty million.”

“You’re sitting on thirty mil?” Cuckoo asked, nearly choking on the words.

“Not me, our sweet Katrina.”

I felt my knees buckle, but I never hit the ground. Cuckoo scooped me up and brought me to his chest. I felt dizzy and needed a few minutes to process all this.

“Come on, Lou. Let’s take this somewhere private.”

Lou pointed his cane at one of the family rooms we built last year when Crow decided the club’s children needed a safe space to play, away from the bar where chaos often ruled.

We entered the room, and Cuckoo sat me on a nearby sofa. “Want any water?”

“Yes, thanks.”

“I’ll go grab a few. Lou, could I talk to you for a minute?”

“I’ll follow you out.”

They left me in the room alone as I relaxed against the cushions. My eyes closed, and

I thought about what Lou revealed. Who were my parents? What happened?

Since I was only five when they died, I didn't remember much. Were my parents politicians? Is that why they were murdered? Cuckoo said the case was cold, meaning they never found the killer. With high-level security on the case files, it made sense that millionaires and famous politicians would be considered a security risk.

I heard a noise and opened my eyes, noticing the figure that stood in the corner. I gasped as he stepped forward, dark shadows hovering around his shoulders. One crow perched on the left side and cawed. It wasn't a loud sound, more diluted like he didn't exist outside of a dream.

"I won't harm you. I'm Carrion."

"Oh. Hi."

"Cuckoo can't know that I came in. That's why I traveled by shadows and the crows."

Um. Okay?

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“It’s not great timing, I know. You’ve just had a shock.”

“Yes,” I agreed, on all aspects.

“But you should know that Lou is telling the truth. Trust him. He’ll help you find out what you need. You and Cuckoo will find closure.”

I didn’t quite know what to say to that. “Thanks.”

“Trust the lanterns.”

Huh?

“When the time comes, trust the lanterns. They’ll bring you peace.”

That sounded ominous.

“Don’t be afraid, Katrina. You’ve been so brave, you and Cuckoo both. You’re going to be alright.”

Before I could reply, he stepped back into the shadows and disappeared.

How strange.

I didn’t know much about Carrion, but he seemed genuine.

But lanterns? I didn’t know how to process that information.

I hoped I wouldn't have to find out what he meant.

Chapter 12 Cuckoo

“What do you mean? She's your cousin's kid?” I asked Lou, folding my arms across my chest.

I didn't mind if the old crow had family or if it meant Katrina still had a living relative. I was concerned about the money. How many people knew about the thirty million and that Katrina was the heiress?

“My cousin was a senator seventeen years ago for the great state of Nevada. The Rossi name used to mean something. He was honest, hardworking, and a politician who actually kept his word. He invested his money and made a fortune.”

“Wow, Lou.”

“They had a little girl. A sweet little thing with big brown eyes, pigtails, and a smile that could melt any heart.”

My Katrina. “What happened to them, Lou?”

“Some bad shit, Cuckoo. My cousin uncovered corruption high up in the government. It bled into the white house. Not the president or V.P. but other senators.”

I clenched my fists as my hands dropped. “Would it be associated with a religious fanatic group?”

He frowned. “How do you know about that?”

I shook my head. “The Sect of Primordial Light?”

Lou smacked his cane against his scooter. “Tell me how you know about them, son.”

“When I was sent to foster care, they came to the house. When I was eight, a little girl was dropped off. She was only five.”

I heard Lou making a choking sound in his throat.

“When they came for me, I hid her in my closet.”

Lou paled. “Fuck.” He seemed to be fighting an emotional battle. “You tellin’ me that my little Katrina and you were in foster care together, and those motherfuckers touched you!?”

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By the time he got to the last couple of words, he was shouting.

“Lou.” I swallowed against the sudden lump in my throat. “I protected her. Saved her. Nearly every time.”

“But you.” He faltered.

“I did what I had to do to survive.”

“Fuck. I know, son. I know.”

I’d never seen Lucky Lou look this distraught. Even when Rook died, he didn’t cry. But right now, staring at me, the sheen of tears in his eyes nearly broke me.

