



Flame's Fight

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Description: Flame Hospitals suck. They suck even more when you aren't sure you'll ever be able to walk again. You'd think being able to see the woman I love every day would help. But since she now hates my guts because I let her down one too many times. Well, you see my problem? But I'll fight. I'll fight to walk. And I'll fight to get the only woman I want back.

Brooke I knew seeing Flame again would be painful. But I hadn't counted on the devastation of seeing him bleeding out and not knowing if he'd live or die. The amazing man I fell in love with broke my heart. Now he's under my care, a broken man fighting to regain his life. He's strong enough to do it. I can see he's trying to draw me back in, but I have a fight of my own that I need to deal with first. A fight I don't think I can win...

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CHAPTER ONE: FLAME

“Hey, man.” I answer when Reaper calls. He’s in Vegas with my sister, Ashlyn. “Did you make sure Ashlyn had fun? And no, I don’t want to know the details.” The last thing I want to hear about is how my best friend popped my sister’s cherry. I shudder at the thought. He takes pity on me and just assures me she had a great day before jumping to the reason he called.

“You heard what happened here in Vegas? With her coach?” I grunt, so he continues. “Ashlyn is worried about the guy’s wife. I don’t know if she’s involved in the kidnapping, but from the way he talked about her, I don’t think she knew. Ashlyn’s afraid she’s another victim and wants someone to check on her.”

I groan at his request. There are so many ways this could go sideways, but I understand Ashlyn’s concern. This asshole tried to kidnap her with help from two other followers of the reverend. The Shadow Borns, an ally to our club, questioned the men and their screwed up philosophy about women makes it easy to believe that this woman needs help. But will she take it from an MC? As I consider Reaper’s request, Shield steps in. As a cop, Shield can open doors that might otherwise stay shut for an MC member.

“Let me talk to Shield, see if he can go with me to talk to her. Maybe we can get Caitlin’s help. I know she’s working on buying another property that she can use to house victims until Crossroads is ready.”

Shield raises his eyebrow at me in question, but waits until I end the call with Reaper. I explain Reaper’s request, surprised when Shield nods in agreement. “We need to

run it by Grimm, but that's not a bad idea. I've been working with Smoke on trying to locate the elusive reverend and his band of fuck-ups with no luck."

"Don't they have some sort of church?" I ask.

He shrugs. "You would think, but the only listing we found was some old storefront in a strip mall. I questioned the other store owners and they say hardly anyone ever goes there, and when they do, it's one or two only and with no set time. No one I spoke with has seen the reverend."

I nod. "You think the wife might have information?"

"Don't know. Doubt it. But it's worth talking to her, especially if she needs help. Let's go see Grimm."

About half an hour later, Shield and I are on our way to Coach Matthews' house. Cole and Izzy are following behind us in an SUV. Caitlin is riding with them. When we pull up, I'm surprised to see Officer Wagstaff waiting for us.

"I thought it might help to have a uniform around in case she feels threatened by our kuttes." Shield explains as we walk toward the officer in question. I like Officer Wagstaff. He's one of the few cops who doesn't look at us like he's picturing us behind bars. However, he still makes me nervous. Not because he's a cop, but because I used to date his daughter, Brooke.

"Shield, Flame." Wagstaff says, offering us his hand before he acknowledges Caitlin, Izzy, and Cole.

"Have you spoken with Mrs. Matthews yet?" Shield asks.

Wagstaff shakes his head. "I was waiting for you, but the neighbor came out to talk to

me.” He nods at the house next door to Matthews. “She wanted to know, and I quote, if ‘Matthews finally killed his wife.’ I called the station to see if we have any records of 911 calls or visits to the house. They’re pulling everything they have.”

“Fuck.” Shield says, glancing at the house.

“Yeah.”

Shield and I walk up the path with Wagstaff, while the others stay behind. “You and Brooke haven’t come over for dinner in a while.” He says to me. “I know Brooke has been working too much. Can’t you get that girl to take a day off?”

I’m not sure how to answer his question. My days of asking Brooke anything are long over. They ended when she cheated on me. “I doubt she’d listen to anything I say.” I tell him, truthfully.

He grunts before ringing the doorbell. We’re met with silence. “Maybe she isn’t home.” I suggest.

The cop shakes his head. “The neighbor says that she no longer leaves the house, unless it is with her husband. She used to work, but according to her former employer, she quit after she became pregnant.” He rings the bell and knocks again. “Mrs. Marshall, this is the police. Can you please open the door? It’s about your husband.”

We wait for a few minutes until we finally hear a voice on the other side of the door.

“I can’t open the door.” She says. “I don’t have the key. Only James has one.”

The three of us share a horrified look.

“Mrs. Marshall, I’m Detective Black. Is there any way for you to open a window or another door? Maybe the backdoor? It is very important that we speak to you.”

“I can’t get out.” She replies, her voice cracking. “If I open a window, the alarm will go off and his friends will come. I’m sorry.”

“Mrs. Marshall, are you saying that you’re trapped in there?” Shield asks.

Her response is heartbreaking. “I am.”

