



Desert King

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Description: You need to be tough to survive living in the desert. It's ruled by outlaws, gangs, cartels, and dirty kings. Now the new Prez of the New Mexico Chapter of the RB MC has set his sights on me. But he's not the only dark ruler who wants a queen.

I'm caught between rivals. Fought over like a prize. But I'm no man's possession. I'm as wild as the desert itself, full of rough edges and hair that blows like a tumbleweed. No man has tamed my rebellious heart yet. Tarak Cassadore is a black hole sucking me into his universe of mayhem. His Apache blood is strong and hot. His lineage shows in every hard plane of his face... in every corded muscle on his body. But If he thinks I have stars in my eyes like every other sweetbutt, he can think again.

I'm not a sucker for the new Desert King. Even if the heat in his eyes brands me with some sort of unspoken promise. But his want puts an even bigger target on my back. The leader of the Black Scorpion MC decides to make his move against Tarak by taking me prisoner. Bound to both MC's... which one will I chose? They all want to break me. Bend me to their will. But when I'm done, every desert king will bend the knee to me, their desert queen.

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Prologue

Amber

“Don’t do this.”

But he doesn’t listen.

“I-I’m falling in love with him.”

“But you want me.”

I rip my eyes from his. I’m ashamed, embarrassed. At one time, I wanted them both. I was undecided between who I’d choose. But I did choose.

He steps closer. I’m on my knees with my hands tied around my back. His finger traces the curve of my cheek. “Damn, mouse. You became beautiful.”

“Is that what this is about? ...felt like you missed your chance with me, and you want to know what he has?”

“By the time I’m done with you, mouse, you’ll forget how his hands feel on you...what he tastes like. I’m going to erase his every touch.”

A shudder rips through me as Edge bends down. His beautiful hazel eyes burn as they roam over my face. The pad of his fingertip skims my cheek. He laughs low in his throat. My nipples peaked under my thin shirt, betraying me. Tarak might have my

heart but my body wants them both. Squeezing my eyes shut, I try to deny the desire singing through me.

His lips find the crook of my neck.

A moan escapes me.

“Please. I can’t. Don’t put me in the middle of your war.”

“You’ve been there since day one, babe.” The hairs on his beard scrape against my neck. My stomach clenches. “Smile.” I open my eyes, blinking them quickly after the flash on his phone goes off. “Perfect.”

“He’s going to kill me,” I whisper, feeling my throat close. My eyes are glassy—my dusky nipples, visible beneath my shirt. My cheeks flush with desire. Next to my face is his smirking one. He attaches it to a text and hits send.

My stomach drops.

Tarak will never touch me again if Edge seduces me. I know this deep in the marrow of my bones. He drags me closer against the hard planes of his body.

“What’s it gonna be, little mouse? Him or me?”

“Him. You know that.” I breathe.

“Liar. I saw you first. I kissed you first. Why did you go with him?” He stands suddenly, his balled fist popping right through the drywall.

“You never made a play for me.”

“Is that it? Did you need romance? Hearts and flowers and all that shit? Well, fuck that. I stole you, sugar. You’re my property now.”

Edge walks back over, jerking me to my feet.

“Am I worth a war?”

“I don’t know. But I’m willing to risk finding out,” he grinds out, capturing my lips. I scream against his kiss. It’s of no use. He’s just as unrelenting as the scorching desert sun. And I have a bad feeling I’m about to burn.

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Amber

“What the?” My eyes are glued to the rearview. There’s nothing in front of me but open road. But behind me? Well, that’s a different story altogether. A line of bikers are coming up fast on my rear bumper.

Come on!” I plead with my old Subaru to give it all she has. My foot hits the gas and she lurches, begging me to stop. She’s got 160,000 miles on her rusted, faded-paint ass, but I still loved her anyway.

The bikers started out as tiny black specks—a line of marching ants dotting the dust behind me. But now an army of chrome and leather breathe down my neck.

“Where in the hell are they going?” I’m stumped because in front of me is nothing. Completely nothing. The barren land rolls for miles in all directions. There are no birds because there are no trees to land. The only thing that breaks the monotony of nothing is the promise of the black mountains rising to meet the sky on the horizon. My destination is a tiny, quiet town nestled somewhere between those mountains. It was Santa Fe, New Mexico, or bust. But right now, it seems more like a bust.

“Shit!”

My fists pound the wheel. The car chokes, sputtering smoke from under the hood. All the engine lights and warning systems chime.

The car is dying. “Oh God, what have I gotten myself into?” I gently brake and pull off to the shoulder. The motors from the bikes buzz like chainsaws as they roar past. “Assholes!” They know what happened to me and keep flying with their backs to the wind. Regardless. I envy them. Flying down the road to nowhere like they give zero fucks. All safe in a pack. While I sit in my broken-down car with no cell signal and miles between me and help.

Gulping down my fear, I check my purse for the pepper spray and tiny pocketknife. I tuck both into my jeans and open the door.

“Help! Please!” I scream, waving my arms wildly as the parade of testosterone keeps zooming by.

Damn. They’re hot. But I’m not naive enough to believe they’d save me. I have a sinking feeling these men would probably sell me to the Cartel I’ve heard about just South of the border. But maybe, just maybe, they’d take pity on my scrawny broke ass and decide to be better men today.

A shiver runs down my spine despite my tank top clinging to the sweat on my back. One by one, they scream past me, each wearing sleeveless leather cuts with “Bloody Scorpions” embroidered on their broad backs.

“Am I invisible? Hello?” But the engines racing like a group of hornets, drown out my yell.

Finally, one slows as he passes, pulling over up ahead and slowly reverses.

“Well, Hallelujah!” I grumble, swallowing the dust their bikes churned up from the road. My mouth is parched. My lungs rebel, and desperately try to cough up the road dust. I turn, bracing my hands on the hood from the spasm in my lungs only to scream as my hands burn as if they touched fire. The engine under the hood is

cooked. The metal was scorching to the touch.

A low chuckle comes from behind me. “Already, bent over and ready for me, sweetheart?”

I spin, facing the giant looming just behind me. His eyes are hidden behind a pair of reflective aviators. A red bandana is tied behind his neck, protecting his mouth and nose from the fine brown dust choking me right now.

He shakes his head. “You’re in a world of hurt, doll.”

“Just please help me.”

He cocks his head. “I can tell you’re not from around here.”

I roll my eyes, gesturing to my Florida plates and piles of belongings stuffed in the back. “Obviously, Einstein.”

I can’t tell if my dry humor even makes this giant smirk. His legs are enormous. His jeans are a bit too tight. Either that or his package is supersized just like the rest of him. No man is naturally this big. He must juice and inject steroids. There’s just no other way.

“I don’t do that shit.”

“Huh?”

“You spoke out loud.”

I swallow hard, still tasting nothing but bitter desert dust. “... can you help me?”

“You sure you want our help?”

I nod. “I’ll die out here. I could call Triple-A if your cell has service?”

“Triple-A?” This time he does laugh. It sounds like booming thunder during a rainstorm in July. “She wants us to call Triple-A!” He turned, telling his fellow biker army who had all spun around, sitting idle on their chrome horses.

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They all snicker, shaking their heads at me. “The only thing out here is the Triple XXX, sweetbutt. You wanna ride there?” One of the soldiers lowered his scarf to call that helpful piece of info out.

“The Triple X?”

“It’s a strip club, sometimes a sex club, doll. Although they’ll take one look at you and throw your skinny ass out.”

“Gee, thanks. I’m a survivor of COVID-19, asshole!” I call out, raising a finger. I spent six weeks on a ventilator and an IV drip of drugs. There was nothing. I didn’t even dream while in a medically induced coma. I’ve stared down death. This herd of oversized bikers won’t scare me. I’m a survivor. I might look small, weak, and pathetically pale, but I’m alive.

“Well, shit. We need to help.”

The huge giant in front of me puts his hands on his hips and turns to his man. “I decide, Prospect. Not you.”

Only then do my eyes lift to the patch on the giant’s right pec. “Prez.”

Well, shit. Somehow in this upside-down post-apocalyptic world, I found myself standing on the side of a burning road with the Prez of an MC named the Black Scorpions. Maybe I died after all and this plane of existence is some other world? Or maybe, I’m still in that hospital bed in Tampa and the drugs are giving me some crazy dreams?

I pinch myself hard.

“No, you ain’t dreaming sweetheart, but you did just step into a nightmare.”

“I’m done with nightmares. I’m chasing dreams now.”

“Yeah? Do you see rainbows and unicorns and shit anywhere? You came to the wrong damn place looking for happily ever after. Isn’t that place in Orlando?” He points to my Florida plates with the rusted, faded oranges with faded green numbers.

I clench my fists, feeling helpless, something I swore to myself that I’d never feel again.

“Get your shit and let’s go.”

“Huh?”

“You heard me, get your wallet and get on.” He saunters back to his colossal bike and takes an extra helmet out of a small box attached to the back.

“Aren’t you going to at least look under my hood?”

“No, thanks, sugar. I can already tell there’s nothing special there.”

My cheeks burn hotter than the sun. I know the illness stole a lot from me. But insulting my lack of curves and sex appeal at a time like this is a low blow. As if I even wanted a jacked-up asshole like him to find me attractive anyway.

The desert wind picks up speed, swirling up specks of dust. They spin around me like a tornado. I try to hold my breath, but my lungs are still weak. I had asthma before I got the virus. My lungs might never be the same and they were shit before.

The coughing goes on and on. I wheeze terribly, struggling, and blindly open the driver's door frantically reaching for my inhaler and bottle of steroids. The steroids will help open my lungs, but it'll take a while to work. The giant devil curses behind me. His large palm pushes me back into the car and then he slams the door. The air inside is stuffy, but clean. I gulp in huge breaths while trying to hold back tears.

I thought I was ready. I left the sick days behind. Despite my doctor's and family's pleas—I left my old life behind, needing something new. I craved to live. Really live. Not like before either, when I just went through the motions. My illness changed everything. Hell, it changed the whole world and I was never going back. I'm full steam ahead. A little desert dust won't stop me, and neither will this MC full of bulky men hiding behind bandanas and bikes.

My eyes smart. Precious air fills me, but I feel defeated. I have hours to go until my destination. Help isn't coming. I know it. I bite my lip, grab my purse and cell. I open the door and lock it. Saying goodbye to the car is hard. Every possession of mine is in there—every memory of the old world. The sweatshirt from the tourist shop in Boca, my Gran, bought me on our last family trip—my high school yearbook, filled with scribbled hopes of friends that I lost. My favorite paperback books with their faded pages, some are wearing a fingerprint or two from when I would sit with a bowl of Doritos and binge-read long into the night. I wanted a new life, but that didn't mean I'd forgotten my old.

“Here.” The man whose name I didn't know other than Prez held up a bandana soaked with water and tied it around my face. Before I could protest, he grabbed my hand and tugged me over to his ride. “Hold on tightly, broken butterfly.” He placed a helmet on me and fitted the strap snug under my chin.

“Do you think it'll be safe?” I nodded over to my Subaru.

“No one messes with what's ours.”

“Yours?”

He whistled and the Prospect got off his bike holding an aerosol can of something. Before I knew what he was about, he sprayed. I screamed and tried to move, but the giant held me in his arms. A scorpion emerged on the side of my car, painted in black. It was now marked.

“Like I said. No one will touch your shit, or they’ll get bit by the spider.” I still couldn’t see his face. But he removed one of the leather gloves on his hands, revealing a black scorpion tattoo going from the base of his thumb across the back of his hand.

“Ride or die, butterfly.”

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I grimace as he got on and motioned for me to straddle the bike behind him. I knew what he meant. I didn't have much water, a running car, or any cell signal. It was either go with the Scorpions or death out here. I'd beaten death already, but that didn't mean it wasn't still chasing me.

My hands check the knot securing the bandana around my face. He's so big. I can't fit my arms around him. The best I can do is hug the shit out of his back and grip the sides of his hips.

"Damn, tiny thing. You're gonna fall off. Grip my hips harder, hold on to the side of my jeans and hook that chicken bone arm of yours as tight as you can around my waist."

"Chicken—what?" You, you ogre! You buffoon!"

"Darlin' if you're gonna survive out here, you're gonna need stronger fighting words than that."

And then we're off.

Through the make-shift mask, I inhale the tangy smell of man, leather, and oil. My tiny arms hug him for dear life. We cut through the air and fly. The unforgiving desert sun beats down, but as the miles erase between us and civilization, I realize this is the first moment in years where I feel alive. I get it now—the fascination with motorcycles. You feel like flying. Weightless. Every fear and worry rolls off you and into the wind. It gets carried to the land of 'giving zero fucks', and I hope that's where all mine will stay.

I have no idea how long we've been riding, but the sun sinks low in the sky. Finally, a few metal signs appear. Then the mountains are upon us. Huge, brown-black and imposing, it seems as if we're going to crash right into them, but at the last second, the road bends and we go between them instead. Glittering city lights shine like gemstones in the twilight.

The mountain range hid the city. The pack of bikers pulls off the first exit, zooming through backstreets then enters a dirt lot.

He wasn't kidding.

The flashing neon pink and blue sign screams "TRIPLE XXX."

My legs are stiff and feel like jelly. I stumble a bit as I get off the bike, much to the enjoyment of the giant whose body I practically imprinted on during the ride.

I'm about to tell him to fuck off now that I'm safely in civilization when my breath catches. Not by some disease or medical condition either. He removes his handkerchief and sunglasses, revealing the most brutally male face I've ever seen.

It's not the handsome face described by a hero in a love story. But it's breathtaking, nonetheless. His nose is slightly crooked, and there is a bump near the bridge. It must have been broken a few times. His jaw is square, and his face a deep tan. Several small scars tell only some of his story. His eyebrows are two thick slashes over large hazel eyes. I feel the smirk before I can stop it. His lashes are long, the tips a light gold.

Angel eyes on a badass biker.

"What?"

“Your face.”

“What about it?”

“It’s a contradiction.”

He moves close, blocking everything in my line of sight but him. He shakes his head.

“You have no idea who you are fucking with?”

“You’re right, and you know what? I don’t care. Thank you for the ride.” I turn, but he grabs my elbow jerking me around.

“Nothing about me is angelic sweetheart and you best remember that. You owe the Bloody Scorpions now.”

I shrug, lifting my chin. “All I have is my dead car and a trunk load of size six jeans and knick-knacks. My skinny, chicken ass isn’t worth a dime according to you, remember?”

The corners of his full mouth tilt as he reaches into the back pocket of his jeans for a pack of cigarettes. Taking one out, he puts it between his lips, “I’m sure you must be good for something, sweetheart.”

I shrug. “I’m the most non-descript woman you’ll ever meet.”

“Somehow, I doubt that, sugar. You might be as pale as a ghost with zero tits and ass from what I can see, but you’ve got a backbone. Be careful who you show it to.”

My parched lips shut, tasting nothing but dust and bitterness. “Do they at least have anything good on tap in there?” I gesture toward the TripleXXX. But I don’t wait for his answer. He cups his cigarette to light it and I have no interest in having my lungs

freak out again.

Squaring my shoulders, I push open the heavy red door, entering the dimly lit room. Five feet in, I'm stopped by a bear of a man. "There is a twenty-buck cover charge." He opens a palm.

"Are you serious? If I wanted to see tits and ass, all I'd have to do is look in the mirror."

"She's with me."

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Over my shoulder, I see my monster. I suck in my breath because he has a bad habit of stealing them. When he laughs, it transforms his savage face. His white teeth gleam, laugh lines make his hazel eyes even more of a focal point. A grin makes his rough-cut face almost boyish. Almost.

The bouncer shrugs, letting me pass.

The men from the Bloody Scorpions take up almost every table by the stage. Strippers bend over, showing the shaved prize between their legs. Disgusted, I turn to the empty bar and take a seat.

“What’s your poison?”

“Tito’s on the rocks, extra salt, and two limes.”

The bartender grins and gets busy making my drink. From the corner of my eye, I see my monster take a seat with his men. “... and get him,” I point over, “something sweet. He sure as hell needs something besides the vinegar in his mouth.”

“Ain’t you cute? Where you from?”

“Florida.”

“Florida? What in the hell are you doing here in the desert?”

“I needed a change.”

“From paradise? Girl, let me give you some advice. Woman to woman and all—run! Run back as fast as you can.”

I shrug, “It’s not that bad so far. The mountains are beautiful. I’m not staying outside of Albuquerque anyway. My destination is Santa Fe.”

She raises her eyebrows. “That’s Royal Bastard territory.”

“Royal, who?”

She mutters something under her breath since the men are shouting at her to get busy and make their drinks, but she makes mine first.

“Thanks,” I smile, then quickly bring it to my lips. A shudder runs through me at the icy burn as it travels down my throat.

Drink in hand, I turn on my barstool and from the safety of the only lonely corner in the entire strip joint, I survey the room finding my “savior” with a topless blonde. She’s sitting on him. His meaty palms cup both her breasts. From the look on the girl’s face, she’s very much enjoying his attention. Her lips are parted; her ass grinds down on his lap. He uses his thumbs to flick her nipples as his mouth finds the back of her neck.

I shake my head, muttering, “Just who is tipping who tonight?”

The bartender smirks. “Right? These girls would pay him for it, not the other way around. He touches them sure, but I’ve never heard of him taking his dick out for any of them.”

“What a pity,” I smirk.

“Where’s the ladies’?”

She points down a hallway and I grimace. Great, I’d have to pass right by his table.

“Who is he anyway?”

“Edge.”

“Edge?”

“That’s his MC name and that’s all I know.”

Raising a brow, I hop down off my seat. “Do you mind watching my drink?”

“Girl, no one would slip a pill in your drink...no offense.”

“None taken.” I grimace. There’s nothing like being in a strip joint to remind me just how lacking I am in the tits, ass, tan, and hair slash make up department.

My long, dark hair fell out of its bun two hundred miles ago. My skin has a light coat of dust and sweat instead of perfumed shimmer powder.

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“Here. Could you please take these over?”

She sees the incredulous look on my face.

“Please? I’m slammed.” She nods over to the fifty-plus parched bikers.

“Sure.”

Balancing the tray on one flattened palm with the edge tucked against my elbow, I carefully walk over.

It kills me to meet his eyes. He reaches for his drink, never breaking eye contact from me as his other hand moves low, rubbing the stripper’s mound over her bikini bottoms.

She moans, throwing her head back and thrusts her hips forward into his hand. He cups her sex; I can’t look away. His eyes. Those damn angel eyes are talking to me, asking me if I wish I were her...if it was me, those hands were on.

Truthfully, I don’t know. I’ve had long-term boyfriends in a previous life that seems so long ago. And even then, I never burned for any of them. Sex was cuddly; warm, but never a burning fire. I feel the small smirk on my face; no one’s ever made me bite my lip and moan the way the stripper is for Edge.

He notices my smirk and makes one of his own. “I am that good.”

“Please. Every guy thinks that.”

In his eyes, is the appreciation for my sass. That's the one thing I have in spades. Placing the empty drink tray down on a chair, I keep moving past the smokey haze to the dimly lit hall. The door swings wide open and I squint as my pupils adjust to the light streaming in. A trio of heavy-set trucker drivers walk in—their rigs parked behind the rows of bikes. I lower my eyes, not wanting their type of attention and quickly move away, pushing the door to the bathroom open.

I cup cold water in my hands to rinse my face. I take more to rinse my mouth.

“Damn, Amber, no wonder why everyone looks right through you.” Meeting my eyes in the mirror, I inspect my face. Despite being from Florida, I'm pale as a ghost. I guess almost dying will do that to you, though. My clothes hang on my body. Despite the fast-food I grabbed on the road between Florida and here, I'm still too thin. My trunk filled with size six jeans don't even fit on my new chicken ass. I need some meat on my bones. I need some health back.

The dry heat will be good for me. At least that's what I kept telling myself. I never thought about the desert dust, though. Somehow it finds a way to cling everywhere.

My hair is the only thing worth noticing. It's thick, wavy, and dark brown. My eyes I guess, are all right—there just a medium nondescript brown. I don't even care about looks or any of that pathetic superficial bull shit. Almost dying is the best medicine for not giving two fucks about any of that or what people think of you.