“Were her parents murdered?”

“Yes,” Lou replied firmly. “I don’t believe the police report that stated it was a drunk driving accident. It was falsified. Those Sect bastards had them killed.” Horror washed over his features. “They had her taken into foster care intentionally.”

Fuck! “For revenge.”

“And their sick pleasures,” he agreed.

I didn’t tell him the only time they successfully got to Katrina was Halloween when she was thirteen. It would shatter him.

“I need you, Lou.”

“I know. I’m here for you both.”

“It’s more than that,” I revealed. “I think they’re coming back for Katrina.”

His whole body shook. “No fuckin’ way! We protect her.”

“That’s why I’m gonna need you to tell me, Crow, Eagle Eye, and Katrina everything you know.”

“Done.” He rapped his cane against the tire on his scooter. “Let’s get back to our girl. We never take our eyes off her. Not until this is resolved.”

“Agreed.”

“TELL ME WHAT YOU KNOW,” Crow growled, sensing the news we had to disclose wasn’t shit he wanted to hear.

“Katrina is my cousin’s child,” Lou began.

“Shit. The politicians?”

He remembered.

“Yeah. The ones who were murdered.”

“You always did believe it wasn’t an accident.”

“And now I know they covered it up, taking Katrina away from me.” He shook his head. “I was her only living relative.”

Katrina sat beside Lou, keeping quiet until now. She reached for his hand and held it.
“I wish I’d known.”

“I would have taken care of you like my own,” he swore.

Jesus. Fucking. Christ. These motherfuckers had stolen so much from me, Katrina, Lou, and her parents. They had to fucking pay for this!

“I know, Cuckoo. I see that need for retribution in your eyes. We’ll get it.”

That assurance was the only thing that kept me calm.

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Katrina cleared her throat. “Do you think they’re going to come after me? For the money?”

Lou nodded. “And for another simple reason.”

I growled, reaching the same conclusion.

She turned to me. “What is it?”

“You got away.”

Katrina shivered. “My house isn’t safe, is it?” Her shoulders slumped. “I love that little house. I’ve worked so hard for it.”

Lou squeezed her hand. “We’ll make it safe for you again. I promise.”

“No matter what,” I added.

Crow nodded in agreement. “We need to know every detail you all remember. Anything, even if it’s small. We have to find these sick fucks and end them.”

“Stop them before they hit the Roost,” Eagle Eye agreed. “I need to know everything about them. How they operate. Who they serve as clientele. Finances. Political ties. We’re going to crush them from the lowest level up to the top just so they know we’re coming for them, and we won’t quit until they’re decimated.”

Crow pounded his fist on the table. “That’s fucking right.”

“I’m scared,” Katrina whispered.

Fuck. Right as I got her to feel safe, these motherfuckers had to come back and ruin it. “Baby.”

“What if we’re all wrong? What if they think I’m not a threat, and they never come after me?”

It wouldn’t work like that. “They know about the money. It had to be part of the motivation for killing your parents. It’s the reason they’ll strike soon. They want access to those funds.”

“But I’ve not seen or heard anything. No one bothers me.”

“It doesn’t mean you’re safe,” Lou replied. “I hate it, but it’s true.”

“We need to protect our businesses and assets, Eagle Eye.” Crow ticked his chin toward our tech. “Jackdaw Security & Bail Bonds, LLC. Rook’s Towing & Recovery, LLC. Rook’s Pawn & Loans. See to it that they’re all secure. Untouchable.”

“Already done,” he assured Crow.

“And our accounts?”

“Also secured. No one is touching anything of ours.”

“Then it’s time to bring this to church.” Crow slapped his palms on the table.

“Cuckoo, call them in.”

For the next two hours, we met and discussed all the details, assuring every member

of the club understood what we were up against, how it affected Katrina, Lou, and me, and how we planned to stop this child sex trafficking group.

By the time church ended, the mood had shifted. Nobody was happy about this turn of events, but every member voted to fight these motherfuckers and make them pay.