“What’s going on?” Caitlin asks as she joins us. I figure Shield is about to tell her to get back, but he surprises me by explaining the situation to her. “We have to get her out of there.” Caitlin states.

Shield looks at Wagstaff. “How do you want to play this? You could call the precinct and get permission? However, if they say no, I’m still going in.”

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“I think I smell smoke.” Officer Wagstaff says, sniffing the air. “We should break in and get her out of there as soon as possible.”

Shield grins and turns back to the door. “Mrs. Marshall, we’re coming in and we’re getting you out. We’ll take you somewhere safe. Somewhere that your husband’s friends can’t find you. How does that sound?”

“Like someone has finally answered my prayers. Please, hurry.”

Shield raises his foot and slams his boot against the door. I copy him. It’s enough to knock the door off its hinges. Before I can stop her, Caitlin rushes in and wraps her arms around the woman, when she steps back into the entryway. She’s petite with dark blonde hair and wide blue eyes in a narrow face. She fixes those eyes on the broken door. As I take in the rest of her, I realize that she’s much too thin. Her baby bump is enormous on her slight frame.

“You poor thing. Let’s get you out of here.” Caitlin says, taking charge and leading the woman out the door.

“Don’t you need to get anything?” I ask. “Clothes, your purse?”

“I want nothing from here.” She responds with so much venom that I have to fight back a smile. She sounded weak through the door, but now that she senses freedom, she’s showing her strength.

“We can get her anything she needs.” Caitlin assures us both as she helps the woman into the SUV. “My name is Caitlin. What’s yours?”

“Lenora.” She says, smiling at Caitlin. “Thank you for coming to get me.”

“You’re welcome, but the real person you need to thank is Flame’s sister, Ashlyn. She’s the one your husband tried to kidnap. She pressed charges against him today and she asked Flame to come check on you.”

“Thank you.” She says, glancing at me and the others. “I don’t mean to be rude, but we should get going. James’ friends will be here any minute.”

We follow the SUV over to Evie’s apartment building. Lenora will stay there until Caitlin can find different accommodations. For now, it’s the best place for her because no one will look for her there. We’re headed back to the clubhouse when Shield pulls over to take a call.

“That was Dante. He wants us across town to monitor Deion.” Shield tells me.

“Why?”

“Reaper thinks he has something that will convince Deion to hand Trask over to the police.” Shield explains. Deion is the leader of Reaper’s old gang, the Spades, Trask is his second in command. “But he’s afraid Deion will go ballistic and try to kill Trask himself.”

“What does Reaper have?”

“That video Reaper found. It proves Trask worked with Renee to traffic virgins. He thinks Deion will give Trask up now. We need Trask alive to clear Reaper of Wylan’s murder.”

We make it over to Killian’s apartment in time to see Deion enter the building. He doesn’t look back at us, so either he knows we’re here and doesn’t care, or he’s not as

aware of his environment as the leader of a gang should be.

A few minutes after our arrival, Shield leans over his bike, holding his phone so I can hear the conversation. Reaper is talking to Deion and Killian about Trask, and we relax when Deion agrees to the plan. We stay out front so we can go with Deion to grab Trask.

“So whatever happened between you and Brooke?” Shield asks. “I haven’t seen her around the clubhouse, but her dad seemed to think you’re still together. Did she dump your ass?”

I scowl at him. “No, she didn’t dump me.” I have to stop myself from squirming. “I broke up with her.”

“Why the fuck would you do that?” Shield asks. “She was hot. Too hot for you.”

“She cheated on me. Ok?” I tell him, wanting him to just drop it. “I went over to her apartment and saw some guy coming out.”

“Who was he?”

“Hell if I know.”

“What did she say?” When I don’t answer, Shield shakes his head. “Don’t tell me you didn’t talk to her?” When I still say silent, he pushes. “You ghosted her? Man, you’re an idiot.”

I open my mouth to retort, but the sound of squealing tires grabs our attention. We turn in time to see a black SUV slide into the parking lot. Before we can move, the doors open and we’re looking at the flashing muzzles of assault rifles. Pain shoots through my back as I fly off my bike. Then everything goes black.

CHAPTER TWO: BROOKE

“Good afternoon!” Tally calls out as she joins us at the nurses’ station.

“We missed you.” Gina says as she gives our favorite doctor a hug, shifting so I can give her one, too.

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“I was only gone three days.” Tally says with a laugh. “But thank you. I missed everyone here as well.”

“Did you go on vacation?” I ask her.

She smirks and shakes her head. “No. I was dealing with some family drama. But it’s all over with now.”

“Not with Caitlin?” I ask. Caitlin is Tally’s younger sister and one of the nicest people I’ve met. She’s been through enough trauma to last several lifetimes. A murdering rapist once left her for dead. Afterwards, she discovered he impregnated her. Then her former fiance beat her until she lost the baby. Just to name a few traumas she’s endured.

“No. Caitlin is doing well. She recently sent two of her paintings to Vegas for an art charity event. So she’s excited and nervous to see if they sell. She also just purchased an apartment complex. The one Flame’s mother manages. She’s working with the cub to build a shelter for abused women and children. She’s very excited about it.”

“Really?” I ask with surprise.