Squaring my shoulders, I lift my chin. “That's right, Amber Walker, and you are a badass survivor. You flat-lined twice and came back to life.” My little pep talk does the trick. Fuck Edge, and his entire Bloody Scorpion MC. I've already been through the fires of hell. Nothing anyone can do or say can take that away from me. Spinning on my heel, I push the door back open and enter the hall. But I don't get far.

“Well, well, what do we have here? A scrawny-ass new girl? Are you one of

F.O.C.U.S' East Coast virgins up on the auction block for later?" The trucker dude smacks his lips and moves in, forcing my back against the wall.

"I've never had virgin pussy," a second guy sneers edging on to my left.

"Please," I mutter, rolling my eyes. Despite every instinct telling me to scream and fight, I try to act tough. Because they are expecting that; me to be a screamer and them being able to get off on the fear. "Me? A Virgin? I've ridden more dick than Jenny J."

The guy closest to me leans closer. "Is that right?" His hand squeezes my jaw. "Open your mouth. Let's see how big it is."

Tears threaten as his hand on my cheeks squeeze. My knee lifts, attempting to get him in the balls, but the second guy blocks the blow.

My head is pushed down to the floor. The sound of jeans unzipping makes me shut my eyes. I was wrong. There are worse feelings than the isolation of weeks upon weeks of the ICU hovering between worlds.

"What the fuck?!"

I open my eyes, seeing my bad angel. The head of the man hovering over me cracks into the wall. Screaming, I crawl between heavy black boots as punches and knives flash above my head.

Wide-eyed, I stay crouched in the hall corner. The brawling men block any escape. The loud music and hoots from men in the club prevent anyone from hearing the fight. I guess men do lose their minds over a good pair of tits and ass.

Edge is going wild. He is an avenging madman hammering punch after punch. It is

three to one. The men gasp and heave, finally squaring off against him together as Edge stands guard in front of me. He eggs them on, gesturing with his hands for them to come at him.

But they don't.

With a snarl, he barrels forward, kicking one in the gut while clipping the other two under the jaw. It's a knockout.

On trembling legs, I stand. "Thank you."

He turns and my eyes fall to the blood on his hands. His knuckles are split. Growling, he stalks forward. "Get the hell out of here. Turn around and go. New Mexico isn't the place for a little mouse like you."

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“Why do you hate me so much?” My voice cracks.

“I hate everyone, mouse.”

“...but you saved me.”

“Nah, I like the fight. Like the blood??—the sound of crushing bones.”

“I don’t believe you.”

He comes closer, the tips of his boots kiss my worn-out Vans. His finger lifts my chin. “You just added more to the debt you owe me. This is your second rescue in one day.”

“So? You’ve already said, there’s nothing I have of value.”

His full lips turn up in a sneer. “My specialty is finding things of value from broken, dumped things.”

“I’m not broken. Or dumped.”

“Now you’re just lying to yourself, mouse. You’re in the middle of nowhere, in a shithole strip joint with no car and no money.”

My chin lifts. “I have money.”

He shakes his head. “If you manage not to get jumped a second time.”

“I can handle myself just fine.”

“Maybe in a state filled with old folk and spring breakers. This is the Wild, Wild West, sugar. It won’t take much for a twig, like you to snap.”

“You know what? You’re a bit nuts, Edge. Who has a name like that anyway? Who speaks like you? Get some damn manners, a better name, and then maybe we can have a conversation.”

He picks me up like a football using only one of his arms. The door to the restroom is kicked open by his heavy boot. My ass is slammed down on the counter and Edge is there, standing between my thighs.

His eyes glitter with something I cannot define. But then his mouth is on me. A thousand lights turn on. Lights, I never knew, could even be lit. I kiss him back. He groans, opening my mouth with his tongue. As our tongues dance, it occurs to me, he had his hands on the stripper but never his mouth. This kiss is much more intimate than the bump ‘n grind he was doing before with someone else.

As warmth floods through me, I kiss him back, knowing I need to stop. I rip my mouth from his, laying a palm on his hard pecs.

“Sorry, I don’t do whores.”

He smirks. “You name-calling? Admit it, my hands were on her, but you felt them on you.”

“I don’t have to admit anything to you.”

“Edge! We got company!” Another Bloody Scorpion yells as he pushes the door open, interrupting our little scene.

“I know, I already took care of the truckers.”

“Not them. The Royal Bastards. They’re here with a few men from Creed MC.”

“What?” Edge grounds out, clenching his bloodied fists.

When he leaves, it’s like a vortex of energy disappearing. It sucks the air out of my lungs as much as anything.

Shouts and screams make their way from the main room. I should probably bolt to the end stall and hide, but curiosity gets the better of me. I crack the door open a quarter inch, just enough to peek an eye out. The truckers are tied up with zip ties and stacked against the far wall.

A few of the working girls grab their bouncing tits as they screech and hurry through the side exit, out into the parking lot. “What the heck could be going on?”

I step out gingerly and creep down the hall. Edge is squaring off with his entire MC at his back against four burly men wearing cuts. But from the body language, there’s no way they are friendly. If anything, the hate emanating between them is so thick you could choke on it. I need to get my purse and get the heck out of here. I’ve had quite the distraction and adventure, but now it’s time to move on and get myself out of this mess.

With my back to the wall, I inch forward. No one even glances my way. I’m a ghost. Just like I’ve always been. Ordinary. Invisible. Completely forgettable.

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“You’ve got some nerve showing up on our turf.” Edge grits out.

The three men shrug, but only one responds. “We were invited.”

“Bullshit.” Edge crosses his massive arms.

“Tell them, Viv.”

The bartender who was kind to me grimaces. “F.O.C.U.S. offered his services.”

“What the fuck, Viv? We protect your business, your women, and you have the nerve to disrespect me by inviting the Royal Bastards to our turf?”

“South Albuquerque is no man’s land.” The man’s face is in shadow as he speaks. His voice is soft thunder. He’s still, but I get the impression he’s a coiled whip ready to strike at a moment’s notice.

“The fuck it is,” Edge growls. “This is toeing the line, and you know it, Tarak.”

“The lady asked us.” The man called F.O.C.U.S. replies. “Some of us think this war between us needs to end. We’d make better partners than rivals.”

“I don’t give two fucks. Get out.”

“Make me,” he growls, raising a fist. He steps forward. My breath catches. His eyes are the opposite of Edge’s. If Edge has the eyes of an angel, this man’s the fallen one. I could get lost in his gaze, just trying to figure out exactly what shade of black his

irises are. They're so dark they gleam. If that is even possible. His face was carved from the mountains, all hard planes, and angles. His bronze skin is drawn tight over his cheekbones. His lips are full for a man. They're sexy and full and right now—baiting Edge with a sly smirk. “Bring it.” He opens his palms, turning them up and gestures with his hands for Edge to come at him.

“Whoa. Easy there...” A giant of a man with salt n’ pepper hair places a hand on the guy’s arm, making it lower. His cut says “Creed” on the back. What is going on? Three different MC’s are talking about their beef?

It is only then I notice another giant of a man with a full beard and dangerous eyes, point a gun at the man to Edge’s right. He points a gun straight back. It’s an old Western showdown, but there’s no horses or 45’s. Instead, it’s tatted cowboys riding chrome and wearing leather and I have a front-row seat.

“Let me at him, Rog. You know why.”

“Maybe later. I wanna drink. It was a long-ass ride.” I’m stunned when the handsome older biker turns his back on the lot of them. He must have balls of steel. He takes a seat right next to where my drink was and damn, I want to finish mine. I’m over being the mouse, hiding in the corner... going unnoticed. Squaring my shoulders, I push off the wall and try my best chicken-ass saunter, cutting right through them all. In my mind’s eye, I’m a seductress weaving her way through alpha men drooling over her ass... I almost sigh. From the corner of my eye, I sneak a peek at the tall man, Tarak. The harsh planes of his face could cut stone. His skin is divine. It’s tan but not from sun, from DNA. I shake my head. This is the Wild West with Chrome Cowboys and hot AF Native Americans. He steps closer, staring at Edge over my head. I feel the heat coming off his skin.

“I need a drink, too.”

The air is thick with tension. I cut right through it. But I wasn't expected the sparks from my left and right. Edge's eyes promise murder and the man, Tarak's sparks with interest. But that can't be right. Who would be interested in a brown, little mouse?

Finally, exhaling, I sit next to the ogre of a man, Rog or something and tip back my glass. The ice has melted, and the tequila goes down smoother. A smirk plays across his full lips. "Whatcha doin' here, sugar? Got a death wish?"

"Nah. Death already came for me and left empty-handed."

He lifts a brow and signals Viv. "Next rounds on me. What did ya' beat? Cancer?"

"COVID-19."

"No, shit? Good for you."

"Thanks."

"Rog? Are you done, making new friends cause still have an issue over here?"

"Boys," the older, hot guy rolls his eyes.

"I know," I wink, suddenly seeing the band of gold around his finger, which is too bad because this hot silver fox has presence in spades.

"Name's Roger."

"Amber."

"Nice to meet ya, little lady. Hold my spot. I'll be right back."

Viv grimaces, twisting a rag in her hands. “Did you really invite Edge’s rivals?”

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“Club business is always complicated.”

“I’ll bet. I did watch Son’s on FX.”

“I fucked up.”

“So? Fix it.”

She bites her lip. “I don’t know how. These boys’ tempers flare hotter than the desert in July.”

“So? Dump ice on it? Douse that shit.”

“Yeah, I doubt that will work.”

“Boys!” Viv stands on the bar, cupping her hands to her mouth. “Please! The nights on me. Free lap dances, extras, beer—I just can’t have the cops here again or file another insurance claim if my place gets trashed. If you can’t settle this now please go out back, okay?”

“Please, as if I’d even stay for free to see her strip.”

All eyes move to me since I’m the only woman left in the place besides Viv. Tarak’s gaze falls on me, roaming over my tank, undressing me. His lip curls as if he’s sucked a lemon.

My chin lifts. “You strip. I’d like to see you get up on that stage so we can all see if

your dick's as big as you pretend it is."

"Burn!" Hoots and hollers erupt. There's a proud glint in Edge's eyes.

"You tell 'em, mouse."

The muscle in Tarak's jaw moves. "I don't take my dick out for sweetbutts. Especially, Bloody Scorpion sweetbutt whores."

Anger seethes through me. I dump the bucket of beers on the floor, lift a glass long neck and bust it against a table—beer foams over broken glass. Marching up to him, I wield it like a weapon. "I'm no one's whore. Got that? Get the fuck out. You obviously don't belong here."

Something flashes in his dark gaze, but it's gone before I can decipher it. "I think you're the one who's lost, pale skin. Dead eyes." His words cut to the bone. How can one look destroy a person? He's a judging god as he sneers down at me.

Edge lunges forward. But his men hold him back.

"Ah, this brown mouse belongs to you? Shall I take your toy just because I can?"

"I'm no one's toy!" I get ready to lift the jagged glass to his skin. What the fuck am I doing? Who am I?

"Easy now," Roger steps in, taking the broken bottle from my shaking hands. He must see the crazy in me, how I'm about to snap. Being called a whore is a hot button of mine. My very first boyfriend my sophomore year, broke my trust when he told his friends how he popped my cherry. I was in high school hell after that. The joke was that me, the mouse, was a closet whore. Made no sense but then again high school bullying never does.

“Let’s go.” Rog gestures to his group.

“No.”

My eyes shift to the biker with the letter’s F.O.C.U.S. embroidered in his leather cut.

“What’s that stand for?”

“My name.”

I shake my head. “You all are weird as fuck. I’m out.”

But I don’t get far. Edge grabs my elbow. “Not so fast, mouse.”

“Look. I’m over this bullying bullshit. I have real problems that don’t involve strippers and bikers, okay? I need to get my car towed and get to my job. Someone’s depending on me.”

“You already have a job lined up?”

“I do.”

“Doing what? Cataloguing library books?”

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“Fuck off, Edge.”

I jerk my elbow back.

His eyes shift over my shoulders at the Royal Bastards then he leans down in my ear.

“I can hook you up with a ride.”

“No, thank you. That’d make me what? ... owe you three?”

“Listen, doll. Your car’s shot to hell. It ain’t worth the repair. You need a new ride.”

“No shit, Sherlock.”

His face remains stoic, but his eyes twinkle just a bit. He points to the bar. “Go, sit your ass down. When I’m done kicking these Royal Bastards outta here. We’ll talk.”

I roll my eyes. “Don’t patronize me.”

“Whose ass you gonna kick?” Edge turns and Tarak’s fist clips his chin.

“Fuck, no!” A few men from the Scorpions throw down.

It’s an all-out brawl and I’m square in the middle. A strong pair of arms grab me by the waist. I’m thrown fireman-style over a pair of wide shoulders. “Time out! We got a lady coming through!” It’s Rog, carrying me. I’m upside-down gaping like a fish when they all pause, waiting for him to carry me to safety.

“Is this a joke?”

“Nah, it’s a real fight. Tarak’s out for blood.”

“That’s so juvenile.”

“If you knew the back story, maybe you wouldn’t think so. Neither of them are gonna be happy until the other is dead and gone. That’s why I’m sittin’ this one out to have a drink with you.”

“Won’t your wife mind?”

“Dev? Not unless you plan on being inappropriate with me.”

“Me? Inappropriate? That’ll be the day.”

“Maybe you should be? You got a second chance at life, doll. Live it.”

“I’m trying,” I grimace. “But my damn car gave out three hours south on I-40.”

“Ouch.”

“Tell me about it.”

“And they brought you here?”

I nod.

“Well, shit. Me and the boys will take ya’ somewhere proper and help you get everything sorted.”

“Thanks. But I doubt your friends will be much help. I doubt they’ll even be able to see.”

“You haven’t seen Tarak fight. That boy has Apache blood. No one fights fiercer.”

“It’s dozens on three.”

“No, it ain’t. Turn and look, sugar.”

Stunned, I turn. They cleared the tables and chairs and formed a circle. It’s fight club in the Triple XXX. Edge vs. Tarak. Both have taken their cuts and shirts off.

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A few working girls stand in stilettos, cautiously coming back inside. I guess the lack of gunshots or screaming sirens had them coming back for the dollar bills.

The music turns back on and a few take the stage, gyrating their hips and shaking their tits but no one cares. The new entertainment is the two men.

“My money’s on Edge.” Viv eyes his rock-hard abs appreciatively.

“I hope they both kill each other,” I murmur.

“This is some shit,” Roger smirks amused as one of the strippers holds up a card like in a boxing match and prances in-between the men in nothing but a G-string and high boots.

But I only have eyes for the two men, circling each other with murder in their eyes. One dark. One Light. Both dark in their own way. Their muscles shine with a light coat of sweat. Tarak’s torso is bronze and hairless. His pecs are big, but hard. Edge also has a smooth chest, but he has a small trail of fine hair that travels down his abs, disappearing under the waistline of his jeans. They’re both fantastic male specimens. My hands are clammy. My eyes wide. My mind starts imagining all kinds of dirty things. Dirty things a plain girl like me never thought once about before.

Disgusted at it all and myself for being so intrigued I turn back to the bar, help myself to a water and slip out unnoticed while punches and kicks are being thrown.

Sure, I could’ve stayed and gotten help. But wasn’t the whole point of leaving to stand on my own two feet? Literally and figuratively?

Night's fallen. I open my UBER app and wait. I decided to stay at a hotel at least ten miles away even though there were some closer.

Forty-five minutes later, I arrive at the Courtyard Inn. It's ninety-five a night but has free Wi-Fi, breakfast—with a promise that every blanket, towel, and piece of bedding has been thoroughly washed between guests. They also ripped up all the rugs and replaced them with wood flooring so everything can be bombed with disinfectant sprays.

I help myself to a wipe and tap the kiosk after scanning in my confirmation code from my cell. The virtual display shows me all available rooms. I pick a corner one facing East and hope for the best. The kiosk spits out a keycard and I browse another dispenser sales machine for toothpaste and a toothbrush.

I grab another wipe and use it to push open doors and turn the handle on the one to my room. After using it to flick on the lights, I carefully wipe down every knob I can. Hell, I have antibodies now but that doesn't mean my lungs, or my spirit want to go another few rounds with the damn disease. Even though they say it's gone I still have PTSD from what I lived through. Hell, the whole world does. After taking a long, hot shower, I crash. My dreams are filled with low constant drone of motorcycle engines, the taste of Edge's lips and the dark, enigmatic eyes of the rugged man who looked at me like I was nothing...yet everything.

2

Amber

I've pretty much resigned myself to the fact that I won't be able to recover my car or hope that any of my things are still inside. I called several towing companies, but no one want to waste three hours one way for a tow in the middle of nowhere. The charge just to retrieve it is more than the car and everything inside it is worth.

But still. My things: my memories of life are worth something aren't they? But I just can't justify spending eight hundred cash.

Sighing, I grab some toilet paper using it to touch every surface while leaving the hotel.

"Morning, mouse."

He's so big he blocks out the early sun.

"What the...?"

"You didn't think you could just leave, did you?"

Shifting my weight, I refuse to be cowed. "Yeah I did. It still is a free country."

"You owe me."

“You came to collect?”

He rips off his shades and pulls down the handkerchief covering his face. “I need a nurse. Are those tiny hands good for anything?”

His left eye is swollen shut. Dark, bruises cover his cheek. I think his nose is busted again. “You lost?”

“It was a draw,” he shrugs seeming unfazed.

“I don’t have time for this. I need to be somewhere.”

He turns, swaggering toward a blue Ford truck. The paint’s faded but the chrome finishes shine. “All your shit’s in the back.”

Stunned, I slowly walk forward. In the back of the truck, tied down by rope cords are my suitcases, plastic bags full of old, loved books, CD’s, and knick-knacks from my old life.

“I-I can’t... I have no way to repay you for this.”

“And I already told you, I don’t collect money.”

I swallow hard. The past twenty-four hours were surreal. It was like I stepped into the middle of a movie and walked off the set. “What do you want from me?”

“I don’t know yet.”

He presses a key into my palm and raps his knuckles on the hood. “She’s solid, with some years on her, but still runs strong.”

“This is yours?”

He shrugs noncommittally. “You could say so.”

“I’m not taking a stolen truck, Edge.”

“Title’s on the seat. The least you could do is utter a thank you, mouse. But maybe it’s not words from you I want.”

My brow furrows as he invades my space. His meaty hands grasp either side of my hips as he pushes me back against the driver's door. His swollen lips close in on mine. My hands rest on his forearms. I’m not sure if I’m attracted to him per se, but I’m curious to find out if I’ll feel anything at all or if yesterday was just a fluke. He smells of fresh soap and coffee. One hand cups the back of my head as he opens my mouth with his and his tongue searches for mine. Searching for my acceptance. His other hand moves up, slowly rubbing over my tiny breasts. I hiss into his mouth as my nipples harden at his touch. He moves over them lazily in broad daylight. His hand circling, his fingers pinch me lightly. A wave rolls through me. My hips buck forward. His kisses and touches are long; lazy. He’s in no rush to take more but won’t let up either. I kiss him back because I can. Because I’m alive and free and never made out with anyone in a hotel parking lot just for the hell of it.

He grunts, angling his hips closer. I free myself from his mouth, my hand cups his bruised cheek. “Who knew only a little mouse could satisfy the beast? Especially when he had a full course of tits and ass at the buffet but still left hungry?” With that, I push forward making him move back and open the door to the truck, quickly inserting the key into the ignition. Our eyes lock through the glass. His are wide. I wink, blow him a kiss then reverse, leaving him stunned and horny in my wake. In the mirror I glimpse my flushed cheeks, sparkling eyes, and mussed up hair. Damn, if I don’t look just a little bit hot.

He stares after my taillights with his hands fisted by his sides. I know I haven't seen the last of him, but I needed to get the hell out of there before I let some Bloody Scorpion biker make me want for things I know he can never give. I'm not delusional into thinking I could be a woman to make a man like that change. Edge is bad with just a hint of good. I came here to start a new life. Getting involved with an MC man was never on my horizon. Besides, Edge has a different woman by the hour for all I know. He thinks nothing of pleasuring one woman than another, if last night is anything to go by.