I stood at the end, hugging Katrina against my side, touched that my brothers would risk their lives to help me and Katrina. And also, Lou. His scooter idled beside my woman, a silent supporter of all the club had decided.

“It’s late. You hungry?”

“Yeah.” Her stomach rumbled. “Fried chicken?”

It was her cheat meal and her favorite. “You bet.”

“I’m comin’,” Lou announced.

“You better. I can’t eat all that food by myself.”

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He snickered. “I just want extra banana pudding.”

“Then that’s what you’ll get.”

I smiled because now they each had someone else to spoil them, and I fucking loved it.

“Well. Move it, son. You hear her stomach? She’s about to starve.”

I laughed. “Yes, sir. Let’s roll out.”

“FUCK, BABY,” I GROANED as Katrina stared up at me, her delicate fingers wrapped around my shaft like she couldn’t wait to devour me. “Seeing you like this is fucking addicting.”

We got back from dinner with Lou an hour ago, and now both of us were naked, already enjoying round two since I made her come first after we reached my room.

“Jesus. You gotta use that pretty mouth before I explode.”

She smirked, flicking out her tongue to taste me as she ran it along the length, gliding it over the thick vein underneath.

“Such a tease.”

Her mouth covered the tip, and she sucked, pulling the sensitive crown between her lips and allowing the warm wetness to surround it. I jolted, one hand slapping against

the wall in order to stay upright.

“Damn, angel. You keep sucking me like that, and I’m going to spurt down your throat.”

“Maybe that’s what I want.”

Fuck. I hoped so.

She eagerly devoured me, shoving my cock into her mouth like she needed to be stuffed and couldn’t wait another minute. If I died right now, I wouldn’t regret a single thing. Nothing other than her pussy ever felt this fucking amazing.

Her soft touch and tender licks were at war with how aggressively she held onto me and bobbed her head, messy, dripping saliva from her mouth, but so fucking eager to please me that I could come from that knowledge alone.

“You’re so good at this, baby.”

She loved my encouragement. I could see it with the way her brown eyes deepened, and the lust filled them, but also a twinkle of determination and love. She was enjoying this as much as I was, which was a turn-on.

I could feel my orgasm building fast. I began to pump my hips, stroking her long dark hair until I placed my hand on the back of her head, slowly guiding her movements. She slurped and gagged but didn’t stop, only caring about my pleasure.

My growls and groans of approval got her excited, too.

She lowered her hand, reaching between her legs to play with her clit as she gripped me, still doing her best to bob her head as she moaned. The vibration of her voice, the

heat, the saliva, and the wave of bliss were too much.

I shuddered as I came, fucking her face briefly as I gave in to the pleasure. My cum filled her mouth and overflowed, spilling onto her chin as she swallowed several times. It wasn't enough to contain it all.

With satisfaction, I brought her to her feet, watching her slide the rest of my jizz into her mouth and lick her fingers clean.

“So good.”

Fuck. Me. I needed this every single day for the rest of my life.

“Angel, I’ve just been pussy whipped.”

“Lip whipped, too?”

I snorted. “That mouth is dangerous.”

“So you can’t get enough?”

“No,” I growled.

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“Then you need to fuck me, Cuckoo. Give me my bad-boy biker. Pound my pussy until I scream your name.”

Jesus. “As you wish.”

A minute later, I had her on the bed, her legs over my shoulders, and grunted as I slammed deep inside her.

When we both came together, I had a feeling all this sex was about to reward us. I pulled out of her, leaving my cum as it marked her, and rested my head on her tummy.

Someday, I’d have children with my mate. Until then, I’d sure enjoy the practice.

Chapter 13 Katrina

“Idon’t know about this,” Lou complained as we arrived at my house. “Seems a bit reckless to come here without Cuckoo.”

“He said I could get a few things I needed since I’m staying with him,” I reminded Lou.

He tsked. “He meant going with backup.”

“You count as backup,” I argued. “That cane is vicious.”

He smiled. “Stop winning me over.”