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Using, the navigational app on my phone I set my new destination. “New life, here I come! No more, being a mouse, Amber. It’s time to change.” With that vow, I start making a new list. I’ve been given a second chance. It’s time to truly be re-born. I turn on the radio, blasting a country station. As the truck rolls down I-40, I even do something risky like open the windows. The air whips through the cab, blows my hair back and I’m relieved when no dust particles cause my lungs to clench.

I’m making good time to Santa Fe and my foot presses the gas pedal to the floor. The truck doesn’t cough or protest like my Subaru did. Instead, it accepts the challenge. I laugh out loud.

I’m free.

I’m flying, still high from the bad boy biker’s kiss.

But my grumbling tummy wants more than the butterflies. I need coffee and food. Phase one of my new plan is to gain the weight I lost and add some. I’m going to have a curvy body. Somehow. Someway.

I pull off an exit and sail into the lot of a diner. No one glances my way once as my skinny chicken ass glides into a corner booth. But that will change. I sense it. I’m not running from any sordid past, brutal ex, or broken-down family. My past is as boring as my mud-colored hair and that’s the problem. It’s time to paint my life with bold, fresh color. It’s time these sexy, beastly men stop categorizing me as a plain Jane. I don’t have a pug nose or thin lips. I don’t need plastic surgery. I need to change the inside as much as the out. I just never cared or bothered to paint my canvas. It was easier just to stay invisible for so long.

But I don't want to be an unseen ghost floating through life anymore. I want to be the desert rose.

It's not about a man either. It's about letting myself feel sexy, womanly and in charge of my own narrative. Taking a pen out of my purse, I get started on my new to-do list:

"That's quite a list."

I drop my pen, flip the napkin over, quickly looking up feeling so exposed. "Uh, I'll have a coffee with full cream and sugar. A toasted blueberry muffin, buttered toast... white not—that whole-wheat crap, and a fried-egg sandwich with bacon and cheddar cheese."

The waitress cocks a hip, "Girl? Now where are you going to put all that?"

I smile faintly. "I'm famished."

"Clearly. You sure?"

"Yep."

"Okay, then. You're a tiny thing...and we hate wasting food after what we've been through..."

"I know firsthand. Please don't preach to me."

"You a survivor?"

My chin lifts, "damn straight I am."

"Good for you, honey. Eat up. It's on me."

“No, really I can pay.”

She places a hand on my arm. “My cousin didn’t. Please.”

“I guess, I’ll have to eat every last bite now.”

She smiles with her eyes as she walks away to grab the pot of coffee on the burner behind the counter. My eyes look out the glass window to the horizon. Life’s almost returned to normal after years of intermittent lock downs and death. Trillions of dollars and so many leads touted by major pharma companies—and yet it was a high school genius working in a lab at a local community college who broke the viruses genetic code and found the cure. The boy is nineteen now and has more money than Mark Zuckerberg and that guy who runs Amazon.

The waitress brings over my coffee and after adding a generous dollop of cream and three packets of regular sugar, I raise the mug to my lips, close my eyes and savor the taste. “To backyard geniuses,” I murmur.

My cell buzzes on the table causing me to grimace. I debate ignoring it for the tenth time but after what my family went through, I know I can’t.

“Mom?”

“Where are you, Amber? I have not been able to sleep. I kept picturing you lost on the road somewhere.”

I pick up the spoon, using it to slowly stir the coffee. “I’m fine. I was just tired from all the driving and crashed at a hotel for a day.”

“Did you sanitize everything? Please tell me you didn’t touch the comforter.”

“The pandemic is over, Mom.”

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I hear her shudder through the phone. “We almost lost you and now I feel I’ve lost you anyway...”

“I need this for me.”

She sighs. “I know. But it still kills me. I just want to hold you tight and never let go.”

“I’m twenty-four—not four.”

“You’ll always be my baby.”

My eyes roll as the waitress returns placing three plates in front of me. “I’ve got to go. My food just arrived.”

“Come back. Please.”

My fingers clench on my fork. “I-I can’t. I’m sorry. This is my second chance. My time to figure out what I want to do with my life.”

“I still don’t understand why you had to leave Florida to find that answer, Amber. It’s not going to appear in the blue desert sky like some miracle.”

“I don’t expect it will.”

“Well, when you figure it out, come home.”

“I can’t promise that.”

“Are you almost to Santa Fe?”

“Yes.”

“Will you call me and let me know you got there in one piece?”

“Sure.”

“You better, or I’ll get on a plane and check myself.”

“Ha! You on a plane? Even before COVID, you were too terrified.”

“I don’t trust it. That boy and his cure...I’m telling you Amber, it’s not gone.”

“It is. Besides, I’ve survived it.”

“Barely. Your lungs won’t win a second time.”

“My food’s getting cold... I’ll call you later.”

I disconnect, my appetite gone. I force myself to nibble at the toast. I know the virus is gone, but my mother much like many—suffer from PTSD from lockdown life, all the death and food shortages but most of all—from missing the people who didn’t make it. I’m one of the lucky ones. I’ll live for them all.

I turn the napkin back over. My goals are all so superficial. But part of feeling good on the inside is knowing your outside is on point, right?

The food is bursting with flavor and despite not thinking I could—I polish off just

about every bite. Despite the waitress insisting she treats me I open my wallet and take out forty dollars. Taking another napkin, I write her a note:

Just as I finish drawing the smiley face, the roar of motorcycles has me looking out the window. I swallow hard. Four men on bikes, wearing aviators and bandanas cruise in the lot.

I gasp as the helmets come off and the cloths lowered. No one could miss that sexy beast, Roger and Tarak wouldn't be recognizable without that swagger and arrogance that comes off him in waves. One eye is swollen shut. His face is covered in swollen bruises much like Edge's. But he walks like he could give two fucks.

I gather my purse and phone. A smile is ready on my lips as they enter the small diner. They immediately look to the back where I'm sitting, I raise my hand to wave as four sets of eyes move past me to the last booth. Not a flicker of recognition came my way.

My hand drops.

Heat fills my cheeks.

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The men walk right by me. I swallow the lump forming. Am I really that invisible? Am I really such a plain Jane that a man I thought shared a good conversation with me yesterday would so soon forget? It stings that not even Roger remembers me.

I wipe the corner of my eye and make a dash for the ladies' room. Pushing back my hair, I stare at my reflection in the mirror. I'm not that bad for a living ghost. I swipe my eyes feeling the tears waiting at the dam, wanting to spill over.

"Don't you dare cry. Especially over a group of bikers, Amber." Turning on the taps, I splash some cold water on my face.

In a few more hours I'll arrive at my new life. I won't be passed by ever again. I will be somebody, dang it. Somebody worth noticing.

The bathroom door opens with a bang as I stride out. My head doesn't even turn in their direction. I practically jog over to the old, blue truck and climb in throwing my purse on the passenger's seat. It's then I notice the paper that drifts to the floor. I reach over, retrieving it. The title. After briefly, scanning it, I crumble it up and toss it back to the floor. I must be in a stolen truck. There's no other explanation for a seemingly legit title complete with notarized stamp that claims the owner of this blue Ford is none other than: Little Brown Mouse. Address Unknown.

"That fucker!" My fist slams down hard on the dash. I pull out of the lot faster than I should, leaving a cloud of desert dust in my wake. My anger fuels me. It's better than the bitter taste being invisible left in my mouth.

Instead of pulling back onto I-40, I keep going on the access road. There's a super

Walmart not far ahead.

I don't waste time parking and going straight to the health and beauty section. I never bothered with shit like this before and barely know where to start. But I do know I want my face to look fierce and my hair to have just... more. I don't even know what colors go with "white as shit" skin, so I just pick a bunch of bronzers dumping them into my cart. Next is ten different shades of lip gloss and a few tubes of mascara promising "lashes so long he'll drop to his knees." The picture on the box shows a diamond ring. A snort escapes me, but the box goes into my cart.

Next, I hit up the hair care aisle. "What goes over mud brown?" I pick up a box of pink, thinking my tips would look cool this shade but after scanning the box realize I'd have to dye my tips platinum first. I peruse a few boxes and dump three in. I use the self-scan and get back to my truck but not before I use my hand sanitizer and use an antibacterial wipe on my face. My mother's words haunt me like a bad sex-ed talk. "You will not die. You will not catch it again," I murmur to myself like a mantra. The world is slowly healing but will never be the same and I realize I won't be either. But that's okay. Because the version 2.0 of me is going to kick the shit out of the first.

Tarak

I made her the second we came in the door. Even with only one eye working, she wasn't hard to miss. Not because she's some great beauty either. I watch people. Study them. Life in the MC is a game of poker. You win by reading your opponents. I was voted Prez because of my instincts. My ability to read people has saved more than one brother in my MC. Meets have turned sour and I was always the first one to get the read; drawing first and protecting my brothers from fatal blows.

This girl, she's full of tiny tells. Sometimes it's a tooth nibbling a lower lip, nervous hands, or haunted eyes. The girl has a story. She sticks out like a bright flower against miles of desert. Only her petals haven't bloomed yet. She needs watering, tending—a shit ton of TLC. Something or someone put the shadows in her eyes.

I used to be a man who did those things for a woman. Especially the broken, haunted ones. They always called to me. I see all the jagged, fucked-up pieces of myself reflected when I look at them. Some, romantic stupid part of me thought that if I just found that one other jagged-edged soul, I could line up mine and make it whole again. It's my Native-American blood. My ancestors were fierce warriors. But we also had passion. Deep-seeded passion for Earth, the cosmos, the stars, and our women.

But I've been singed; utterly destroyed by the power of love. The scars are so thick around my heart, I know I'll never love like I did once ever again in this lifetime.

When we walked past her booth, I stared straight ahead. Nope. There's no way that broken, pale mousey-brown haired girl who got in my face yesterday was gonna take one more second of my time. The other guys didn't recognize the brown-eyed girl in the least. So, I didn't bother either.

I heard her quick intake of breath; watched her tiny trembles. And when she fled to the safety of the restrooms, my eyes happened to fall on the napkin covered in purple ink she left behind.

I've read it a dozen times.

And it got to me. Her inner desires, her need to be sexy. Desirable. She already was and she doesn't see it. Hell, she's fresh meat in a small corner of the vast desert. That alone will get her second looks. She's also tiny. The kind of woman that makes a man instantly feel the need to protect. I mean even a slight gust of wind could knock the petite thing over.

Besides, I have more problems than a briar from a rose sticking in my side. The Bloody Scorpions keep pushing us...wanting to expand their territory farther north. My blood will seep into the Earth staining it red before I let that happen. The black mountains of Santa Fe are mine. The chapter of the Royal Bastards kept shit locked down and safe during the time of Corona when people were scared, and the cops and first responders were sick themselves. We kept people safe. Our MC was the law. My leadership cemented our power and now, even though the world is almost back to pre-COVID days, our MC remains in power. We are the law, which means I'm the law.

4

Amber

“Stupid, Amber. You’re so stupid.” My hair is orange, not the sexy shade of baby pink the box promised. I quickly braid my hair and pin the ends up underneath, dressing quickly. I have ten minutes to get to work and I’m actually really excited. Today is day one of my new life, orange hair fail and all—I’m determined to make it a good one.

I didn’t just come out here blind. I did have a rough plan. After I was discharged from the hospital, I still felt horribly isolated. Anyone who managed to thwart the virus shunned me, even though it had left my body, people were still afraid of me. Like I would somehow still spread it.

I spent days by myself in my room, watching the world go by, alive but still not living. I was over it. All of it. I needed a change, something new. Deep in the stillness of my soul I knew the answer was an adventure, a new life somewhere else. I knew my lungs couldn’t take the cold climate and I hate the freezing chill of anything under sixty degrees. I also didn’t want to get on a plane. I searched for jobs in Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico. California was a dream too far.

Hours upon hours I searched the Internet. The pickings were a bit slim for someone like me. College never appealed to me. I didn’t see the point in spending a shit ton of money when I had no idea what I wanted to be. What I wanted to do. Then COVID hit hard in three waves. I caught it on the second wave. The economy came back. We started making everything in America again. Construction boomed. Factories were

built. But I didn't see myself working a shift job on an assembly line. Then I stumbled upon a job posting four Google pages deep. It was a position in Santa Fe, New Mexico. A mom was searching for a paraprofessional with experience working with autistic children. She would pay twenty dollars an hour. I picked up my cell and dialed immediately. After a two-hour phone conversation I knew I had found what I was searching for. Jenny's son was seven and on the spectrum. He spent two years in intermittent lock downs and didn't handle the transition back to school well, so she pulled him back out. I knew I could help the boy. When she texted me his picture, he stole my heart. His dark little eyes tugged at my heart strings. I yearned to brush back the lock of hair that fell over one side of his forehead. I might not have a degree, but I had four years of classroom experience outside of Tampa. I could reach him. I knew I could.

I signed a month-to-month lease in a small apartment complex a few miles from Jenny's home. Packed up my room in under a week and then broke the news to my mom.

I lace up my sneakers feeling excited for the first time in forever over meeting a new boy. Who knew I'd lose my heart to him in a photograph? Edge and Tarak and all those beefy bikers don't have a chance against seven-year-old Evan.

I check my Waze app. Two miles. My fingers move the cheap, plastic blinds from the window. It's sunny but still early. I'll walk. I cross to the small fridge and take a bottle of water with me just in case. After all, I am living in the desert now.

The sun feels good on my skin as I head out into the brand-new day in front of me. I can't wait to meet Evan and Jenny. The streets of Santa Fe are gorgeous. I wasn't expecting a tiny town nestled between the mountains to be so swanky, but it is. The shop windows are full of designer brands. The women milling about all carry expensive espresso drinks. I can't help but notice their toenails match their brightly colored manicured fingernails.

My shoulders slink just a bit. I can't remember the last time I painted my toenails. I make a mental note to start.

The smell of fresh brewed coffee and baking bread wafts from a small café enticing me to wander in.

I order a small coffee heavy with cream and sugar then ask for a buttered croissant.

"Thank you," I murmur, gingerly taking the coffee and bag. "Shit! What the?" The sound of buzzing chainsaws startled me causing tiny drops of hot coffee to land on my skin.

I shake my head. It wasn't chainsaws but the buzz of motorcycle engines as about five of them race past. "So much for a peaceful morning," I mutter. My eyebrows lift as I recognize the familiar patch on the back of their cuts. Royal Bastards MC. And of course, they slow down, cut their engines and park just up the street. I hate that I can't look away. They're just so huge. Manly. Their faces are covered but I recognize the leader, Tarak. He swaggers toward the bake shop as if he has the biggest set of balls the world has ever seen. My eyes roll. I'm sure my snort reaches their ears, but I don't care as I turn in the other direction. These big ass men with their bruises and tats still have their vices just like the rest of us. Including coffee and sweets.

"What's so funny, Mouse?"

My hand tightens on my coffee. No way, does he remember me.

I pause, feeling him behind me. A huge presence. It's probably the wind but I swear I felt his breath on the back of my neck. But he couldn't be that close. Could he?

Grimacing, I turn. "I'm surprised you even remember who I am."

“Don’t flatter yourself, Mouse. You have a particular shade of brown uglier than marsh mud.”

I flinch. Words still hurt. “How did your fight go?”

“I cut Edge down like a dog.”

“Really?” I arch a brow. “Seems to me your face is more busted than his was.”

“You saw him?”

“The next morning.”

Tarak’s fist clenches. Interesting... His lips thin as he looks me over. His eyes narrow to slits.

“Get lost, Mouse. Leave. This is my turf and I don’t want you in it.”

“Tough. I’m not leaving.”

He comes closer. The tips of his snakeskin boots touch my sneakers. “I won’t ask twice. If you’re not gone by the end of the week. I’m coming for you.”

“Ooh, I’m so scared. Trembling.” I roll my eyes at him and turn. But I don’t make it two steps before his large, tan hand covered in ink jerks me around. “You don’t know who your messing with.”

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“Funny, that’s the same thing Edge said. Then he hooked me up with a new ride.”

Tarak’s nostrils flare. “Damn, Mouse. You must be hiding the sweetest pussy somewhere under skin and bones.”

My hand cracks across his bruised face. He grabs it, leaning so close, his breath kisses my lips. “Get lost.”

His eyes are a black hole filled with nothing but contempt. I swallow hard. Making enemies with him is hardly how I envisioned the start of my new life. But I won’t be cowed into leaving. Not when I’ve come so far. I decide to change tactics. Leaning closer, my breath lands back on his lips. “Why? Why do you hate me? We’ve hardly met...”

He closes his eyes. “I know enough... see enough...,” he swallows hard, then abruptly turns. With his back to me he calls out, “End of the week.”

I flip him the bird. He can’t really make me leave, can he? I mean he’s just the Prez of an MC. He doesn’t own this town. That’s just TV bullshit, right? He’s nothing but a grown-ass bully.

I sip my coffee, trying to forget how he looked at me like something he wanted to crush.

5

Tarak

I watch her walk away while the smell of her sugary lips still lingers in the air.

She's too much like Mandy. Even her name's similar. I don't trust her. Not one bit. The way Edge looked at her got under my skin. For all I know she could be a plant. A way for him to get eyes and intel on what goes down in my turf. Edge knows I have a penchant for broken little things.

That fucker really likes to stir the pot.

"Tarak?"

I turn, glaring at my second, Indé. "Find out where she lives. Who she is... Everything about her down to her blood type."

He nods, pulls out his cell and starts making calls. It won't take the Royal Bastards long to find out every detail of her life. Our chapters span the States and across Europe. Soon, we will be the biggest syndicate on the globe. Fuck the Cartels. They're too busy fighting one another to grab the ultimate power of a unified global network. That's what we have in the Royal Bastards. The pandemic just further cemented our power. While governments wrung their hands worrying about PPE and the economy, we moved the merchandise and fed the hungry by partnering with the farmers. We are the ones who stepped up and saved lives. No one forgot either. This new girl is about to wish she never crossed my path. I don't want her traveling down

my road.

I wave my guys ahead. “I’ll meet you at Church in thirty.” I stop in the florist three doors from the café and pick up Mandy’s favorite. Pink orchids and white hydrangeas.

With the flowers wrapped and under my arm, I navigate the streets until I rise higher above the town. I throttle down, the engine revs as the altitude increases. There high above town, under a tree I nurtured until its roots grew, is a small cross bearing only her name.

I take off my helmet, hanging it off the edge of the handlebars.

“Babe.”

Kneeling in the dirt, I press my hands into my eyes, willing the salty tears back. I lay the flowers on the ground. “Damn, girl. I wanted to die with you. I miss you so much.”

I press my palms flat on the ground, trying to feel her through the layers of rock and soil separating us. “Sometimes I think I hear you. You tell me to let go and move on. But I just can’t, babe. You were it for me.”

I stay here at my love’s final resting place until the sun singes my skin. “I love you. I’ll be back soon, babe. Wait for me. Don’t go falling in love while you’re in heaven.” I kiss two fingers then trace it over the cross.

I have Club business to attend to now. Things are getting messy. Now that some semblance of normal is back, every MC, street gang, and cartel wants a piece of the action. The latest hot commodity is blood plasma from recovered patients. That geek fuck might’ve saved the world, but his antibodies are made in a lab. There’s nothing

like the real thing especially since the cost of mass production is high. But no one wants to donate. The survivors are scared shitless. The black market is ready to supply the demand, but first they need to find the survivors and take their blood like vampires. The Royal Bastards are voting on it. Not just us either. All the Chapters. If we're in, we're in. But if we vote it down, someone else will fill that void and that's the problem. I'd rather it be us. At least we live by a code. Sure, I'd take the plasma, willing or not but I wouldn't kill for it. They are survivors of something, who would we be to take their life for it?

I turn down the dirt road at the base of the mountain that leads to our Clubhouse. Protected by chain link and barbwire and tricked out with the latest surveillance equipment, it's a fortress. The back of our property is the black, rugged terrain of the mountain's base. The rest of the land is flat in all directions. No one can sneak up on us in our compound, During the outbreak, we let people pitch tents on our lands after being swabbed. Our people don't fear us, they know we protect them from everything.

My sister, Regan, is out front tending the garden. She made us haul logs and soil for hours. But her garden kept us fed with fresh, organic fruits and vegetables. Regan moved in during COVID and never left. It's a real pain in the ass having your little sister constantly underfoot. Especially when she's hot and curvy. I've planted my fist in more than one brother's face for staring too long. Regan ain't no sweetbutt. She's off-limits. When we host other Chapters, I've locked her in her room more than once. I can't be distracted or get into fights with my brothers. It ain't good for my image as Prez.

"What are you growing now?" I plant my hands on my hips, noticing an addition to the garden.

"Herbs."

“Hemp?”

She shakes her head.

“At least plant some shit we can make money off of.”

She giggles. “All this kept us alive.”

“I know.”

“What’s wrong? Besides, the obvious. Who did you get into it with now?”

“Who else.”

Her spine stiffens. “Edge?”

I nod, looking away.

“She wouldn’t want this. You need to let it go.” Regan places a hand on my arm.

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“I can’t. I’ve tried.”

“Have you?” I shrug off her touch. She sighs. “They’re all waiting inside for you to make the vote.”

My brow lifts. “If you had a seat at the table, what would yours be?”

She shrugs. “I see both sides.”

“Me, too.”

“You’ll do the right thing, Tarak. You always do. Even when the right thing is the wrong thing.”

“Thanks, for the vote of confidence, sis.”

“Anytime.”

“You didn’t cause any trouble when I was gone, did ya’?”

“Not as much as you did.”

“He had it coming.”

“So, you decided to waltz down to the Triple XXX and just walk in?”

“I was in the mood for some tits and ass,” I shrug, grinning like a mother fucker.

“Oh yeah? Did you get any?” The memory of how that girl stood before me in her dirty jeans and thin T-shirt runs through my head. Her eyes returned fire. Her tiny fists were balled. She was beautiful in that moment. Her defiance stirred my blood. She also stirred Edge’s. Her little-bitty tits and no ass didn’t matter. All that mattered in that moment when she baited me was making her beg for my touch.

I force my lips into a wry grin. “Of course, I did.”

“Slut.”

Shrugging, I bend down to kiss her cheek, then head into the clubhouse. My men dip their heads as I walk past. “It’s time for church!” I call out, round the corner and push the heavy double oak doors leading to the inner sanctum open.

Two dozen eyes question me as I enter the room. Taking my seat at the head of the table, I pick up the oak gavel, slamming it down.

“Today’s vote will be on the harvesting and distribution of antibody plasma on the black market. All those in favor say ‘aye’.”

No one speaks.

“Fine. I’ll vote first. Aye.” Brows lift. I grin like a mother-fo. “What? You didn’t think this Apache had the balls for it? Either it’s us or the Scorpions.” One by one, my men follow my vote for aye. I slam the gavel down. “It’s done. I’ll call the rest of the chapters and report our vote. The entire MC has to decide. But the New Mexico Chapter is in.”

Slamming my chair back, I head to my office shutting the door. Pinching the bridge of my nose, I wonder what in the heck I just got the Club into. Hell. I hate taking shit from survivors. They earned their right to live but the world is still a hard and bitter

place sometimes. I'm the best bad guy out there. At least that's what I keep telling myself.

Sinking down in my chair, I open my desk draw choosing a new burner. The MC runs just about everything in this part of the state and it burns the ass of some up and coming federal agent, Kinkaid. The man has a friggin' hard-on for me. My phones are tapped, drones fly overhead. Last time one came close, I took out my rifle, shooting it down. If Kinkaid knew the call I just made, he'd have my ass in a federal prison past eternity.

I decide to call New Orleans first. Then New York. I'm still pissed at F.O.C.U.S. for that stunt at the Triple XXX. He has some crazy ass idea that he could triple profits by circulating women from different clubs. He thinks men get tired of staring at the same pair of tits on a stage and thought by having women do two-week stints, rotating them around strip joints would keep the customers coming and spending more. The Club spread us a bit thin these past few years, giving more than taking and keeping our people fed and their bills paid. Now we need to replenish our cash reserves. Plasma and pussy are better than ways the other MC's make cash. At least that's how I'm living with my choices.

"Jameson."

"Tarak."

"We just took the vote. We're in." He breathes hard through the phone.

"It's an ugly business."

"You still have your contacts in Hong Kong?"

"I do. Bastards."

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“If it’s not us, others will move in.”

“I know, brother. I’ll take a vote here and report up the chain. Compton was a no. So was Dallas.”

“Shit.”

“Gerard wants a meet in Vegas. All the Chapter Prez’s. This decision is too big not to have a council meet on.”

“When is he thinking?”

“Three days.”

“Well I guess I better go pack then. See you there?”

“You will, brother.”

I toss the burner in the trash and stand. I need coffee with a splash of bourbon. Maybe two. Maybe, I’ve gone soft. Maybe I need to return to my roots, clear my head and become the Apache warrior within me.

I walk back out to the main room, stopping short at the sight of the men from Creed—Smith, and Rog, at my bar. “Shit. I forgot you were still here.”

“We wanted to see how the vote went.”

“We are in, but the rest of the chapters are still voting. It will be all or nothing. Globally.”

Smith’s jaw clenches. “We’re not down with that, brotha. This will impact our alliance.”

I nod. “If it’s not us, it’ll be the Scorpions. At least we have a code. I don’t want to do it But at least we’ll handle it with the least amount of violence.”

“So fucked up,” Roger, breathes. “My wife won’t like it.”

“I’m glad I don’t have one.” But as soon as I speak the words, I know it’s a lie. I almost had one. Mandy...

“Roque’s woman had it. He’s gonna go berserk. You want a war with the Salvatore Syndicate?”

“I have no choice!” I roar, kicking a chair over. The two men immediately stand. “Look, I don’t want a war with anyone but my back’s up against a wall here.” The three of them eye me while I pace across the room with clenched fists. The decision isn’t sitting right with me either. But the survival of the entire human race is on the line. In my head I hear Mandy’s sweet voice. “If you lose your humanity, humans are already extinct...”

I stroke my chin, “Maybe I’ll call Salvatore myself. Explain the situation.”

“I’ll arrange something.” Roger gets up. “We’re heading back north.”

“Wait. I’ll ride with you. I’m heading to Vegas to meet with Gerard.”

“Boys!” I bellow to my men still at church. “It’s time to ride!”

I pack a small roll bag and head out. “Sis, you better be good while I’m gone. Don’t leave the compound. I mean it. Shit is about to go south.”

Regan is still bent over her garden. “I’ll do as I please.”

“Regan,” I warn.

Her eyes roll. “You men, think you run the world.”

“We do.”

“Don’t. We live outside of Santa Fe. The most exciting thing going down is our cousin’s Quinceanera next month..

“Shit, I had forgotten about that.”

“We’re hosting, idiot.”

“Here?”

“No. We’re closing down Main Street since she invited the whole town.”

“Security is gonna be fucked.”

She raises a gardening tool, “Sorry?”

I wave it off, “Add it to the rest of things on my plate that I need to deal with.”

“I’d help you if I could, but I’m kinda busy.” She winks, lifts the hose, and squirts me. “Oops.”

“You’re gonna pay for that,” I growl, stalking forward. Instead of backing off she presses the nozzle down on full blast.

I charge.

Squealing, she runs back while keeping the hose on me, but I outweigh her by a hundred pounds. I grab the hose in one hand, bending it in half cutting off the water. “I’d pay you back but all I’d be doing is giving the boys a show.” I nod to her white T-shirt.

She shrugs. “Not sorry. That’s payback.”

“For what?”

“The vote.”

“Spying again?”

“I have my sources.”

I shake my head. “If you sleep with any of the guys, I’ll cut their balls off myself and lock you back in your room.”

“Please. As if any of your blind sheep interest me.”

“Good. It better stay that way,” I grit out. “I need to change now, thanks a lot sis.” Her laugh follows me. Pausing, midstride, I turn. Regan has always been a bit wild, a bit of a troublemaker. And she always seems to find a way to insert herself in Club business.

“Actually, little sis you could help out while I’m gone. Make up for being such a brat.”

“Oh?”

“I have a job for you. There’s a new girl in town. I told her to be gone by Friday. Make sure she is.”

“What did she do.”

“Piss me off.”

“Obviously.” Regan’s eye’s light up. “Did you...?”

“Hell, no. She disgusts me.”

“Uh-huh.” You know what I think?

“No. But that won’t stop you from telling me.” I place my hands on my hips.

“I think you’re afraid of her.”

“Mouse?” I laugh, heartily. “That’s funny.”

“Mouse? It is funny. Don’t worry, I’ll make sure she’s gone.”

“Regan,” I bite out. “Don’t get yourself involved. She’s a spy for Edge.”

That finally snaps my sister to attention. “I’ll find out everything I can on the girl.” Her eyes are fire as she picks up a shovel and slams it down hard into the Earth.

“Good. I knew I could count on you.”

6

Amber

Three days later...

“You’re good with him.”

“Thanks. He’s amazing.”

We both turn our heads. Evan is busy at his easel painting. He has natural talent and many of his pieces hang in oak frames around the room.

“I knew you were the right fit. My family thought it was crazy to hire you, without meeting you in person. But I just had a gut feeling you were the right person.”

“That’s how I felt, too.”

“What’s wrong? I thought you liked it here?”

“It’s only been three days... but yes. I’m sure I’m staying.”

“Then why are you twisting the ends of your shirt and biting your lip. And every time a bike goes by, you wring your hands.”

I blow a lock of hair off my face. “I’d never win big in Vegas, eh?”

“Nope.”

“Ugh, it’s nothing. Just some dumb-ass biker giving me a hard time.”

“Tell me about it. I was married to one.”

“Was he a Royal Bastard?”

“Totally.” We look at each other and laugh. “I like you Amber, not just as Evan’s para. I was hoping we could be friends. And by the way—I’m dying to get you into my salon. I’m not into girls, but I know you’ve caught me staring.”

My face heats because I have caught Jenny looking at me when she thought I didn’t notice.

“I didn’t want to impose but my ends... I tried to dye them myself...”

“Let me see.”

My hands undo the sloppy bun on top my head.

She lifts a lock of my hair. “I can work with this.”

“Really?”

“Please. You would not believe what people did to themselves during the pandemic when salons were closed. I was booked solid for a year.”

“I’ll bet,” I smile.

“Evan’s dad is taking him for tacos later. Swing by my salon, I’ll stay open for you.”

“I couldn’t impose...”

“Is it about money? I’m offering.”

“No. It’s not that. I can pay...I just... can you do more than hair? Would it be weird?”

“What did you have in mind?”

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I swallow thickly. “I don’t want to be unseen anymore. People look through me, not at me.”

“I can, do... more. But Amber, I can’t fix what’s in here.” The tip of her finger brushes my chest. It’s not sexual and yet it is...

She shrugs. “I do kinda go both ways. There’s something about you... a frailty layered over great strength. It’s like you can’t decide which one to wear.”

“Are you a mind reader?”

“It’s the Native American in me. My great-grandmother was a seer.”

“Wow. That’s beyond impressive.”

“My half-brother insists we connect with the land and our heritage. Once a month we go to the reservation in the mountains... we smoke pipes, set up a sweat lodge as a way to keep our culture alive.”

“I wish I had something like that. My family isn’t into culture or religion.”

“Maybe I’ll take you with me next time we go.”

“I’d like that.”

“Are you coming by later?”

I nod.

“Good. Have a good day with my boy. Open Instagram. Find a few looks you might want to try. And when my Royal Bastard of an ex swings by, give him the bird for me.”

“Yeah, ok.” I roll my eyes. I smile as she kisses Evan on his head before she leaves for work.

* * *

“You ready?”

I nod, anxious to see my big reveal. Jenny spent hours, plucking, exfoliating, and putting some weird cream on my face. Then she artfully raised her shears to my long locks, “promising not to cut too much.”

I held my breath as she applied strong smelling dye to my hair, but she swore I’d look “like a desert rose in full bloom,” by the time she’s done.

Neither of us speak as she wheels me around to face the mirror.

“How is this possible? You did this just with make-up and hair dye?”

“What can I say, I’m good. Right?”

My tongue is stuck to the roof of my mouth. Gone is the plain, brown mouse girl with pale skin and muddy eyes. In her place is a stunning brunette with caramel highlights and light pink tipped ends. My eyes are wide and lined with pink and black liner. My lashes are long and full. She put a light tanner and coat of blush on my cheeks.

“All I need to do now is gain twenty pounds.”

“That won’t be hard, girl. Just stop at Tommy’s Tacos on your way home every night. Everything is deep-fried and the avocado guac is homemade.”

“Yum.”

“Are you ready to tell me about this biker giving you a hard time?”

I shrug. “He hates me. For no reason either.”

“Is he a Royal Bastard?”

I nod. “Tarak.”

The brush stills in her hand. “Tarak?!Girl, what did you do to piss off the Desert King?”

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“Desert King?” My mouth tips down. “He’s just a bully.”

“He saved this town. Kept us fed, protected, and loved. I’d do anything for the man. Be careful what you say about him. He’s beloved here.”

“Great. I guess I should just pack up and leave like he asked.”

“He must have a reason if he asked you to do that.”

“Nope. Not one. He’s just an arrogant prick.”

“They all are. But at least Tarak has a big heart. That’s what makes him different than the rest of the MC’s. He’s a good Prez.”

“If you say so. My first impression of him was that he was just a big baby.”

“Where did you meet?”

“At the Triple XXX outside of Albuquerque...”

“What?” She guffaws. “This is some story...”

“He got into some weird fight club match with Edge.”

“You were with Edge.”

“No... well, kind of... maybe?”

“That explains it. Edge is his nemesis. The two of them are huge rivals.”

“Ah, dueling MC’s and all that.”

“No. It was Mandy.”

“Who’s that?”

“Tarak’s fiancé. She dated them both. Left Edge for Tarak.”

“She dated them both?”

“Lucky girl, right? But she’s not she died.”

“That’s terrible. Was it during the pandemic?”

“Before. They fought over her. Edge went crazy with jealousy. Tarak was on a run north with the MC and Edge took advantage. He showed up at her house. The story gets crazy... some say she cheated on Tarak with Edge. The best guesses are she was filled with shame, left Edge in bed and took off in her truck. It was late, dark and she was going well over a hundred miles an hour. There was alcohol in her system—the tracks left on the road suggested she swerved trying to avoid something and lost control. The truck flipped and rolled killing her. Tarak hit the roof. There was an all-out brawl at her funeral when Edge showed up. They started shouting at each other and then Edge dropped the bomb that she was leaving Tarak to get back with him. He told Tarak that she had been with him before the accident. Tarak went loco on his ass.”

“I’ll bet. Wow. No wonder they beat each other up again at the Triple XXX. But what do I have to do with any of it? Why does Tarak hate me? I only met Edge twice.”
What I don’t say is how his kiss made me feel or the fact that I owe him three.

“Probably because you resemble her a bit.”

“What? Me? Now, that’s crazy. There’s no way I resemble a girl two men like that would ever go to war over.”

“She was petite like you. Brunette... but she was tan you are—”

“Tell me about it. I know I’m pale as shit.”

“You want a self-tanner.”

My nose wrinkles. “No. I’ll work on it the old-fashioned way.”

“You’ll fry.”

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“Probably. Anyway, can you show me how to apply all this stuff?”

Ten minutes and two-hundred-dollars later, I’m out the door. A light wind blows back my new hair. I find Tommy’s Tacos, placing an order to go. The bag swings from my hands as I navigate the streets back to my rental.

The complex is eerily quiet. Not that I’ve really bothered to make friends or meet people. But it’s just past dusk and there’s no lights on. Only a few cars sit, parked around the back of the building.

Clutching my takeout bag to my chest, I insert the key into the lock. My boxes and bags are creepy lumps sitting in the dark.

Instinctively, I flip the light switch. But something’s off. There’s an oppressive silence. The same silence that greeted me before I even stepped foot in here. Someone’s been here. My things are tossed about. Bags I never opened are untied, their contents in piles.

But my door was locked? I grab a candlestick, clutching it tight. With my back to the wall, I inch around the corner, trying to peer into the small bedroom.

“What the fuck?” I hiss. I should be afraid, instead I’m enraged. I charge forward, raising my weapon. She spins, holding a small gun. She’s in my bed with her boots on. A glass of my wine sits on the nightstand with the stain of her deep pink lips around the rim.

“You interrupted. I was just getting to the good part where you had crazy sex dreams

about your male nurse in Tampa.”

My cheeks heat. “That’s private!”

“Not anymore. You’re a damn good writer. Your talents are wasted in your diary.”

She’s crazy.

A crazy, beautiful woman. She lights a blunt, bringing it to her lips. Each of her fingers are covered in stacked rings. Beaded and leather bracelets cuff both her wrists.

“What do you want?”

“You gone.”

“And he sent you to make me?” I roll my eyes. The woman is almost as tiny as me.

“Can we talk about this?”

“No.” She exhales, flipping the page of my purple book of secrets. She lays her blunt down on the small table next to the bed.

“Are you really going to shoot me?”

“Maybe.”

“Bullshit.” I lunge, catapulting myself on the bed. We fight over my book. She drops her gun in an effort to grab it with her other hand. We roll and roll, kicking, panting, punching.

She lands on top of me. Grabs my wrists and pins them above my head. Her knee presses down on me. I bite my lip. The pressure feels good.

“You like that?”

“No.” I swallow hard, feeling my nipples straining. She bends down, sniffing my neck.

“You smell like desperation.”

I buck, trying to get her off me, but I have nothing. I need to start weight training.

She moves her mouth to my lips. “If you tell, anyone about this, I will kill you.”

Her soft lips land on mine. She moves, grinding her mound against my jeans. I’m not into women but just being touched and seduced feels so damn good. The feel of a warm hand and a mouth on me has me craving for sex, affection, and intimacy.

It’s over just as abruptly as it started. “I’m not into women either.”

“Then what the hell was that?” I wipe her kiss off my mouth with the back of my hand.

“I’m high. You look sexy as fuck and the man I want is still in love with a dead girl.”

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“I have food and a half bottle of wine?”

She gets off me. “We’re not friends. He wants you gone. So, get gone. I’ll give you until Sunday.”

“Or what? You’ll jump me again?”

“Please. You looked good but your kiss is boring as fuck.”

“Really? Tell Tarak, Edge didn’t think so.” I smile smugly, knowing how much Tarak hates Edge.

“What?” Her head snaps up. Murder is back in her eyes. She picks up her gun. Looks like I hit her neve instead of his.

“Are you his ex or something?”

“Or something.” She bares her tiny, perfect teeth at me. “I don’t know who the fuck you are, horny COVID girl. But I need you to blow out of town as quickly as you came in. Don’t make trouble for my brother and me. If you mess with us, we’ll take you out to the desert and let it decide your fate.”

“You’re his sister?”

I study her closer. Her skin has the same bronze gold brown color, her eyes aren’t as dark, but the strong bone structure in her face is similar but softer at the cheek. “My brother hates you and I can see why.”

“You can?”

“You’re a vixen. A seductress. Even I wanted a taste and I’m straight as the arrows my ancestors used in battle.”

“Me a seductress?” I collapse on the bed, laughing until tears spring from my eyes. “Bitch, please. These inverted tits and boney ass can’t seduce shit.”

She slaps me hard across the face. “Sunday. You, Gone. Get it?”

“Or what?” I spit, grabbing her hair hard. She slaps me again and I punch her in the stomach. She rolls off me to the floor. “Make it Saturday. And when I come back it won’t be just be. I’ll have the Royal Bastards with me.” She slams the door. The cheap windows rattle.

“I’m calling the police on your ass!” I scream after her, already hunting for my cell.

The door flies back open. “Do it. They’ll have a good laugh. My name’s Regan Cassadore. Make sure you tell Greg that when he answers dispatch.”

With the phone pressed to my ear, I make the call, calling her bluff.

“Local dispatch is this an emergency?”

“Yes. I-I was assaulted by an intruder in my apartment.”

“Are they still there?”

“She... just left.”

“She?”

“Regan. Regan Cassadore.”

“Is this the brown mouse?”

“What?!”

“You have till Friday.”

The call ends.

She laughs from the open door. “My brother’s the king. You think the cops will help you when my brother protected them all? Kept their families fed and safe?”

She must be talking about the pandemic. Jenny filled me in on some of what had happened here. This mountain town tucked away in the desert was surrounded by Tarak and his knights riding their horses made of chrome.