“I thought I already did,” I quipped.

He laughed as we pulled into my garage, and the door shut behind us. We opened the doors and exited the SUV we borrowed from the club. It had dark tinted windows, which helped to disguise us, but there wasn't any mistaking of who we were once we stopped at my place.

“There're two prospects out there. We're not alone.”

“Still makes me anxious.”

Yeah, it made me anxious, too, but I wasn't going to stop living life. I told Lou how I felt.

He sighed. “I can understand and respect that, Katrina.”

“Just Rina.” I wasn't sure why I said that until I had a memory of my mother saying my name. It flitted across my thoughts in a whisper. “Rina Rossi.”

“You remembered.”

“Just now. Yes.” I turned to him. “You used to call me that. You, Dad, and Mom.”

“We did,” he confirmed.

We walked into my kitchen, and I paused, leaning against the counter. “Somehow, it makes me feel closer to them.”

“I wish you would have had more time with them.” He leaned heavily on his cane, and I helped him to the living room, where he could sit on the couch as I packed a couple of bags.

“Me too, Lou.”

“Uncle Lou,” he insisted.

“Only if you call me Rina.”

“Done.”

My phone vibrated as I walked upstairs, pulling it free from my pocket. “Hey, Rain.”

“Baby, tell me why you’re not at the clubhouse.”

“Because I took Lou and two prospects to my house to pack a couple of bags. I need things, especially new underwear, since you like to rip them from my body before you fuck me.”

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“Katrina,” he groaned. “You can’t say shit like that while I’m riding my bike. I’ll fucking crash.”

“Don’t crash. Be careful.”

“Sweetheart.” He sounded frustrated. “You should have waited for me.”

Maybe. “I didn’t know how long church would take, and I’m wearing dirty panties right now.”

“Do they smell like my cum?”

“I thought you didn’t want to talk about sex while you’re riding.”

“Well, you forced my mind into the gutter. Now it’s stuck.”

“I think it was already hanging out there.”

He laughed. “Yeah, okay. You got me, angel.”

“I’m going to put you on speaker while I change.”

“Shit. I’m missing that?”

“Well, get over here. Make it quick so we can have a quickie.”

“Babe. Lou is there.”

“I’ll close the door.”

“Damn. Now I’ve got a hard-on.”

I giggled as I stripped and pulled on new undies, leggings, and a long T-shirt. I wanted to be comfortable since it was hot out. I slipped on running shoes and then opened my Samsonite luggage, loading it up with clothes, shoes, and essentials. Within minutes, I had everything packed up.

“I’m nearly done.”

“Wait for me. Don’t leave yet.”

“I won’t. Lou is probably going to need help.”

“Yeah. I won’t be long.”

I kept him on speaker as I carried the luggage downstairs and parked it outside the door that led into my garage. Just as I turned around, the doorbell rang. “That was fast.”

“What? Katrina?”

“I’m coming!” I shouted, skipping toward the door.

“Babe! Don’t answer it!”

Too late. I swung it open with a smile, staring stupidly at the man who stood in front of me. How did the gas company tech end up here again?

“Can I help you?”

He whipped out a gun and pointed it at my chest. Move back and let us inside,” he ordered.

Us?

If someone had told me that my enemy would have come out of hiding, and he would be the same pathetic asshole who showed up to my mother’s dinner.

“Carmichael?” Shocked, I didn’t move.

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“Let us in, bitch.”

They forced their way in as I heard Cuckoo shouting my name.

I stumbled as Carmichael shoved me. My hip slammed into a table, and everything crashed to the floor.

“Rina!” Lou yelled as he pushed to his feet, whipping his cane around. “Leave her alone!”

I missed there was a third man who entered my house until he said my name. It was the way he said it, calm, but like he’d known it for years. Of course, he had. He’d been a close friend of the foster father we knew.

My gaze swept over him, noticing the shirt he wore with a logo I had seen on multiple occasions as a child. A sword with a golden halo. Always worn over black.

The Sect of Primordial Light.