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“Unbelievable.” I mutter, crossing the floor and slamming the door shut. I slip the chain lock in place and try not to cry.

I sit alone on an empty box feeling the vast loneliness of my life wash over me. Some fresh start. I should just go back home. At least I was loved there.

My cheek’s swelling. I get up, eyeing myself in the mirror. My almost beautiful face is a mess of smeared makeup and wild bed hair. It was just a mask. Underneath I feel ugly. Ugly, mousy me.

“Shit!” I kick a box over. “Arghhh!” I sweep an arm out, knocking all the picture frames over I had started to set out. Picking up my forgotten about food. I reheat it in the microwave, drink the rest of my wine straight from the bottle and decide. Will I run back into my hole and hide? Or can I make a stand against that weird beautiful bitch and her clan of bastards? Pacing around the two small rooms, I search my heart for the answer when my eyes land on deep purple. Twisted in the sheets are my words. The ones I wrote down when I was at the most vulnerable point in my life.

Sinking down, I open the page she had folded over.

I’ve been called many names. But survivor was never one of them. I’m determined to add it to the top of the list. I’ve been depressed and lost for so long that when I first got sick, part of me was relieved. Relieved to maybe just let go. But now that I’ve survived and am off the respirator, all I crave is to bust out of these sterile walls and fly free. I’ve wasted all the good days. I wish I could take them back. Countless sunny days filled with blue skies that I took for granted, too lost inside my own spinning globe of self-pity to realize I had the world in my hands the whole time.

I want a bad romance and then a great one. I want a life filled with purpose and meaning not one where you just drift through. I want to lift my face to the brightest sunny day and not waste it.

Dan was on third shift last night. I blushed when he held the cool, damp cloth over my heated skin. The fever was coming back despite my meds and he thought that he was helping. Instead he only made me hotter. I was moaning in pain. So much pain, and when he squeezed the cloth, letting the cool water fall on my skin and run down my naked breasts under my thin, cotton gown, I almost came off the bed. He thinks it's all the virus, but I have the hots for him. My thighs were sticky and wet. I swear he knew what he was about. Through his mask and protective glasses, I saw the wicked gleam in his eyes when he asked, "What can I do to make you feel better?"

His scrubs were stretched tight over his biceps. My mouth was dry. He fed me ice chips and I ached to bite down on his gloved finger. Even through all his protective gear, I could see he was hot and bothered too.

"Damn, baby, test negative." The plea fell from his sexy lips.

I sighed, feeling my insides combust. I was covered in sweat and lust. When he placed the last ice chip in my mouth, I sucked on the tip of his gloved finger...

Beep. Beep. Beep. My IV drip was out, the machine was making noises. I was all alone. Did I pass out? Fall asleep?

Dan was nowhere to be seen. Did it happen? Was it the drugs? The fever? The virus? The doctors had said other patients were having vivid hallucinations. I chalked it up to that. But then the day I was discharged when Dan wheeled me down the halls through the cheers and clapping of his peers, he bent low against my ear, "I knew you'd test negative baby. I'll hit you up."

Boy did I want him to do just that. But Dan forgot about me. Or maybe he just met someone else. Either way he gave me a glimpse of all the passion in life I had been missing.

No wonder Regan jumped me. My own words make me feel horny. I fan myself, grab an ice water and make a plan. I'm not going back when I've done so much to move forward.

I stuff my things back into bags and boxes, take a lukewarm shower, and stare out at the stars from the window by the bed. Tomorrow the sun will rise, and I will lift my face to the new sunny day just like I promised myself, I would.

7

Tarak

The taste of bitter ash fills my mouth. I swallow hard, fueled by anger and the need to crush Edge. The only reason why I haven't killed him yet is that if I did, his soul would reunite with hers first. Picturing the two of them in eternity together burns my ass just as much as knowing he had her once on Earth.

I slow my bike down as we approach the spot in the road where Mandy lost control. "What happened that night, babe? 'Cause I know you'd never cheat on me." The wind carries my question but as always, she never answers. I've been angry at God for so long, maybe he won't let her answer even if she could. I've been looking for signs everywhere since she passed, knowing our love was so strong that surely, she'd find a way to let me know existence goes on. But I've had nothing from heaven. No signs. No message.

I wave the men riding with me to go ahead, while I pull off by the wood cross set in the dirt.

I say a prayer. People might think men like me don't pray but they wouldn't know shit. I don't pray for myself but for her, my family, my men...I'm their desert king and it's my duty to ensure their safety at all costs.

I know who were infected in my town, and I won't let anyone touch them or their precious plasma. If they won't to give it that's one thing but I won't have them terrorized by the Bloody Scorpions or the Juarez Cartel just South of the border.

“See ya’ on the flipside, babe.” With that I roar off. There’s peace on the road. In the humble drone of the engine, in cutting through the air so fast it’s almost like flying. Feeling connected to nature, to the Earth is in my blood. That’s why we’re sleeping under the stars tonight. My men got used to it when we policed the coast during the pandemic. We packed a roll bag like modern day cowboys. We filled it with jerky, water, and cigarettes. I always bring my guitar, strapping the case to the frame of my bike in the back.

There’s nothing like spending a night out under the stars to cleanse your soul. We ride until sundown then I pull off down a dirt road and start the climb.

“What the fuck?” Rog pulls parallel with me.

I don’t stop but gesture him to keep moving forward. We climb the side of the mountain until the sun dips down and a few stars start peering from beneath the veil between Earth and the heavens.

Finally pulling over, I wipe the dirt and sweat from the road off my face. “Surprise.” I taunt the Creed MC brothers. “You wanted to ride with us. We are hardcore motherfo’s. Our bed for the evening,” I gesture to the mouth of a small cave to my left.”

“Uh-uh. No way. I’m out,” Rog, growls.

“What’s wrong, Rog? No thousand thread count sheets?”

I clap a hand on his shoulder. “Stay. We’ll smoke a peace pip. Have a few...” I enter the mouth of the cave and open the trunks I leave stocked with my things. I take out extra sleeping bags, food, and start making a fire.

“Gimme that,” he growls. Taking the kindling from me.

“Rog, I’m Indian. I think I know how to make fire.”

“Yeah? Well, I’m better at it.”

I put Smith and Indé in charge of cooking while I prep the sweat lodge. Indé passes me what I need tonight. What I came here for. It was just supposed to be me on a voyage of truth and self-discovery, but Club business often mixes with mine. This sacred spot of reflection and heritage is on the way to Vegas. In the cave, we keep the drums, the tepee, emergency food and anti-venom. But what Indé rolled in the blunt is a secret recipe. We added shit to it over the years, but the hallucinations and visions are strong when mixed with the ancient Apache incantations. I light the tip of the blunt, breathing deep. After the tent is up, I wait for the rocks I added to the fire to burn for twenty minutes.

“What the fuck? Are you auditioning for me?” F.O.C.U.S. taunts as I take my shirt off.

I flex my guns, winking at him. “How much would you get for me?” I shuck my jeans off.

“Damn. For a practical pure-bred like you? Ten grand.”

“A night?”

“A half hour.”

“Get out.”

“There’s a bunch of rich housewives in NYC.”

“I’ll catch up with you on the road. I was just fucking with you. You don’t need to

camp here with me. I just need to do this tonight. It was... I can't talk about it."

"I'll stay to watch your back."

"No." I turn to Indé. Stay at the base of the canyon. "I need to be alone. You know why."

"Well, thank fuck. I'll be outside of Los Lunas." They sit, around the fire and enjoy a few beers. They know what I want but will stay for a while to keep me company. I nod to Indé who starts the drum. Then I strip from my boxers, hearing Rog and Smith swear at the sight of my bare ass.

A grin cuts across my face. I'm already feeling a bit high. I cover myself with a homemade buckskin cloth. Then pour water on the hot stones I had placed in the tent using tools I keep here.

I'm a man on a mission tonight. And if Mandy's in the stars somewhere, I know she'll come back down to Earth and join me tonight.

8

Amber

Seven hours earlier...

The visor on my ball cap is pulled low over my eyes. Screw Tarak. I've battled worse and won. Armed with a to-go coffee and a few housing apps, I navigate the streets looking for a new place to land.

I slow in front of the third run-down housing complex. "Nope." The balance in my checking account has triple zeros. The thought of spending all that money on rent just doesn't sit right with me. I could afford the luxury, gated community in downtown Santa Fe, but doubt the sleek expensive cars would like this old truck parked next to them.

Sighing, I ditch the rentals and pull up a new search for homes instead. Scrolling past the first few pictures, I save a few that look decent and re-route my nav app.

The drive takes me further away from town and deeper into the shadows cast by the mountains.

I slow, passing by the first house for rent. It had dirt for a yard, a rusted mailbox, and piles of broken lawn furniture stacked by the garage.

"Florida is looking pretty good right now." My jeans are stuck to my sweaty butt, but I don't dare open the window out of fear of the desert dust. The truck has AC but

barely any cool air blows out.

I drive aimlessly for a while, basically just exploring and blasting old country songs. I drive further northwest, intrigued by the black shadows of the mountain range. A for sale sign sits at the end of a dirt drive. “Fuck it,” I turn down and follow the windy, dusty road.

“Whoa.”

I put the truck in park. Who knew I’d find paradise here? A few trees grow taller than the roof. There’s brush, greenery, a rock wall. There’s peace.

It’s a home made of wood instead of the stucco that’s so popular. It’s a wood cabin of sorts but has two levels. The wood is a rich, red brown. I grab a handkerchief and tie it around my nose and mouth before stepping out of the truck.

I spin in a circle. There are mountains everywhere. Behind me, in front of me—to the side. The range behind the house is in the distance, nothing but desert brush and sloping hills in-between. There’s no neighbors. No houses in view, just open land, and sky. I cautiously walk around back. There is a hot tub, an outdoor fireplace with a few chairs and nothing but view for miles. It’s a flat view of the ends of the Earth with nothing but desert and sky for company.

I tentatively step up to the porch that wraps around the house, press my nose to the glass window and look inside. The wide-plank floors are inviting, the kitchen has stainless steel and granite counters.

Taking out my phone, I Google the address and find the listing. It’s \$325,000. I have no job I can show on paper and no way to qualify for a mortgage that large. But what I do have is \$250,000. Everything my father left me for college. I never touched it. Thought using that for a piece of paper with words on it seemed like a waste.

Biting my lip, I tap the number for the realtor on the listing. It's about time this mouse grew some balls.

"Hello?"

"Hi, I'm at your listing at 2 Camino Tres..."

"Yes?"

"I'd like to make a cash offer."

"Is this a prank?"

I laugh softly. "Not quite. But my best and final is \$250k. No inspection. Cash. Close on Monday."

"Well, hells bells, sweetheart. You are a real ball-buster," he replies in a heavy Texan type accent.

I grin. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"I'll dial the inheritor. The previous owner moved on. Died in a nursing home in Florida a few years back. The property's been maintained by the son who comes by a few times a year. The roof is solid. The structure sound. I can't vouch for much more than that. It's low but I'll see what I can do. I'll need proof of funds."

"Not a problem. I'll screenshot my bank balance. You'll see it's every penny I have."

He whistles low.

"I just fell in love. What can I say? When you know. You know."

“Amen to that. I’ll ring you back, doll.”

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My soul feels lighter the more I walk around the yard. It's hot but there's quite a lot of shade under the canopy of the trees. It almost feels as if time stops here and I'm in a bubble. Turning toward the horizon, I half-expect to see cowboys on their mustangs riding with big-brimmed hats through the brush. I feel connected to the Earth here. I feel as if in the quiet spirit of the nature all around me I can be still and listen to my soul, unlock the secrets hiding there and finally find the purpose that's been eluding me. Two-hundred and fifty thousand is cheap when I'd pay any price to feel this way.

The phone rings in my hand. I tap, answering quickly.

"Mouse. It's time to collect."

My heart hammers. My palms sweat. The sound of his low voice skates down my spine.

"Edge."

"I still taste you."

"Mouse must taste good."

"I wonder if your pussy could taste sweeter?"

"You'll never know."

He chuckles low. "I bet you're wet just thinking about my head between your thighs."

“My eyes are rolling.”

“Uh-huh.”

“What do you want?”

“I need you to gather some intel for me...”

“Me? That’s funny.”

“You owe me three, I’m collecting one. Tarak and a few men are riding out this weekend. Find out where and why.”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll just ring his doorbell and get back to you. He threatened me...wants me out of Santa Fe.”

“Are you going to let him run you out?”

“Nope.”

“Good girl,” I hear the pleasure in his voice as he praises me.

“I’ll expect to hear from you by sundown.”

“What? That’s impossible. I can’t—”

“Don’t disappoint me.”

“Or what?”

“I’ll collect much more than a kiss, sugar.” A shudder rips through me. “Or maybe,

you want that? I break girls like you then hand them over to F.O.C.U.S. I have a good side-business going partnering with him. Fresh girls are always a hot commodity and your kiss was the freshest I've had yet." He taunts.

"You'd take me, just to trade me?"

"In a flash, doll. Don't get any crazy notions about me. I told you from the start, I'm no angel."

"And yet you kept saving me."

"Saving you for a purpose. Sunset, doll. I'll be in touch." He ends the call and I'm left breathless and bewildered. I have a small crush on him. Like very tiny. Damn hormones. How else can I explain why the sound of his voice and the remembrance of his kiss makes my heart feel like tripping off a cliff? My nipples are pointy and swollen. Damn. I need to get laid. Repeatedly. I was never one to want sex in my old life but maybe that's because my experiences were all with high school boys who were clueless. While Edge has so much experience it borderline grosses me out.

My phone rings again.

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“Hello.” I’m deflated. Flat. A balloon who just had a pin stuck in it.

“Mystery woman. The house is yours.”

“Seriously?”

“If that screen grab isn’t faked.”

“It’s not.”

“Well then, little lady we have a deal. Get your butt to the lawyer in downtown Santa Fe by noon. He’s expectin’ ya’. I’ll meet you there with the paperwork. If you don’t mind, I’ll represent you and the seller.”

“I don’t mind. But if you play me, I will bust your balls.”

He laughs heartily. My eyes narrow. Edge put me in one hell of a mood. But knowing this slice of heaven is about to have my name stamped all over it helps me feel better. I walk over to the hot tub, inspecting it. It’ll take some work, but it seems to be functional.

I wonder if I can garden here in the shade. Heck, I’ve got a truck now to haul soil. In my mind’s eye—my future takes shape. The future I’m self-creating.

Humming under my breath, I make my way back to the truck. When I reach the main road, I unhook the for-sale sign, taking it down from the post. This bitch is sold.

* * *

My hand is cramped from signing so much paperwork. My bank account is about to be down to a penny, but I feel like a million bucks.

I'm planning on going back to my gloomy rental, piling all my bags and boxes back in the truck and camping out in the yard of my new home this weekend. Jenny will pay me at the end of next week in cash, so I have about eight dollars to use on coffee and tacos until then.

Placing my stack of papers on the seat, I pull out. There are about four cars in front of me waiting for the light. The sound of familiar engines rumble from my left. One by one, six men on bikes zoom across the intersection. The glint of the sun bounces off the chrome, almost blinding me.

My hands clench on the wheel. I didn't miss Tarak's bronze skin and broad shoulders as he raced past.

My fingers tap the wheel. Instead of going straight like I should, I turn right, tailing them. I keep a discreet distance. My tanks on full. Fuck it. I follow them simply because I can. Heck, my new home is in the direction they're going anyway.... Out of town. One of the rider's pulls over to the shoulder as the rest keep going. I sink in my seat, hoping I'm not made. When I pass, it shakes me when I see it's Tarak. The man looks utterly broken. His face is etched in pain. His biceps are two huge bronze works of art, decorated in bright turquoise tattoos. He's too busy staring at a white cross to even pay attention to me gawking as I roll by.

I'm confused. I can't stand the man but I of all people know that every person has a story. His chapters aren't all good ones either. I pull over at an RV park, parking my truck behind a row of campers.

RV's have soared in popularity since COVID. People can travel and see the states while staying in their own traveling hotel room.

Eight minutes later, Tarak races by. I hold my breath, count to fifty, and pull out of my hiding spot.

I follow the men from a distance again. They pass my dirt road, driving between two mountain ranges and enter the Interstate. It's hard to keep my distance and not be caught out. But luckily a few truckers are on the road. I let a Walmart truck slip past me and then one from Costco. A few cars enter the highway.

The sun is getting lower and lower. I won't trail them much longer but maybe if Edge thinks I'm doing what he wants he'll back off until I can make it to my hideaway home. I'll lie and tell him and Tarak I'm going back to Florida. But I do need a new ride. One that isn't stolen or belonging to some pimp from an MC. When the time comes, I'll leave the truck with the keys in it at the Triple X for him to fetch.

Up ahead, I see them pull off down a dirt road. My foot presses the brake. I pull over and wait ten minutes. I'll be caught out for sure with no buffer between me and them. I shake my head at their arrogance. They have no idea the prey has been hunting the predator for over an hour.

Finally, I dare easing back out onto the highway. I turn off past the mile marker, gingerly inching the truck forward. They've already gone past the straight away. The road narrows. Nestled between huge rocks and boulders. My head hits the top off the roof as I go over a huge bump followed by a crater. I need to stop or risk blowing my tires.

I pull over to the side parking the truck parallel to a large cluster of rocks. There's nothing out here. He's up to something. I know it. Maybe if I bust him doing something, I can use it as leverage to get him off my case.

The sun's almost setting. I grab my water bottle and the old flashlight I found in the glove box. I follow the trail, seeing the tire marks from their bikes.

"Bingo," I breathe, hiding behind a tree. Six bikes are lined up, parked against the rocky base of the hillside.

Crouching low, I dart between rocks and clumps of trees until I reach them. They still feel hot to the touch. The low sounds of men laughing floats down from above with a waft of cigarette smoke.

"What are they up to?" This is a weird ass place to have a road break. Biting my lip, I creep forward into the darkness toward where they are.

I creep up the hillside, crouching low and praying no rattlesnakes are near. I recognize Roger stoking a fire. The other men pass out beers while their backs rest against rocks. Bedrolls are spread out.

"What the fuck are they doing?" My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth, my nails scrape into the ground. I try to bite back the moan from escaping but can't. My eyes are glued to Tarak as he takes his shirt off. Next, he unbuckles his belt, shucking off his jeans. He's a warrior. All bronze skin covered in ink... some tattoos—ancient symbols...maybe Apache words inked across his heart. His torso is thick and broad his stomach flat and the V between his groin is deep. His legs are huge and hairless.

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Only in boxer briefs, he erects a tent. A buckskin tent, then uses an iron shovel to pick up rocks that glow from fire and places them inside. Then he carries a gallon of water and pours them over the rocks. I hear the hiss of steam from my perch just below the rise of the hill.

He says something to the men, flashing his white teeth as he turns, peels off his boxers, giving me the sight of his perfectly muscular ass, which is just as bronze as the rest of him. I take out my phone daring to hold it above my head and open the camera app. I rapidly click then bring it down. Tarak disappears inside his makeshift tent and the men roar with laughter.

A drum beats. Another man from his MC taps his palms on a small drum and starts chanting. Tarak's deep voice joins from inside his sweat lodge.

I'm utterly mesmerized. I take out my phone, open the video app and crawl closer. By now the sun is going, a trail of stars glittering like diamonds emerge from the blue/black sky. The hairs on my arms rise. There's something mystical out here. The Earth is still warm from the sun even though it's gone. The drumbeat gets faster as does their chanting in a language I can't understand.

Tarak comes out twenty minutes later, gone are his boxers. Instead he wears a buckskin loincloth. Chanting and dancing around the fire to the beat of the drum, he's magnificent. Sparks from the flame shoot up into the sky. He suddenly stops. Turns his face to the sky and bellows the last line of his verse.

I'm awed. The men are silent. Tarak sits with them and he takes out what looks to be a joint. He smokes it all then goes back inside the tent.

I roll over against the hill breathing hard. I might hate the man, but he's out of this world both in beauty and spirit. He's a warrior but so much more I can barely understand. I'd like to read his book, devouring the chapters all from the safety of my bed. I could sigh over him, crush on him and learn all his secrets without risking any part of myself.

I should go. It's pitch-black behind me and I need to make my way down the hill without falling. The flashlight is in my left hand. But I want to stay. I want to discover more of his secrets.

"Shit," I mutter, noticing the bikers standing. They gather their things preparing to leave. Only Tarak stays behind. I'm so screwed if my truck's spotted. I did park it down from the bikes, parallel with the rocks, tucked neatly under a ledge by the base of the hill. Hopefully, they'll just ride off never looking that way. I'll have to stay here and wait it out.

I turn back over on my stomach, inching closer to the top of the hill. The roar of the bike engines starting up come from below. One by one, their lights shine when they reach the trail to the main road. I'm safe for now.

Tarak's back is to me. I decide to leave my spot and try to follow the rim of the hill to the other side. But the rocks are too much, I end up easing myself lower, climbing down slightly while carefully navigating the rocky terrain in the dark using the light from my cell. Finally, I'm on the front side of the hill and inch back up. But my foot gets caught between two rocks. My cell falls from my hand and I tumble. My hair's in my eyes. My knees are scraped but I'm unhurt. I gingerly look around for my cell only finding it because it's still lit up and tuck it into my pocket. I hear him cursing as he crashes down the mountain to me. I keep my head lowered, hiding behind my curtain of hair.

"Mandy?" He breathes. "Baby? I knew you'd come. You came from the stars

tonight... on our anniversary. What would have been our anniversary.”

I swallow hard, not daring to meet his burning eyes. He leans down, takes my hand, pulling me up. The hair falls from my face but it's so dark, I half hope he won't recognize it.

“Baby,” he breathes, cupping my cheeks as his lips land on mine reverently. He kisses with his whole soul. Light, love, and passion infuse me. Passion meant for someone else. Stolen love that's not mine. But I crave it anyway. I revel in this tender warrior's kiss. I know he's high. I taste it on his tongue. He might be hallucinating I'm his lost love, but he feels too good to quit. Just for one stolen moment, me, mouse gets to know what the word cherished feels like when it washes over you. I kiss him back, my tongue dancing with his under the stars. He moans, angling his hips closer. I feel him straining against my jeans. His loincloth does nothing to stop his body from demanding his love's hips cradle his.

But I'm hardly his love.

I'm just the little brown mouse, still metamorphizing.

I gasp as my legs are swept out from under me as he picks me up, carrying me like the bride he's mourning. We break for air. My heart cracks wide open for his tears to seep in. The strong bones of his cheek press against my softer one. His is wet from tears of joy at the reunion he's having in his head. My heart lurches. I can't do this. As much as I hate how he's bullied me. Belittled me. I can't sink so low to steal his soul like this. It doesn't belong to me. It's hers.

But his hands shake as he sets me down by the fire. His skin is hot to the touch. He's on fire for the woman he thinks I am. My head falls to the side as his lips find my neck. His hands skim down my arms, one wrapping behind my lower back. “Touch me baby. Take me baby, I'm yours. Only you bring this desert king to his knees.” His

plea is soft. If you could put imagery to passion, it's reflected in his eyes as he looks at me.

But I don't dare touch him. His kiss alone is making me wish I was a dead girl; the one he loved. His stolen passion reminds me so much why I need to live.

He groans, taking my mouth hostage. My tears mix with his as he lays me down on the bedroll. His large palm is up my shirt cupping my breast. I lose all thought. I'm lost in his touch. In the way his big, warm hands feel on my skin. I stuff the guilt down until it fades behind the burning need his touch arouses. His hands roam over my skin. He lifts his head, pushes my shirt up to my shoulders and I breathe in hard as his mouth skims my breasts, savoring them both one by one. I clutch the top of his silky head, my eyes moving up to the heavens looking down at us. "I'm sorry," I murmur to the stars looking down. It's one of the most magical, mystical, romantic moments of my life and I stole it.

After my words whispered above. I let go. Completely let go and give all my locked-up passion back to him. My shirt comes off. Pressed skin to skin—we roll. He places me on top of him. His hooded eyes glitter as he watches his own hands palm my tiny breasts, completely covering them. I move my hips against the hardness under his loin cloth. He chuckles low. "My bride. How I've dreamed we'd spend the night here. Just like our ancestors did. I made you a bridal bed. Do you like it?"

He rolls again, hands at my jeans, trying to take them off. I can't let it go this far. Taking this from him would be too cruel. A sin that can't be undone. I stop his hands. "Not yet. Kiss me some more. Cherish me more."

"Anything. Anything you want. I'll always be anything you need." He stares so intently at me; I swear his gaze goes right through me to my soul. I believe him. I shake my head worried at what kind of cocktail of drugs could ever make him believe I'm her. But it's clear he's on it. So, under its spell he's not the Tarak I met. He's the

man who no one else sees. Out here in the wild, he's not an MC Prez. He's just her heart. And she's his. I'm just the stand-in. The unwanted interloper who can't stop taking this moment and wishing it was really hers to have.

He kisses me. Pins me down against the soft down sleeping roll and touches me in long lazy strokes. The feel of his smooth skin contradicts his muscles carved from steel. My hands memorize him, tracing every muscle of his back and biceps. But he's impatient. His hands again go for my jeans. "I need to taste you, baby." His mouth moves down my navel, he looks up wickedly at me and peels my jeans past my hips. My cry echoes across the rocks to the valley below as his tongue parts my folds finding my swollen clit that's starved for a man's touch. I cry for it when it finally happens. I feel like I've stuck my hand in a light socket. I've never felt so alive. So completely alive, and very aware I've overstepped the invisible line I drew back in the sand somewhere.

He doesn't stop. My hand fists in his hair, my hips move up into his decadent touch. I cry out, pant like I'm running a race and approaching the finish line as he adds the touch of his hand to me.

Then I'm weightless, shooting past the stars; soaring high into the sky. "Mandy. Please, baby," he rasps, with all the love in his soul in his eyes. Tears prick my eyes. I can give him this. Give this poor man a stolen memory the way he gave me one.

This time my hands shake as he rolls to his side next to me and my hands reach between us, go under his buckskin cloth, and wrap around him. His eyes shut. He grits his teeth hissing as if I'm causing him great pain. "Don't stop," he begs.

I moan, still feeling the aftershocks of his hands and mouth in me. On me. My breasts are tender and sore from where his mouth pulled and tugged on them. My skin is chafed from his beard. He's marked my body. I'm drunk on his love. Completely jealous of Mandy and disbelieving she cheated on him. His touch is unrivaled.

Unparalleled. I feel for Edge. Two hours ago, I thought he was the king. But now I know better. No wonder Edge hates Tarak. Being a close second is still not number one.

My hands sheath him. He's so hot, he's fire itself. I move up and down by instinct. I haven't done anything like this in years. But that doesn't seem to matter. I wonder if maybe it's been a while for him. Maybe he clung to the ghost of her love and never wavered. He's thick in my hands and I know he's close as he tenses, and his shaft gets even harder if that's even possible. "Mandy. My love. Forever," he promises, grabbing my face for a passionate kiss as he empties himself in my hands in wave after hot wave.

He rips the cloth from his hips, uses it to clean up and curves his naked body around mine. I turn my face to the fire as he spoons me. Tears fall from my eyes. What we shared was beautiful. I never expected his heartbreak to bleed into me, breaking mine into smithereens. I feel so safe. So, loved. He holds me tight. The drugs, the spent passion and the warmth from the fire puts him out. I need to leave; need to sneak away like the love thief I am. But I can't make my body move just yet. I steal more time. More moments not meant to be mine. I know I'll never be with him like this again. The next time we come face to face, he'll look at me like I'm nothing while I'll stare at him with stars in my eyes. It'll be demeaning. Embarrassing and nothing less than I deserve.

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A shooting star streaks overhead. The fire's nothing but glowing embers. The magic of the night won't last much longer. I ease from his arms. He mutters in his sleep protesting. I take a rolled sleeping bag and stuff it in his arms. Deep in slumber, he grumbles but jerks it close. I shove into my jeans, press one last kiss to his lips and murmur my goodbyes.

The trip down is easy since I use the well-marked one, he's used many times before. Halfway down I turn the flashlight on my cell on. When I finally land safely inside the cab of the truck, turning it over, I flip the visor down.

"What the fuck did you do, Amber?" My hair is wild, sexily tousled. My lips are plump, swollen from his kisses. My eyes are wide and full of knowing. A knowledge of what it feels like to taste the passion movies are made of. I don't look like a mouse. I'm all woman full of stolen confidence. But I'll take that. I'll keep that. What happened here tonight, I'll take to the grave with me. Mandy can kick my ghost-ass when it's time for what I did. I flip the visor shut, charge my phone, and carefully drive off. Hopefully, he'll be too hungover and confused to notice the tracks from the truck.

The smell of him clings to my skin. My eyes are on the road, but they don't see anything but him. How he looked as he whispered the words locked in his heart. How his eyes gleamed with ownership as they worshipped my body... I wonder if maybe... somehow, someday he could love me? Love Amber instead of Mandy?

It's a wish I make on a star as I roll down the highway. I slow, finding the dirt road with the broken for sale sign. It seems like days not hours ago, as I drive up to the little log house sheltered by trees.

It's mine in less than forty-eight hours... I pick up a rock, smashing a pane of glass by the backdoor and turn the lock. I'm already a villain. What's breaking and entering compared to the crime of stealing love?

Squinting in the dark, I find the master bath turn on the shower, relieved the water's hot and use someone else's soap to rinse away a touch I still feel.

9

Tarak

A smile curves my lips. I refuse to open my eyes, wanting to savor the moment before it shatters like glass. My mind is out of the fog, but the fog still clings to my brain, like a fine mist. I know reality is just beyond the see-through veil, but I want to stay here in the part of sleep that hovers a breath away between this reality and the next one.

The sun's rays climb above the horizon, brushing my bare back with the first rays of heat. I want the magic of the night to never end. I pull her closer.

My eyes pop open. I'm holding the bedroll Indé never opened.

A thousand swords pierce my heart. The glass shatters. "None of it was real? But I felt you, baby. I know you were here."

My mouth is as dry as the desert basin full of sand. Somehow, I rise and make it over to the cave. Grabbing a bottle of water, I chug half before lifting it high and dousing my face with it. My head pounds. I search my bag for the aspirin I brought and swallow three.

Something's not adding up here. The blunt Indé made was potent as fuck. He probably messed up the recipe. I shut my eyes. I saw her. Touched her. Tasted her... I can still smell her on my skin.

Puzzled, I walk back over to the bedroll finding a long piece of brown hair. I wrap it around my ring finger. It could be Regan's. But I need to cling to something before I lose my mind.

I can't stay here much longer wondering. I just need to keep the gift of the memory from last night and go before the sun climbs higher and the headache I have increases tenfold.

I clean up the campsite and head back down the mountain stopping short at the bottom. Someone else was here. The tire tracks look like the one's from her truck. They're rare. I had bought Mandy a custom set of tires meant for the beach. I was worried she'd skid on sand and had them installed. They're wide and have a certain, unmistakable pattern to their grooves.

"You were here, baby. I knew it." I don't question the how's of it. The Apache always believed in the mystical realm of life and so do I. I get on my bike, following the tracks until they stop at the asphalt road. I feel like I made love to my queen last night. I feel like a man again. No, a warrior. She gave something back to me last night, something I had been missing.

My swagger.

Making love to her always made me feel like a king. I always knew she was looking down, waiting for the time she could return to me. The harvest moon was on the night of our wedding date. I knew the distance of time and space would be close and I was right.

Everyone tells me to move on. But I don't have to. Not when I know how to get her to come to me.

I pause, the powerful bike idling under me. Left, or right? I could catch up with the

guys, but I feel like I went five rounds with Edge. My head pounds. My muscles are sore. Wincing, I pinch the bridge of my nose. I need hot food, hotter coffee, and a cold shower. The drugs still lingering in my system are potent little fucks. Despite, my body feeling like I won a death match, my spirit is strong. I was with my girl last night and that will carry me for a while.

Pulling out, I turn left back toward Santa Fe. I'll lose an hour or so, but I need to feel human again before I head back out on the long, open road.

I'll freshen up, load up on food and let the memories of the night keep me moving forward for a while.

10

Amber

I've never felt so low and yet so high. I slept naked, wrapped in a sheet I found in the dark. I awaken in a home that's almost mine but still belongs to somebody else. The irony isn't lost on me. I have no choice but to put on my old clothes. I race out to the truck. I need to get to the apartment and burn this shirt, these jeans... If only doing that could purge what I've done.

Tarak stamped his name on my heart. His stolen love bit me. I race into the apartment, strip, and take another shower. I'm moving out of here today, putting everything in the truck. If Regan or any other Royal Bastard comes looking, they'll think I'm gone.

I'll avoid town and when I next cross paths with Tarak, hopefully I'll manage to hide the truth from him. I need to be the mouse, not the queen he loved for one, stolen night.

My cell dings with a text:

Sunset came and went, mouse. I don't like being ignored.

I won't betray Tarak. No matter how much he hates me. I tap the phone against my leg. I won't respond. Edge is all empty threats just like Tarak. What will they really do to me anyway? I saw Tarak's soul. The part of him he never shows anyone. He'd never hurt me. His power as the head of his MC is just making people believe he will.

Right?

I dress quickly, put my wet hair in a messy braid all the while ignoring my stomach begging for food.

It takes me thirty minutes to reload the truck. I only signed a month to month lease so fuck it.

I take one last look around making sure I didn't leave any trace of me behind. If Regan comes back, she'll report to Tarak I cleared out.

Tarak is gone so I make a quick food run into town. I stock up on water, soda, bagels and buy an instant coffee maker. I pack everything in the truck, deciding to walk the few blocks to the bakery for my daily fix of fresh-baked muffins and expensive brew.

"Baked blueberry with butter and a tall, dark Colombian with three sugars?"

I nod. "You remember me?"

"Of course. You order the same thing every time."

"I'd like a tall, dark Colombian," somebody behind me sneers. Shit. I know that voice. "We told you to go."

I turn, coming face to face with that she-devil Regan.

"I'm going. After I get my Colombian."

"You better, bitch."

Ignoring her, I roll my eyes and scan my bank app to pay for my food. The girl

behind the counter opens the small window in the plexi-shield to hand me my muffin.

“Thanks.” I smile warmly at her just as Regan snatches my warmed muffin from the worker’s gloved hands.

“Bitch! Give that back,” I scream, lunging at Regan. She holds the bag high above her head. Her teeth gleam white against her deep tan as she grins. My insides are shredded, I’m tired. Guilt laces through every emotion I have. I just want my damn muffin.

She teases me, waving it in the air knowing I can’t reach. I climb up on a chair then stand on top a table, launching myself at her. Her eyes widen seconds before she screams as my body slams into her and we both tumble to the ground.

“What the fuck?” He roars. The door to the café slams open. The bells attached jingling like a drunken Christmas carol.

His warm hand lands on my back his other grips the end of my braid, yanking my head up. The feel of his hand on me is familiar. I lean into his touch wanting more. His eyes. Those eyes that promised me forever hours earlier are filled with nothing but bitter contempt. I quickly look away, too shamed to meet them. His promises weren’t for me anyway. But my damn heart doesn’t want to hear that.

“She started it.”

For a split-second, I glimpse the Tarak I know he hides. His eyes flash with a glimpse of mirth but then it’s gone, and the freezing rain is back.

Regan pushes me off but Tarak keeps his grip on my braid. He yanks down, pushing my chin up.

“You are one dumb, girl.”

My cheeks heat. I am dumb because I know how he tastes; how hot the thick girth of his cock is and what his beard feels like between my thighs. I can't even get angry at him for being a dick. Not after the part I played last night.

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“I just want my food and coffee, okay? Then I’m out.”

He tugs my braid twice, leaning down. “You better. I’m done looking at this scrawny chicken-ass of yours, mouse. Tell Edge, I send my regards.”

“I’m not with him. I already told you this.”

“Oh yeah? Let me see your phone.”

My spine stiffens. He’s all in my phone. Sweaty, half-naked and lost in incantations all in an effort bring back his dead girl. Instead he got me.

“Look. I’m leaving, okay. I’ve already cleared out of Santa Fe, like you asked. Can you just let it go?”

His skin draws tight over the sculpted cheekbones I traced by hand. “He has no conscience. There’s no limit to how far he’ll go. Thinking you—of all people could get hooks into me.” He sneers, looks down his nose at me and I just break. Completely break at his feet.

Tears spring from my eyes. My body shakes. I run out of the bakery no longer wanting my food. Now that I know how sweet his words and touch can be, I want them back. And not as some stand-in. I want them only for me.

11

Tarak

The last thing I expected to witness when I went on a coffee run was that girl launching herself at my sister. She vaulted off that table like a Diva from Monday Night Raw. It was impressive. She even looked sexy for a split-second. If she weren't Edge's rat maybe I'd even like her.

But something about her spooks me. Makes me uneasy. The fragrance of her hair had me leaning in to sniff more.

She's nothing like Mandy and yet they do have a slight resemblance. Mandy flaunted her body and always had her nails and makeup done. But this Amber girl, wears nothing but faint freckles and plain gloss.

"What the fuck was that, Regan?" I turn from my spot at the window where I was watching her flee.

"You were the one who made her cry, not me."

"She was afraid of me. It was in her eyes. She never was before. What did you say to her to make her leave?"

"I didn't say anything. I just kissed her."

"What?" I bark in disbelief.

“Don’t tell a soul, Tarak. Mouse is hot. I don’t know what came over me or how it happened. I was in her apartment lounging on her bed, drinking her wine, leafing through the dirty parts of her diary—when she launched herself at me much like she did now. I don’t know... I saw the broken parts of her. The ones she fixed. She was fired up, it was hot... it just happened.”

“Are you—?”

“No. I don’t think she is either.”

I steal the bag of goodies from her hand, turn and swipe the girl’s coffee.

“Hey!” Regan protests.

“Fuck it. She left and I need it more than you do.” I open the bag, stuffing the buttery muffin into my mouth. I shut my eyes in bliss, washing the muffin down with a hot strong swig of coffee.

“She has good taste.”

“Of course, she does. She kissed me back.”

I almost choke on the muffin. “What? Was this like a full on make out scene?” I frown, faking horror. “I can’t picture my sister in a girl on girl scene. I feel sick.”

“No? How about picturing her with Edge?” Regan’s lips curl.

“I knew it.” I polish off the stolen muffin, throwing the empty bag in the trash. “Make sure she stays gone. I’m heading to Vegas. I’ll be back in a week or two...”

Regan takes the coffee from my hands and helps herself to a long swig. “Be back for

the Quinceanera,” she warns.

“I’ll try. But I can’t make that promise. I gotta go. Be good.” I tweak her nose. I jerk the coffee back from her hands walking slow. The sun is bright as I use my elbow to open the door. The light feels like tiny needles pricking my brain.

“Ugh,” I squeeze my eyes shut, pinching the bridge of my nose then fish around my cut for my shades. My jumbled thoughts bleed into one another. Mandy. Mouse...the MC.

I turn. “What broke her. What was in her diary?”

“COVID. She almost died.”

“Well, shit.” I breathe. That means the blood running through her veins is liquid gold. Little brown mouse has a target on her back. One that makes the one I put on her tiny. She better run back to whatever hole she came out of. She just put herself square in an underground war where people like her will be hunted.

* * *

My body achesbut I power through it. My headache dulled to a throb, but I need a fuck-ton of water and sleep. Shit. Maybe I’ll pull off for a bag of intravenous fluids. I’m tempted to take that shit I smoked last night every night if I could have an experience like that again. But I can’t get so fucked-up like this again. Because I can’t make the clear decisions I need for my Club.

I can’t tell a soul what I experienced. I’d lose my Prez patch. Lose respect. I gotta keep this shit to myself.

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I pull off the exit for the meet up house the Club's owned for years. It's halfway between Santa Fe and Vegas. And especially useful when moving goods and services between territories.

I pull in the huge ranch, nod to the Prospect on watch and stretch my legs. I loosen my mouth covering, taking it off to rub the sweat and dirt from the back of my neck.

F.O.C.U.S, Rog, and Smith's bikes are here too. I enter the house, going straight to the bedroom I keep here. It has fresh clothes and a private bath. I strip, take a long cold shower, letting sting of the water reduce my inflamed muscles.