A cult that believed children were objects to be owned and used. God. They found me. They found us.

My Rain couldn’t take this. It would break him further.

“What do you want?” I asked, feeling far calmer than I looked.

“Ah. So smart.” The man smiled, and it made my stomach roil. “I remember that

about you. Sharp-witted. Beautiful. Soft. Sweet.” He licked his lips. “Do you remember me sticking my fingers inside you?”

What!?

“Do I haunt your nightmares?” His laugh was sinister. “We always collect our strays.”

Oh, God.

“You and Rain belong to us.”

I took a step backward, shaking my head. No. He couldn’t be one of the men who tried to violate me. But I wouldn’t know. They all wore black robes and dark masks. The cowards concealed their features.

“You won’t get away with this. We know who you are.”

The Sect member chuckled. “We’re legion. Millions. You will never subdue us. Our god gives us strength, power, and the luck to persevere.”

He was fucking delusional.

“I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“You might want to think about that.” He looked at the gas tech, who had obviously used the uniform as a disguise. “Knock the old man out.”

I screamed for them to leave Lou alone, rushing forward to fight off anyone who tried to hurt him. “I’m not five years old anymore. Or even thirteen. You can’t control me!” My fists pounded flesh, and I kicked and fought like a madwoman.

One of them slapped me, and I tasted blood as I bit my lip. My frantic gaze swept over the doorway again, and outside, I saw the streetlights click on. Lanterns.

Carrions said to remember the lanterns. That I'd be okay. They would bring peace. Did that mean Cuckoo was almost here? I didn't have to wonder for long.

Within a heartbeat, I heard motorcycle engines outside.

"Katrina!" Cuckoo roared.

And then everything went dark. The sky grew so dim I thought a thunderstorm had rolled in. But no, I caught the flapping onyx wings of dozens of crows through my open doorway. The murder swooped low and entered, cawing as they mobbed the three Sect members. Their harsh croaks and rattles were a battle cry almost deafening to my ears, overlapping as it grew in volume.

I screamed as someone grabbed me, realizing Cuckoo had come through with them, and he grabbed me, tugging me against his chest as we stood in the center of the chaos. Not a single bird's claws caught my skin or Cuckoo's. Not a beak pecked at us.

All the murder's rage was directed at the three humans that were being viciously torn into and savagely bled. The crows concentrated on the Sect members and their eyes, gouging them out to make their prey vulnerable.

I buried my head in Cuckoo's chest as he led us from the living room, not the least bit surprised about the carnage.

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The fear that had been conjured from meeting those men quickly morphed into relief. I was safe. My Rain was here, and he saved me.

“Lou,” I managed to cry, emotionally drained.

“He’s fine. Unharmd,” Cuckoo promised.

“I’m here,” Uncle Lou assured me. “Right here with Carrion.”

I opened my eyes, realizing I had squeezed them shut when I saw all the blood. “You’re okay.”

“Rina, he croaked.

Cuckoo released me as Lou opened his arms, and I rushed into them, allowing his warm hug to engulf me in the most parental and comforting embrace of my entire life.

“There, there. It’s okay now. You’re safe.”

I nodded and sniffled as he patted my cheek. “I’m glad we’re both okay.”

When he released me, I reached for Cuckoo. He didn’t hesitate to wrap his body around mine, sheltering me as if the last few minutes had terrorized him. In truth, it had been horrifying. Knowing these Sect members existed, that they wanted sex with children, and they never let their prey go was the scariest thing I’d ever encountered.

The flapping of wings had slowly diminished. All I heard now was the occasional flutter.

“Well shit,” I heard a male voice say. “I guess we missed the fun.”

“Rael,” Cuckoo breathed. “He’s a friend. A biker in an ally club.”

I clutched at his shirt. “Don’t leave me.”

“I won’t. If you want to see justice, come with me.”

I let him lead me into the living room, and I kept my gaze averted after I saw all the blood and feathers on the three men groaning on the floor. None of them could see since the crowshad taken their eyes. All that remained were gouged sockets and claw-marked faces.

“I’m Rael. A Reaper,” he announced as he greeted me.

I saw black and white face paint that resembled a skeleton but was somehow more intimidating than I could describe in words. His eyes shone with a silvery sheen that spooked me more than Cuckoo’s.

Something about him wasn’t all . . .human.

“Would you like to see these men meet their fate?”

I nodded. No hesitation.

“Let me show you how a Reaper sends souls to hell.”

I wasn’t sure what I expected, but it wasn’t the spectacle that took place before me

with the ground beginning to shake and the floor opening up, fissures popping with sizzling hot steam as hellfire burst through and heated the room.

My front door was no longer open, and I stared, wide-eyed and slack-jawed, as the Reaper and another like him quickly transformed. Dark robes billowed in a soundless wind as they rose off the floor. Each bony hand held a scythe.

“The Sect of Primordial Light will be hunted until every last member is destroyed.”

With that decree, the two Reapers swiped with their scythes and sliced the souls of the Sect members from their bodies. I would never forget the cries of anguish and suffering, the pain so visceral it made the tiny hair on my arms stand up. The cloud, tainted souls stunk and made my nose burn. The filmy, greasy-looking images cried out, begging for a mercy they never showed and would never receive.

I watched as they were sucked into hell, consumed as laughter drifted up from below. I knew in an instant that Lucifer himself would welcome them and take charge of their eternal punishment.

The ground shook once more, and the fissures closed. Within seconds, the hole closed. The steam disappeared.

Only the husk of the three men remained. With a snap of his fingers, they burst into ash, sizzling on my floors before dissolving into nothing. No stench remained. No stain.

It was like they never existed.

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The Reapers lost their robes and scythes, once more returning to their human forms. I finally was able to crack a smile, more in awe than anything else. How could such beings be real?

“It’s what we are,” Rael explained. “Now that you’ve seen. You help guard our secret.”

I nodded. “I’ll never tell a soul.”

“That agreement is binding.”

Yeah, I wasn’t risking an ending to my life like that.

Rael chuckled. “Your soul is beautiful. You have nothing to fear.”

Good to know.

Chapter 14 Cuckoo

I almost lost her.

My Katrina could have been taken, and I never would have seen her again. Sure, I would have hunted until the day I died to find her, but not before that sick cult her in ways she may never recover from.

I sucked in a breath, overwhelmed, adrenaline and rage still humming beneath my skin. “Fuck, angel. I nearly lost you.”

“No, you didn’t. The crows helped us.”

The crows. Did she understand they obeyed my commands? That they flew to her and mobbed the enemy, ensuring she stayed alive until I arrived? I sent my crow to the murder, and he brought them to her house. His quick flight and relentless need to protect our female were the reasons she remained at our side, unharmed and safe.

“It was you, wasn’t it?”

“Me? Yes.” I gestured to the cawing outside my window at the Roost. I brought her back here, needing her close to me as the club heard about the attack. “But him too.”

“He’s a part of you,” she realized.

“Yes.”

“I’m grateful.”

Relieved, I kissed her. “Come on. I need to speak to Crow.”

It didn’t take long to describe how the crows intervened, and the Reapers joined us, eliminating three of the Sect members. Obviously, there were more. This wasn’t over. But at least my woman was safe for now, and we could hunt the rest of them.

I wouldn’t let this go until the whole fucking cult was gone. Not one could be left to spread their evil agenda.

Rael gripped my shoulder as we stood in the bar. I kept my gaze trained on Katrina, watching over her as she spoke to the other ol’ ladies. “We’ll find them all.”

“I know.”

“But your mind and soul still feel rage,” he observed.

“Yeah.”

“It’s how I live my life.” He grinned. “That’s how the Reaper knows who to fuck up and send to Lucifer.”

“I’m not a Reaper, bro,” I laughed. It lacked humor. “I’m fucking trying to deal with this, and the thought of those assholes still out there makes me want to do something violent.”

He scratched his chin. “What if we channel that energy into something else?”

“I’ll fuck Katrina later,” I commented dryly.