After, I dress in fresh jeans and a shirt then look for food and ice water.

"Damn. Rough night?"

"Fuck, Indé. What did you roll in that blunt?"

"Did it work? Did you 'see' what you needed."

I jerk my head breaking eye contact. "I'm fucked up still. In here." I point to my chest.

"Walk with me." I turn, finding Roger at my back. His blue eyes know too much. Rog has battled demons worse than me. The man is like an all-knowing wise man or some shit. I grab a water and head out back with him.

"What's up?" We wander off toward the back of the property where a metal chain-

link fence twenty-feet high is capped off with barbed wire. In the distance, the sound of howling coyotes echoes across the desert.

“I’m worried about ya’. You’ve been holding onto a love that’s been gone, for far too long.”

My jaw works. Shoving my hands in the front pocket of my jeans, I turn away, kicking the fence. “Don’t speak about her to me.” I grate out. I respect the shit out of Rog. He’s always had my back. Especially when my father and uncle were gunned down in a shoot-out with a rival MC from Nogales, Mexico. He’s always been there for me. On every dark day I’ve had over the past five years,

“Son,” he places a hand on my shoulder, “it’s time to let her go. Sometimes... we look back through tinted lenses. Make the departed more than they were. Mandy had her demons, Tarak. Everyone saw them but you.”

“She was my world!” The words explode angrily from me. My hands clench the fence, my face dropping to the ground.

“That’s okay. I get that. One time I thought a woman was mine, too. She left. And I never thought I’d feel that way again. Then I met Devon. And you know what? What I feel for her is everything compared to the woman who came before her. It was a real kick in the ass.”

My face turns, “I’m happy for you. I am. But I don’t see that happening for me.”

“You’re too young to say shit like that.”

I hang my head again. “I smoked some potent shit last night that gave me crazy hallucinations. She was with me. I felt her, kissed her, touched her. It was so real Rog. I can’t let that go.”

“You have to. Take it as a gift and don’t do that shit again. Maybe that was your goodbye, Tarak. The one you never had.”

“Fuck.” I feel the hot, sting of salty tears spring from the corner of my eyes. I know he’s right. But holding her close to my heart is the only thing that’s kept it from breaking.

He claps me on the shoulder. “Take some time. Let it out. Let it go. You need your head to be right for the meet we have. If anyone suspects you’re weak they’ll use it against you and the Club.

I nod, unable to speak.

He moves away back into the darkness and toward the house.

“Baby. Why did you leave me? What happened that night?” My eyes move to the stars. But she doesn’t answer. She doesn’t come. Deep down, I know he’s right. I need to let her go. I’m not even thirty yet. “Mandy? Babe? Send me someone then, so I don’t feel guilty. I don’t want to find another you. I need you to pick her for me, okay?”

A shooting star streaks right before my eyes. “I’ll take that as a yes, babe.”

It takes a few more minutes to gather my composure. I swipe the back of my hand across my eyes and move forward. I’ll never forget her. It’ll take a bit more time. But maybe, just maybe, I’ll find myself a new world to live in. Just like Roger did.

12

Amber

Three weeks later...

I'm plagued with dreams of him at night. Reliving the hours in his arms. Somehow the guilt slipped away leaving only memories behind. I've been hiding out in my new home for weeks. Only leaving to get supplies at the local garden and feed store or going to teach Evan every day. Jenny kept her mouth shut about it all. Her focus is on her son, not whatever beef the RBMC has with me. All I know is he's gone. Left for Club business and hasn't been back since. Jenny heard through her ex some big shit was going down at an MC meet.

I know I can't hide out in my desert house forever. Someday I'll face him. Make my stand that I've bought a house with no plans of leaving. But for now, just getting myself stronger has been the goal.

Hours of landscaping has turned my skin from ghostly to a light tan. I also got into pilates and yoga, using the wide-planked covered deck behind my house as a perfect spot.

Lifting heavy rocks and boulders to make a garden wall was a bitch. But doing it as well as hauling bags of soil for my new vegetable garden and eating Mexican takeout every night has given me more bulk.

"There," I scoop the heated Earth pressing the last seed into the soil. By spring, desert

blooms will line my front drive.

Cell signal was spotty this far out of town, so I had a dish installed on my roof with a cell signal booster. Tarak can kiss it. Besides, technically I'm not in his town. My home sits outside the city limits of Santa Fe. So, technically I wasn't lying when I said I'd leave.

My cell buzzes from the back pocket of my jeans.

"Hey Jen."

"What are you doing?"

"Right now?" I look at my dirt-covered hands. "Getting dirty."

"Get your ass over to my place. Evan's at my sister's for the weekend. We've got a party to attend."

"Oh?"

"The town hasn't seen a party this big since the great re-opening."

"I can't show my face. You know that."

"Relax. I figured it all out. It's a coming of age party for my cousin's daughter. It's called a Quinceanera. She wanted it to be a costume party. A grand, over the top, hoop and ballgown, men in tuxedos kind of party. It was delayed a week and now it's on. You can't miss!"

"Really?" I can't help but to be a bit excited. I never went to any proms, dances, or parties in my old life. Something like this is on my new life's to-do list.

“I have nothing like that.”

“Girl, please. I’m a cosmetologist. Hair, makeup, and costumes are my thing. It’ll be more fun if I don’t go alone.”

“Fine. But I need to look different.”

“You already do. Your tan is flawless. And how much weight have you gained these past few weeks eight pounds?”

“Twelve. I found a doctor I really like he gave me a pill to help.”

“Damn. Does he have a reversal?”

“Har-har. What time should I come.”

“Four. I’ll have cocktails. The party starts at eight. That should be enough time to transform ourselves.”

“Can you transform a mouse into a Queen?”

“You’re already on your way to doing that Amber. You just can’t see it.”

* * *

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“I’m soglad you talked me into this.”

Downtown has been transformed. Sure, the cute shops and white stucco buildings with wrought iron gate sand flower boxes were always charming, but now it glows. Large-bulb string lights hang from one side of the Main Street, connecting to others on the opposite side. There are no cars. The streets are closed to traffic as couples mill about in ball gowns, masks and men look intriguing in tuxedos and masks.

I could be anyone tonight.

Excitement races through me. Maybe, I could even meet someone. Tarak and the Royal Bastards put the word out that I was a leper and not one decent looking man within a hundred miles will even look me in the face.

I went to Albuquerque to buy furniture and hung out in a few bars there. But after meeting men like Tarak and Edge, no one could compare. But by the looks of so many tall men in tux’s anything could be possible tonight.

I don’t think they’re Bastards either. They’re all clean shaven. Not a beard in sight.

“Let’s get wine!”

“I’m more of a beer kind of girl.” But I follow her to one of the many open bars. A stage is set up near us and a live band plays a mixture of classic songs and newerpopularones.

“Dance with me darlin’.”

Jenny giggles as a blonde-haired man wearing a tux and a cowboy hat whisks her into his arms and into the crowd.

She looks like a million bucks tonight. Her deep blue gown hugs her curves and her platinum wig is styled in long loose waves down to her ass.

No one could guess her identity or mine for that matter.

She put me in a pale pink gown after making me endure a full-body spray tan. She added clip in extensions to my hair, making it fuller before curling it into long waves half-pinned up behind my mask.

My mask is made of feathers and rhinestones. What's annoying is the fake lashes she glued to mine are so long they keep brushing against the mask. But I don't dare take it off.

I move away from the bar area just people watching while holding my beer in one hand like a lifeline. I reach in my clutch to find my phone wanting to capture tonight. An incoming text interrupts me.

Looking good tonight, mouse. I came to collect. Did you think I'd just let it go?

He's here. He could be anyone. But Edge's eyes will give him away. Unless his mask covers his whole face...

What will he collect? Do I dare wait and find out? My chin lifts. I'm not the runaway anymore. Let him come at me.

I text back:

What do you want?

He replies: Your blood.

???

Antibodies doll. Real ones.

Never. I won't let anyone steal what my body made to protect me.

The music picks up and I'm pushed around in the crowd. Bodies brush me as they pass. Mostly everyone is drunk. Part of me wants him to find me. While the other, just wants to get away. Jenny filled me in on the Bloody Scorpions. Edge has gone over to the dark side since Mandy's death. Nothing is too far for him. Even arms dealing, trafficking, and stealing vaccines meant for medical workers. Apparently, he stole them for his Club and had a vaccination party. I was stupid to keep the truck, but all my money's gone on my new home. Nobody gives anyone anything for free. And what did I do? I accepted a gift tied with too many strings to count.

Ducking my head, I try to slip away. I round a corner and press my back to the stucco wall. No one followed me. I keep going through the small alleyway between buildings, finding myself in a small courtyard park. Benches are placed beneath trees full of more twinkling lights and in the middle a small bridge arches over a manmade pond. I creep closer. Every day, I discover tiny beautiful places like this one.

Sighing, I sway to the melancholy of the ballad drifting through the air. Close my eyes and wish for impossible things.

"Let me guess you're not a people person either?"

"You scared me. I didn't even see you there."

"My apologies." He tips his head, drawling like a southern gentleman.

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“Well, you do kind of blend in.” He’s standing against a rail to the pond, under a tree and his black tux blends in with the night. He steps forward.

“Nice mask.”

“You like?”

“I do.” He’s wearing a Phantom of the Opera mask. It covers everything but his lips. He’s tall and muscular but I can’t tell much more than that.

I hum one of the tunes from the musical under my breath.

“May I?” He holds out a hand asking for a dance.

I grin. “You may.” I place my beer down on the rail.

He’s so poised. So formal. So very eloquent and polished that I’m intrigued. A few couples stroll through the gardens so I’m hardly afraid of my new stranger.

He takes me in his arms and we just sway. One song blends into another, then another. My tummy growls breaking the spell.

“Sorry. It’s a good thing you can’t see my blush through my mask.”

“Let’s get you something to eat.” He takes my hand. But I hesitate.

“Everything okay?”

I bite my lip, nodding. “I... there’s just someone giving me a hard time.”

“What?” He growls. “An enchanting creature like you? Come. I’ll protect you.”

And I believe him. He leads me through the dusk and back into the fray. My tiny hand is clasped tightly in his and maybe—just maybe I think I can cross off one more thing on my to do list: a romance with a handsome stranger.

People move out of our way. The crowd parts like a sea as he whisks me forward to the food truck, cutting the line and demanding I be fed. It’s bossy. Arrogant but cute as heck. No one’s ever fought for me. I like it. I like it a lot.

He leads me back over to our secluded spot and takes off his tuxedo jacket, placing it on the grass for me to sit on.

“What’s your name?”

“Can I give you a fake one?”

“Why?”

“Because I want to be anyone tonight. Does that sound crazy?”

He studies me from beneath his mask. “No. I get it. Sometimes I wish I could be someone else too. My responsibilities stop me from a lot of things...”

“Then simply call me Christine...”

“From the Phantom of the Opera?”

“You know it?”

“My sister made me take her when it played in Vegas. Three times.”

“Lucky girl.”

“She doesn’t think so. She thinks I’m a pain in her ass.”

“Are you?”

He shrugs. “Maybe. Fine, if you’re Christine then I’ll be Erik.”

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“You?” I snort. “Please. You couldn’t play the bad guy on your worse day.”

He winces, looking away. “Well, then just for tonight, I’ll play the good one. Raoul.”

“I’m sure you’re just as polite and pleasant without your mask on.”

He doesn’t reply and so I pick up my plate and begin to eat.

“Who is bothering you?”

“No one. I just made the mistake of taking help when I needed it and not realizing the price was more than I’m willing to pay.”

“We’ve all been there.”

I shrug. “What do you do? Are you from here? Or just visiting the birthday girl?”

“She’s my family.” I smile warmly. “But where have you been hiding, beautiful Christine?” His index finger traces up my arm from wrist to shoulder. I shiver. It’s light but erotic.

“In plain sight?”

“Then I must’ve been blind...”

My fork drops on my plate. He’s going to kiss me. I just know it. His finger moves to my mouth. The pad gently touching my lips. I decide to be bold. Flirt. I touch the tip

of his finger with the tip of my tongue.

He sucks in his breath.

His hands are in my hair pulling my mouth to his. I turn my head. Our parted mouths meet in the slowest, most sensuous first kiss. On cue, fireworks light up the sky behind us.

I sigh into his mouth. “This is too perfect. You can’t be real.”

He takes my hand, kissing the inside of my palm. “I’ve learned to just take what’s in the moment. And right now, you are in my moment.” He groans against my lips as he pulls me to stand and lean against him. We sway under the falling fireworks, dancing to music we hear with our hearts.

I’m over Tarak.

Over Edge.

I’m finally falling for the good guy.

“Give me your phone?”

“Why?”

“So, I can put my number in it.”

I open my clutch and handing it over. He taps in a number, creating a new contact. Then hands it back to me.

“Phantom?” I giggle. “I thought you were the good guy?”

“Maybe, I’m both. Take off your mask. Please?”

But I can’t. I’m still insecure about my face. I’ve changed so much but insecurity is a hard thing to break. “Just a little bit more... of this.”

Something over my shoulder catches his attention. He stiffens, pulls me closer against him, then changes his mind and forces me behind his back.

“Boss. We have a situation.”

Three men in suits and masks walk briskly forward. Who is this guy? Some kingpin from Vegas? A mafia boss?”

“Can it wait?”

“No.”

He sighs in frustration. “Wait here for me. Don’t move.” He places a finger against my lips.

“As if I’d go anywhere.” My words please him. One of his men holds up a phone. Anger radiates from my man’s body. It’s palpable. He rips off his mask.

“Who took these.” His voice booms like thunder.

The grand finale lights up the sky and the harsh angles of his face. How could I not know? But he tasted different. Spoke different. The mask turned him to someone different for a while. I guess now I can crush on them both while I’m alone in my bed in the dead of night. He shaved his beard. They all did. Probably just for tonight? For some teenage girl’s birthday. It hits me just how deep and loyal these proud men are.

I silently walk backwards. But not before I watch the video playing from the phone in his hands. It’s him. On the night. The one I stole. He’s chanting and dancing and wearing that cloth...

He’s pissed. An angry god. A king who’s been betrayed. “Who was it? F.O.C.U.S? Roger? Smith? Who the fuck took that!”

“It wasn’t them. We asked.”

“It had to be, No one else was there!” He roars, smashing the phone onto the ground and stomping on it.

I open my clutch. My phone is still safely tucked inside. Tarak turns, his glittering eyes finding me in the shadows. He's breathing hard.

"Watch her," he commands one of his soldiers. The rest of them follow him as he charges back into the crowd, no doubt looking for the culprit.

I start walking back to the alley. "Where you going?"

"Um, to pee. Is that allowed?" The man points to one of the stucco buildings.

"It's that way."

"Thanks," I smile. I slowly change directions, noticing he's checking his phone more than me. I get in the line for the restrooms and wait for more people to get in line behind me. They block his view of me and I carefully inch forward as if I'm cutting the line but instead follow the side wall of the building until I'm back on Main Street.

It's dark and people are very drunk. No one notices the mouse even dressed as a queen as I stick close to the crowd, blending with them. Being invisible in plain sight. I walk back to Jenny's and to the safety of my truck. The one I still owe someone for.

I might have escaped Edge tonight but found myself still trapped by Tarak. That man has one hell of a hold on me and he doesn't even know it.

I hardly drank my beer and my buzz from early has worn off. I rip my mask off, throw it on the seat and start the engine.

I'm home in thirty minutes. Safe. But I'm too wound up to sleep. Too fucked up on all the feelings I've worked so hard to quit. I open the door to my outdoor fridge, take out a beer, pop the top and decide to strip.

I'm naked under the stars, beer in hand and waste no time taking the cover to my hot tub off. The soak always helps me sleep.

Sighing, I slip down to my shoulders letting the heat relax me while taking a pull of my cold beer as my body feels too hot.

I close my eyes.

“Damn, mouse.”

I turn so fast, water sloshes over the side. Edge is two feet away looking flawless in a black tux. He wears no mask.

“What? How?”

He holds up a square metal box. “Tracking device. Been on that truck since day one.”

He steps closer. I drop my beer in the grass, using my hands to shield my breasts.

“Already saw them doll. When you stripped. I'd pay more to see you than all the girls at the Triple XXX.” He moves closer.

“What do you want?”

“I don't know. Maybe everything? But I'll start with this.” He jerks my chin up, swallows my protest with his bruising lips.

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I have feelings for Tarak, but Edge can kiss. He's virile. Hot. And despite my heart, my body wants his touch. He chuckles low in his throat, dips a hand into the water and pushes mine away. He rubs my nipple, rolls it between his fingers. "Just like I knew it that night when you watched me and her... tell me, mouse. Are you wet for me? Did you want it to be you?"

I slap his hand away and move to the other side of the tub. "How did you do it? Did you hack my phone?"

"Remember that night after you first moved in? You awoke probably thinking something was off?"

My mind reels. There was a night I felt someone watching me. Something was off. I checked and re-checked the locks, Shut my open window...

"You?"

He nods. "You really should use a passcode. I took your hand while you slept, scanned your finger and transferred all those pics and videos. We could've done it the easy way, but you kept it all to yourself."

"Are we done then? You got what you wanted. Leverage on Tarak."

"Not quite. I need your blood."

"What!!!! Get away from me!" I scream.

His eyes soften. “Please. It’s for my daughter...”

“You have a daughter?”

He nods.

Shit. I’m a sucker for kids.

“She has an autoimmune disease and a thyroid issue. Her mother took recreational drugs while pregnant Please. They won’t give plasma to kids. She had a reaction to the vaccine. Never got the booster.”

“Get me a towel and we can talk.”

“Thank you, angel.”

“Angel?” I roll my eyes. “I know what you think of me. I’ll always be mouse.”

“You’re beautiful and you know it.”

His soft words leave me stunned. I sink back down in the tub feeling more confused than ever. His touch is dangerous but feels so good. Tarak’s feels like home. But only when he thinks I’m someone else. Either Mandy or some mystery girl. Edge sees me for who I am. But does he want me or is he using my attraction to him to get what he wants and faking the rest?

He comes back with a towel. On his face, he wears a sexy smirk.

“Hand it over and turn around.”

“Whatever. I’ve seen the goods, doll.”

“So? That doesn’t mean you get a refill.”

He rolls his eyes but complies.

I rip the towel from his hand, stand and wrap it around me as I exit the tub.

“How many times have you come here? Taken things from me?”

He whips around, eyes narrowing. “I haven’t taken anything from you...yet.”

“Tell me about your daughter.”

“She’s five and a half. Looks so much like her mother it hurts every time I look at her.”

“Who is her mother? Your wife?”

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He swallows hard. “Mandy. Tarak doesn’t know. He’d take my girl from me and claim it’s his kid not mine.”

“Is she?”

“No. I did a DNA test.”

“This Mandy chick is getting on my nerves,” I mutter under my breath as I march past Edge and into my house.

“Nice spot you got here, mouse. You’re not so down on your luck as you seemed.”

“I had money. Had past tense. I don’t want your damn truck anymore.”

“Do what you want with it.”

“I need to shower and get dressed. Don’t move. Don’t you dare snoop,” I warn him.

“Can I at least have a beer?”

“Fine,” I snap. “A beer and my blood. We’re done. Even.”

“Deal, sweetheart.”

He appraises me. A blush creeps up my face. I think Edge might really be into me. Not faking anything at all. But I’m sick of competing with a dead girl for hearts. His and Tarak’s.

I pause halfway up the stairs. “Are you over her?”

“Somedays I am. Others not.”

“What was so special about her? What did she have that you and Tarak can’t let go of?”

He shrugs. “Can’t put it into words. She was wild. Beautiful. Untamed. But underneath she had a softness about her; a vulnerability.”

“Do I look like her?”

He takes out his phone. “Why don’t you decide for yourself?”

I take the phone from him, scrutinizing the photo he pulled up. She is brunette and tiny like me. Has dark eyes like me. But her lips are fuller. Confidence exudes from her and her eyes are not shy. They are filled with sexy promises I’m sure she kept.

“How did Tarak not know she had a baby? Your baby.”