He snickered. “I met a costume party. The whole fucking club. Right now.”

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I liked that idea. “Everyone?”

“Why the fuck not? Bet you can’t guess what I’m going to choose.”

He wasn’t that funny. “A Reaper.”

His hand slapped over his heart in mock surprise. “You gonna morph into a crow?”

“No,” I growled. “I don’t know yet.”

He shook his head. “You’re too tense, brother. Come with me.”

I knew this would be a bad idea, but I followed him anyway.

Half an hour later, we entered the bar, and both of us dressed differently than when we left. The funny?

I was the Reaper, and he was the crow.

No shit. We swapped. Mind you, it was just a joke, but still. We had the attention of the room as the speaker began to blare our song of choice. When “Monster Mash” began to play through the speakers in the bar, everyone looked surprised.

Rael and I began to dance like goofy fuckers, popping around and bumping into one another. My black and white skull-themed makeup, black robe over my jeans and bare chest, and the scythe in my hand made the costume perfect.

Rael grinned. “I fucking love it when they can’t figure me out.”

“Usout,” I corrected.

“Yeah, I guess it’s both.”

We shrugged and went back to dancing, lurching around the bar as people began to join us.

His crow costume and beak were fucking perfection. He sort of reminded me of Hawkeye but with more feathers, a beak, and a mohawk. A purple one. I never told him to use the hair dye. Rael always did his own thing. Just like me.

Maybe that was why we remained friends.

A sharp whistle pierced the air, and I spotted Crow digging through my chest of costumes that I’d brought in. “Pick your poison, fuckers. We’re all getting freaky tonight!”

My brothers and their women rushed to the chest of costumes, and I sent one of the prospects for another one. By the time we’d gone through about five Halloween-themed songs, everyone was bopping to the music, had a drink in hand, and was dressed outlandishly. Most of them didn’t even match.

I guess they liked my costume choices after all.

Katrina stopped in front of me, wearing a tight white t-shirt and cut-off denim shorts. She looked delicious.

“You’re missing your costume.”

She shook her head. “Nope.” She held up a black permanent marker. “You’re finishing it for me.”

Oh? “What do you want?”

“For you to write PROPERTY OF CUCKOO. You already claimed me. We might as well make that public.”

Fuck. I loved her.

With a grin, I took the marker and carefully penned her request. When I finished, I tossed it away, tugging her against me. Later, I’d show her exactly how much that meant to me.

Right now? I just wanted to feel her close and enjoy this moment. Because soon, I planned to be watching her belly swell with my baby.

“You’re thinking naughty thoughts,” she observed.

“Oh, I am.”

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“Then take me in a closet and fuck me, Cuckoo.”

“I love you, Katrina.”

“I know, handsome. Trust me, I know.”

As I watched her sexy ass sway, I decided she would be my wife too. I couldn't exist without this woman.

Might as well put a ring on her finger to prove it.

Chapter 15 Katrina

Memories of the past would always haunt me. The nights I hid in Rain's closet. When he would take beatings to keep me safe. The extra food he gave me, sometimes going hungry, so I didn't. That horrible night when the Sect found me at the carnival.

But I wasn't alone.

I had Rain. My Cuckoo. The fierce biker and protector who would never let me falter or suffer alone.

With his help, support, and love, I felt I could overcome anything. I told him that in bed, which only led to additional hours between the sheets. We finally got up around noon, only to discover that Crow had the entire club preparing a BBQ, and he'd declared today was a holiday.

We'd won a battle but not the war. The Sect was still out there. They would investigate what happened to the men the crows had mobbed. But nothing would lead back to us.

We crippled them, but they weren't destroyed. The club vowed to do whatever was necessary to end the cult. And we had help. The Reapers had already begun the hunt. I learned that one of their own, Spook, had experienced something similar to what Rain and I had.

But that wasn't what I wanted to focus on.

I decided I wanted a name change. I was no longer a girl without a family. I'd gained more than I ever could have hoped. My adopted parents, Trent and Sabrina. Cuckoo and his club. But the best part? Lucky Lou and the Rossi name. I was found, no longer lost.