“He was gone. Went back to Apache territory when his father passed. He lived on the Res... Mandy broke it off with me and went to her tribe, The Navajos. She hid her pregnancy from me. The Res had tight security. I went nuts trying to get to her, but I was young. I was pledging to the Scorpions. My personal life had to take a backseat to the Club. It took me two years to earn my patch. They don’t just let anyone who wants to join in. By then Mandy was with Tarak. She hid the baby from both of us, leaving her with the elders on the Reservation. But the guilt got to her. She came to me once, when Tarak was on a run with the Bastards. She confessed everything. I still loved her. I wanted us to be a family.”

“What happened?”

“Tarak came back from his run with a ring.”

I don't know what to say. I leave him with his beer and memories while I shower and put on lounge clothes.

I come back down twenty minutes later finding him still in my kitchen. “Fine. I'll do it. But then we're done. We're square.”

“Deal. Let's go.”

“Now? It's after midnight.”

“So? Time waits for no one. You know that.”

“No. I'll drive down to Albuquerque next weekend. Text me her doctor's info and I'll make arrangements.”

“No can do, doll. The doc will come to my Clubhouse.”

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My face scrunches. “Is that even sanitary?”

His face darkens. “You think I’m screwing around here? With Elle’s health?”

I smile faintly. “That’s a beautiful name.”

He grunts. “You better show up after I text you the details. Or I’m coming back for you, mouse.”

“Ooh, I’m shaking.”

“I know you are, doll. It happens every time I touch you.”

I roll my eyes. “You can go now.”

He smirks, pinning me with those eyes but finally walks out, shutting the door softly behind.

I turn the lock, watching until his taillights disappear down my drive.

“Phew, what a night.”

I carefully check the lock on each door and window, but still pace restlessly. I finally pick up my phone from where I had left it charging. There’s a bunch of new texts from my mystery man, Tarak.

Where did you go?

Why did you leave?

Call me, Christine. I can't sleep until I hear from you.

Biting my lip, I debate what to do. I've messed with this man more than a woman ever should. But he's a drug I can't quit. I hit call.

"Don't ever walk out on me like that again," he growls, taking my call.

"It's gonna be like that, huh? You're the nice guy who's all alpha male?"

"Damn, straight. I waited a long time to find someone I... I felt a spark with."

"Me, too."

An intimate silence hangs between us.

"Meet me tomorrow. No mask?"

Here it is. The moment of truth. Will I stand and face him, proud of the woman I am today? Knowing my worth? I swallow hard. It's the only way to ever know.

"Where?"

"Our bridge?"

"We have a bridge?"

"We do and a song. It's still in my head. The one that played as the night sky fell around us."

“I remember it too. “Nobody, but you.”

“Yeah. Maybe that could be us. Are you willing to find out?”

I swallow thickly. “If only I could be so lucky. Do. Do you have feelings for someone else? Had a bad break up or something that still sticks with you? I’m inching to the edge of a cliff, but I need his honest answer.

“There was. Someone I thought was it for me. But she’s been gone a long time. I didn’t want to let go. I thought she was perfect. But,” he pauses. I walk over to the window, pressing my hand against the cool glass, wishing I could touch him. “She wasn’t. Far from it.”

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“No one is perfect. It’s beautiful that you loved her like that.”

“You’ve never had someone love you deep and hard?”

“No. Never.”

“Prepare yourself. What’s your real name?”

“You’ll find out tomorrow.”

“Goodnight, for now then.”

“Goodnight.” We disconnect and I’m full of butterflies. I know the real him not the jerk he pretends to be. But will Tarak give me a chance? How can I ever confess the night we shared?

I grab a blanket, wrap it around myself and unlock my door. I’m sleeping under the stairs again tonight. I feel close to him that way. Close to everything. Maybe even God.

I climb into my hammock, gently swinging it with one foot. “Please, Mandy. Let him go. Give him to me. I’ll cherish his heart if I get the chance.” My wish makes its way up to the stars. I hope she hears it.

* * *

My hands shake as I apply the light pink gloss to my lips. Jenny came over earlier to

do my hair. I just told her I had a date but wouldn't tell her with who. My makeup is light and on point. I thought about putting on a cute sundress but that might have been her style not mine. Instead, I have my comfy jean shorts with frayed ends and a simple tank top showing off my lightly tanned arms. I push my feet into my Van sneakers and grab the keys to the truck. Getting a new one is on my to-do list as soon as I can scrape enough money together.

"Here goes nothing, Amber." I glance at my reflection barely recognizing the girl I was a few months ago when I was back in Florida daydreaming about the life I'm living now. Gone is the girl with the pasty skin, limp hair, and haunted eyes. Gone are the regrets, insecurity, and self-doubt I wore for so long.

My palms are clammy on the wheel as I drive into downtown, parking at a lot behind the strip, near the hidden park where our bridge is.

My heart is in my throat. But I can't stand him up. I walk slowly but keep my eyes and chin up. He's already there, leaning on the bridge, tossing a coin into the pond below. He's wearing his jeans, Royal Bastards MC cut and his snakeskin boots. I guess he's coming as he is, too. Not the businessman in a tux he could've been taken for last night.

He turns around.

"It's you."

I wince. "Don't be angry. Please. Can we just talk?" He nods, saying nothing. I wring my hands coming forward. "It's always been me, actually."

He takes off his aviators, puzzled by my words. I step forward, boldly grabbing his left hand. Sparks shoot up my arm at the touch. I stare up at him. "I know you hated me on sight. I kind of hated you, too. I thought you were such an arrogant bully. And

well, I've been bullied my whole life. I'm done with it. Especially after surviving my illness. In my mind's eye, I pictured something new for myself. A do-over. I've found it here. Even before the magic of last night. You are just the thing I hoped to find, but if I didn't that would be okay. This journey was more about finding me but in doing that—I found you.”

He says nothing but takes me into his arms, hugging me tightly. After a few minutes he brushes back my hair, steps back and stares down at me. “Will you forgive me for being such a bastard?”

“It is printed on the back of your cut,” I tease, playfully grabbing the edges of it.

“That it is,” he grins.

“Are you hungry? Can we go eat? Start over and just get to know one another?”

“I'd like that.”

He smiles, takes my hand, and leads me to an outdoor patio adjacent to a cozy restaurant I've passed by but never got the chance to try. After we're seated, he orders a bottle of wine and pours two glasses. “To new beginnings.”

“To new beginnings.”

During the course of the meal, I share everything. About my life, my insecurities, my illness, how I met Edge and what he asked of me. Tarak's face darkens. I'm not sure if I should tell him about Elle. It's not my secret and yet I have so many I've kept. The napkin twists in my hands. “I need to tell you something. Don't get mad. It's not my story to tell but if we're going to try something, I don't want to keep anything from you...”

He places his glass of wine down. His dark eyes miss none of the worry in my face and waits.

“Edge and I made a deal.”

“Break it,” he growls. “You’re under my protection now. You don’t owe him jack for anything he’s done for you.”

“He did stop. He did have my car towed and gave me a new one. I know it was stupid to take it.”

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“Don’t beat yourself up. What does he want?”

“My blood plasma.”

Tarak almost jumps out of his seat. His skin draw’s tight over his cheekbones. “Over my dead body.”

I bite my lip. “I want to. It’s not for him, but for his little girl. Tarak, he says it’s theirs. His and Mandy’s.”

His fists clench. “I heard there was a child. I just didn’t want to face it.”

“He has a DNA test.”

Tarak looks away. “She never told me. I-I don’t want to bring up my past or any of its baggage with you tonight. I loved her despite her lies. I was younger, more hot-headed. I was in love with the idea of our forever but in reality, maybe it wasn’t so perfect as I made it out to be.”

“I’m sorry. I want to do it. She needs it. She has a medical condition.”

“That’s so selfless of you. It makes me feel like even more of a dirtbag for hating you.”

“Why? Why did you hate me?”

“Because Edge found you first. Because you remind me of her and yet you are

stronger... with more layers. For making me see I could move on... take your pick. If you were gone, I could stay in my own despair. I could stay stuck with my excuses for not moving on.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

“I’m sorry. Deeply.”

“That’s okay, because there’s more. I did something to hurt you too. Something completely unforgivable. So, if we end here and pay the check I’ll understand.”

“What could you have possibly done?”

I look away, embarrassed. “I followed you. I was angry at you and Regan. Edge was on my nerves. I don’t even have a good excuse. You were with a few other men...”

“I know where this is going. It was you. It was always you just like you said.”

“We didn’t. I stopped you... I wanted to but it wouldn’t have been right. Please just understand, I saw you in so much pain. It made me want to just take it all away.”

“Your hair smelled familiar. You felt familiar in my arms. I’m a bit pissed because well, I’m embarrassed you saw me high as fuck and acting like that.”

“Don’t be. It was beautiful. The way you loved her was beautiful. I’m a bit jealous.”

“Well, you and I have chemistry. Pure chemistry. I don’t ever want you to think I’m thinking about her when I’m with you.”

“You think I’m such a sure thing then, eh? I’m going to make you work for it, Tarak. I’m not going to fall at the desert king’s feet so easily.”

“Fine. Game on, princess. I’m going to seduce the shit, out of you.”

“Really? By the time I’m done with you, you’re going to be calling me Queen. Not princess.”

“I see my little mouse has become a tigress. I like it.”

“Good. Because I like it too.”

“Do you want to go for a ride?”

“On your bike?”

“What else did you think I meant?” he winks.

I blush, tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, and take his outstretched hand.

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With my arms snug, around him, we fly. Past the mountains and desert sky. The stars come down, smiling at us. I sigh, breathing in deeply. There's no dust in the air tonight. It's just perfect. Finally, he turns back toward town, parking in the lot by the bridge. His shoulders shake and he's breathing hard. "Tarak?"

He gets off the bike, holds his sides, doubling over in pain. I hop off, placing a hand on his arm. "It's her truck. Mandy's," he rasps.

"What? No? It can't be?"

"Let me guess," he grits out. "That's the truck Edge gave you."

"Oh my god! He wouldn't..."

"He did. And I'm going to kill him for it. This is a message, Amber. A message for me. One I can't ignore."

"How? I thought her truck was totaled?"

"Me too."

"Look, I'm sorry. I just need to ride again. And clear my head. I'm so pissed off right now I won't be good company. This has nothing to do with you and everything to do with Edge." He walks over, pulls me to him, placing a hard kiss against my lips. "I'll call you later."

I nod, watching him ride off. I can't even go near the truck. I feel sick. Used. I'm

living a dead girl's life. Stepped right into her shoes and I don't want to wear them anymore.

I wander around town, find an outdoor beer and wine bar and order a cold long-neck Bud Light. But I don't want to be around people. One of the benefits post COVID is outdoor beer gardens and the right to walk in public with a cold one in hand. I take my beer and walk, finding a small hill past the garden. Night's fallen. Blanketing me in the darkness. The Earth is warm as I plop my ass down. From beneath the hill, notes of the music float up from a street band. Lifting the beer to my lips, I take a long swig. I'm lost in thoughts, transfixing my gaze to the distance.

"Pass it over." My eyes narrow as Regan sits next to me. Shrugging, I hand her the bottle. "What he did wasn't that bad."

"You heard?"

"Tarak, texted."

"Are you kidding? He gave me a dead girl's car."

"She doesn't need it anymore."

A chill runs down my spine. "It was cruel."

"I don't see it that way."

"Really?" I hold my hand out for the beer. She passes it back.

"It was completely crushed. Now it's fully restored. I bet he did it all himself. Edge fixes things. So, does Tarak."

“They both loved her.”

“Immensely. But she chose my brother. Who are you going to choose?” Her dark eyes pin me down.

“Who says I have?” I play dumb.

“I wish that were true. He only sees you,” she mutters.

“No one sees me.”

“They do now.”

“That’s the problem. I shouldn’t have had to change for that to have happened.”

“He always saw you. Why is it always somebody else and not me?”

“Edge?” I ask.

She nods. I pass her back the beer. “That would start a war.”

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“I know,” she sighs. “Doesn’t matter. He looks right through me.”

“He’s stupid. You’re stunning.”

She grimaces. “Thanks. What are you going to do with Mandy’s truck?”

“Give it back?”

“To whom? She would want you to take it. I’m just not sure she would want you to take his heart, too.”

“Tarak’s or Edge’s?”

“Who do you think? You’ve already chosen. Even if you won’t admit it to me. If you hurt him, I’ll come after you again.”

“I don’t doubt it. Can... can we be friends? I kind of like you. You’re such a badass.”

“Maybe. I’ll let you know.”

“You do that,” I grin as I stand, using my hands to wipe desert dust off my ass.

“Thanks for the beer.”

“Keep it. I have to figure out how to get home.”

“Where’s that? You had us fooled. I thought you were gone.”

“I’m not letting anyone run me out. And I’m not stupid enough to tell you.”

“Fine. But it was a one-off. Our kiss... everything after.”

I hold up a hand. “Don’t. Speak. Of. It.”

“Fine,” she smirks, taking another swig.

I walk back out into the park, over the bridge and take out my cell. I’m tempted to text Tarak. But decide to call Jenny. A hand clasps over my mouth. I’m pulled against a strong body. I scream, biting thick fingers, recognizing the taste of his skin. He curses, removes his hand and replaces it with a bandana. I’m gagged, hauled over his shoulders kicking and screaming and into the back of a van.

“Hey, sugar. I was still in town. Tarak called thinking I was 200 miles away. Edge buckles me in, zip ties my hands and gets behind the driver’s wheel.

I’m so angry, my body shakes. Edge is going to pay. Like Tarak, I’ve seen his good sides with the bad. But kidnapping me is too far.

The drive to Albuquerque takes a few hours. I’m sticky, sweaty, and really need to pee. Finally, he parks, hauls me into his arms and over his shoulder, into what a guess is his Clubhouse. He carries me like some prize past hollering men who ask who I am.

“Tarak’s girl. And mine.”

“Again? Damn, the two of you need to find another type.

Edge doesn’t answer. He carries me into a back room, plopping me down and locks the door. He opens a small fridge, takes out a bottle of water and loosens my gag.

“Don’t do this. Please, untie me.”

But he doesn’t listen.

“I-I’m falling in love with him.”

“But you want me.”

I rip my eyes from his. I’m ashamed, embarrassed. At one time, I wanted them both. I was undecided between who I’d choose. But I did choose.

He steps closer. I’m on my knees with my hands tied around my back. His finger traces the curve of my cheek. “Damn, mouse. You became beautiful.”

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“Is that what this is about? ...felt like you missed your chance with me, and you want to know what he has?”

“By the time I’m done with you, mouse, you’ll forget what his hands on you feels like...what he tastes like. I’m going to erase his every touch.”

A shudder rips through me as Edge bends down. His beautiful hazel eyes burn as they roam over my face. The pad of his fingertip skims my cheek. He laughs low in his throat. My nipples peaked under my thin shirt, betraying me. Tarak might have my heart but my body wants them both. Squeezing my eyes shut, I try to deny the desire singing through me.

His lips find the crook of my neck.

A moan escapes me.

“Please. I can’t. Don’t put me in the middle of your war.”

“You’ve been there since day one, babe.” The hairs on his beard scrape against my neck. My stomach clenches. “Smile.” I open my eyes, blinking them quickly after the flash on his phone goes off. “Perfect.”

“He’s going to kill me,” I whisper, feeling my throat close. My eyes are glassy—my dusky nipples, visible beneath my shirt. My cheeks flush with desire. Next to my face is his smirking one. He attaches it to a text and hits send.

My stomach drops.

Tarak will never touch me again if Edge seduces me. I know this deep in the marrow of my bones. He drags me closer against the hard planes of his body.

“What’s it gonna be, little mouse? Him or me?”

“Him. You know that.” I breathe.

“Liar. I saw you first. I kissed you first. Why did you go with him?” He stands suddenly, his balled fist popping right through the drywall.

“You never made a play for me.”

“Is that it? Did you need romance? Hearts and flowers and all that shit? Well, fuck that. I stole you, sugar. You’re my property now.”

Edge walks back over, jerking me to my feet.

“Am I worth a war?”

“I don’t know. But I’m willing to risk finding out,” he grinds out, capturing my lips. I scream against his kiss. It’s of no use. He’s just as unrelenting as the scorching desert sun. And I have a bad feeling I’m about to burn.

I’m not afraid of Edge. We have mad chemistry too. But I’m not Mandy. I won’t jerk around two men at once. And Tarak... that night in the desert that I stole... I want my own with him. Only him.

“Edge, please. Stop this insanity. Stop all of it. You could have your own great love. She’s out there waiting for you. In fact, I already know who she might be.”

He cups my chin, holding the bottle to my lips. “Drink. You need rest. I’m taking

you're blood tonight."

"Let me go after."

"Where? Crawling back to him? What's he got anyway? Some magic dick?"

"I don't know. We haven't..."

He shudders. "Then you're still fair game. Let me be the one."

"I'm sorry. My heart wants him."

Edge picks up a table, throwing it against a wall. "It's always him! I'm sick of it!"

"But you have her. You have Elle. You have a piece of Mandy he can't touch. He'll never have..."

He grabs a knife off a dresser. Comes back to me, traces the flat side over my breasts, before cutting my hands free. "It's only because I'm a father now that I won't take you—make you love me and erase every memory of him. But I can't let you go. I need your blood."

"And I'll gladly give it. That and nothing else."

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“That’s too bad, Amber. Me and you? We could’ve had one hell of a ride.”

“Maybe? Maybe in another life.”

“I wish you could be my desert queen. Not his.”

I cup a hand to his cheek. “Part of me wishes the same. I did feel something for you, but you did me wrong. You played me and he hated me. You should’ve told me about the truck. That it was hers.”

“Why? Yeah, I did it to piss him off. Make him hurt. But Mandy as much as she had issues was kind deep-down. She would’ve wanted you to have it. Please don’t trash that truck.”

“Maybe, Elle would like it? Could it even last that long?”

He swallows hard. “God, you’re perfect. Are you sure, it’s him?”

I nod. “Fine. Go. I won’t keep you.”

“Go where? You brought me here.”

He hands me his phone. “Call him.”

“Edge! I’m going to fucking kill you for this. I swear it!”

“Tarak, it’s me.”

“Amber? Did he touch you?”

“No. I’m fine. He’s letting me go. It’s over.”

“The hell it is. He still stole you. Took you. In my territory. It’s personal but he also broke MC code, babe. He will pay.”

“Hasn’t he already? Haven’t you. It’s over. Finished. I’ll wait for you outside their gates. I’m at his Clubhouse.”

“We’ll discuss this when you’re safe and in my arms. Wait for me.”

“Okay.” I take Edge’s water and he walks me out, stopping at the van to get my purse and phone. “He’s going to kill you. Or at least try.”

“I know.”

“You can’t. You need to stop this for Elle’s sake.”

“Will you still help?”

“Of course.”

“Who is she? This woman you think could be it for me?”

“Ah, now that’s gonna cost you. You owe me two,” I wink.

“No hard feelings?”

“None.”

“Are you gonna talk to that crazy ass man of yours? Put in a good word not to kill me?”

“I will. But I can’t promise you he won’t if who I think could be your match holds true.”

He shrugs. “It’s what he and I do. Go to war. Only you, our desert queen can command us to stop.”

“You’re wrong. I’m no queen. I’m just the little, brown mouse, remember?”

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“Ah, Amber? You were always a queen. I just loved watching your eyes spit fire every time I called you that. Didn’t you learn in school boys only tease the girls they like?”

“No one ever liked me.”

“Bullshit, mouse. Bullshit. Go. Go wait for your man before I change my mind and lock you back up into my bedroom.”

I swallow hard, walking backwards. “I’ll text about Elle.”

“You do that.”

I turn, practically sprinting to the end of the road. A man opens a gate for me, and I wait on the other side. Last year, I almost died. A half a year before that, some thought life as we knew it could be over. But I know there’s blessings in hard times. Times when you can’t see the light. All you need to do is hold on tight and keep looking in the dark until you find the light.

I look up. Down the dark road leading to the Clubhouse, a single light shines. It’s my man on his chrome horse, coming to his lady’s rescue. It comes closer and closer. I found my light in the dark. And he found his.

I turn the flashlight on my cell on, slowly waving it—knowing my light will lead him home.