I'd never truly been abandoned. Cuckoo made sure of that.

Lou parked his scooter beside me, offering me a cold glass of iced tea. "You looked thirsty."

I accepted it and took a sip. "It's perfect. Thank you."

"Get used to this. I'm an old man with nothing better to do than spoil my family. I'm so proud that includes you, Rina."

Touched, I reached for his hand and squeezed it. "You know, there's something I'd like to do."

"Oh? Name it."

“I’d like to return to my real name.”

“You want to be a Rossi again?” He blinked back tears, revealing the emotional reaction he couldn’t hide.

“I do.”

“But it might make you a target,” he warned.

“It’s my birthright. I want to do this.”

He nodded. “It’s brave.” He smiled. “And it feels right.”

It did to me, too.

“Cuckoo won’t like it,” he observed as my man joined us. He’d chosen a shirt printed with giant palm trees, his cut, and bright orange velvet pants with silver zippers. He wore a pirate hat with a white skull and crossbones. Somehow, it all worked.

“I won’t like what?” he asked, picking me up, sitting in my spot, and depositing my bottom on his lap.

“Changing my name,” I answered, “to Rossi.”

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He seemed to think it over. “I like it. It’s good for you.”

Lou snorted like he knew that wasn’t all Cuckoo would say. He was right.

“But since I plan to give you mine soon, you won’t have it long.”

Wait. Was he saying . . . marriage?

“Yeah, angel. I’m talking about putting my ring on your finger, my son in your belly, and living happily ever after.”

Wow.

“You think you can handle that?”

Lou appeared amused.

“I guess so, but only if you admit this is true love,” I teased.

True love. Just like *The Princess Bride*.

He didn’t hesitate to reply. “Baby, I fucking love you to the moon and back, to the depths of my soul, and I’d pirate any ship that kept you safe and by my side. So, hell yeah, I believe this is true love. Not even twelve years apart could change or fade what we feel.”

Okay, he was perfect. “Then I just have one thing to say about your proposal.”

He grinned. “Tell me.”

“As you wish.”

Lou whooped and pumped his fist in the air. People around us began to cheer as Cuckoo kissed me.

“She said yes!” he shouted as more congratulations were shouted around us. Whistles followed.

I never expected him to already have a ring. He slid the rose gold band over my finger, decorated with a delicate rose and an obscene amount of diamonds. “Rain,” I gasped.

“It’s a ring fit for a princess. My angel.”

“I love it.”

“I knew you would.”

The kiss we shared nearly curled my toes.

As I scanned the crowd of people, I recognized friends, family, and the people I had come to trust. The ol’ ladies. The club. And at the gate, waving, I saw Trent and Sabrina.

“You invited my parents?”

“Sure did, baby. They need to see how happy you are and how much we all adore you.”

“Thank you.”

He really did know how to make me deliriously happy.

“I’m gonna say hi,” Lou declared. “What’s their names?”

“Trent and Sabrina.”

“They kept you safe and adopted you. Without them, we wouldn’t have found one another.” Lou patted my leg. “I think I should let them know how much I appreciate all they’ve done.”

Wasn’t he a sweetheart?

“You’re amazing, Uncle Lou.”

He winked. “I think you are, too.”

I watched him ride to the gate as Cuckoo tilted my chin up. “You need something?” I teased.

“Just that sexy little mouth.”

“What about my heart, devotion, and promise to never leave you?”

“Baby, I already have all that. Besides, I’d only stalk you until you gave in.”

“Haven’t we played that game before?”

“Oh, yeah, but now, I’m raising the stakes.”

“How?”

“I want to chase you through a cemetery.”

“That’s interesting.”

“Wouldn’t you like to know what I’ll do once I catch you?”

“Cuckoo, if you’re not wearing a costume and planning to give me your cock, I’ll be severely disappointed.”

A wicked chuckle was his only answer.

I guess we'd be finding out tonight. "Meet me at midnight, Rain."

"As you wish."