“How can she afford to that?” Gina asks.

Tally gives me a questioning look, but answers Gina. “She inherited a large sum of money from my grandmother. Caitlin wanted to use it to do something for those who have suffered like she did. She’s calling it Crossroads. A place for victims to start a new life. I would have thought Flame would have told you about it.” She says to me.

I flinch because I should have seen that coming. If Flame and I were still dating, he would have told me. But we aren't, and it hurts. I know it's my fault. But it doesn't make it hurt any less. "We broke up. I thought everyone knew." I mumble.

I see the question forming, and I really don't want to get into it. I glance around for an out and see our HR Manager, Tony Younger. Tony took over the department when administration overhauled the department. The arrest and conviction of Dr. Kevin Marshall revealed that the previous HR Manager ignored several complaints from various nurses. He did nothing to protect the staff from the asshole. Now Marshall was in prison for attempted murder, thanks to Tally's testimony after Marshall attacked her at her home. She's alive today because Dante came to her rescue. Most of us wish Dante had killed the bastard when he had the chance, but knowing Marshall is suffering in jail is just as satisfying.

"Ladies." Tony says, coming up to join us. "Dr. Chambers. I'm glad to see you could make it back to work. We were getting worried."

"Were you?" Tally asks, her smile less warm than normal. "And why is that? I explained I had a family situation and would need an additional day off. No one mentioned a problem. I've already spoken to the doctor who covered my shift, and I'm taking one of his later this week."

"Oh, I know. I wasn't implying anything." Tony says quickly. "I just wanted you to know that we were concerned. On your behalf, of course. Was it a problem with your parents in Chicago? If there is anything we can do to help...."

I suck in a breath. I know Tally is not on good terms with her famous parents. Not after all the pain they've caused Caitlin. I went with Scar and the others to rescue her when her mother and former fiancé kidnapped her from this hospital and flew her to Chicago to force her into marriage. I'm not kidding when I say Caitlin has been through hell.

Tally stiffens her spine and gives Tony a look of haughty superiority. She has an ethereal beauty that is enhanced when she's angry. "My family situation has nothing to do with my parents. As far as I know, they need no help. Not from anyone. I was helping Dante's mother. Angela Westbrook."

I see Tony pale when he hears Angela's name. Tally's parents may be famous in certain circles, but Angela Westbrook is the queen of San Diego and maybe all of California. She's also one of the major donors for our hospital.

"I hope Ms. Westbrook is well." Tony says quickly. "She's very important to us."

Tally smirks. "She's fine. But thank you for your concern." When Tony doesn't leave, she addresses him again. "Is there something else we can do for you?"

He glances at me and looks away again. "I was just checking to see how everyone is doing. I'm heading home soon and wanted to reach out to the evening shift to see if there were any problems I could help resolve."

"I think we're good." Tally says. "Thank you. Now we should probably get to work."

I turn away, but Tony stops me. "Ms. Wagstaffe. I was wondering if we could have coffee again soon. We can continue our discussion about your career goals."

I frown as I try to remember our earlier discussion. I can't remember a specific discussion about my goals, except a casual mention by him about the possibility of my moving to obstetrics or even neonatal ICU. "Oh, sure. Maybe when I work an earlier shift?" I suggest.

"Ok. It's a date." He says, walking off.

"You're dating him?" Gina asks me and I shake my head.

“God no. We had coffee once in the cafeteria when he asked if he could sit at my table. Does he really think it’s a date?” I ask them.

“Seems like it.” Tally says with a smirk. “What career changes did you discuss? I’d hate to lose you.”

“We didn’t discuss anything specific. He asked if I ever thought of moving to obstetrics or NICU. But I never said I wanted to change departments.” They both burst out laughing when I tell them. I glance at Tony, who glances back at us. I see his shoulders droop, and I feel a little sorry for him. But seriously, he can’t think I’d be interested in dating him, can he? I’m lost in thought when I feel someone kiss me on the cheek. I jolt but quickly relax to see my father standing next to me with a smile playing on his lips.

“Did I startle you?” He asks me.

I laugh. “A little. My mind was elsewhere. What are you doing here?”

“Had to bring in a young woman who is several months pregnant. She had a shock.” He says. “We were on our way over to meet Caitlin when she started feeling pain.”

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I frown at him. "Caitlin as in Caitlin Chambers?" I ask, glancing at Tally. She shrugs. When her pager goes off, she checks the display, frowning when she reads it. Turning, she walks away in a hurry.

"Yes. I would have thought you heard about her already. Met Flame and Shield at her house this morning. Her husband tried to kidnap Ashlyn, Flame's sister." He says, frowning at me. "Don't you two talk?"

"We've both been busy." I blurt out. "Is she alright?"

He nods. "She's fine. The exam went well and we're leaving soon. By the way, I invited Flame over for dinner. So get with him and figure out a day that works for you both. Ok?" He asks, leaning in to kiss my cheek again. He saunters off to meet a pretty and very pregnant woman sitting in a wheelchair.

"I take it your dad doesn't know you and Flame aren't dating anymore?" Gina asks me. I shrug.

"I haven't told him. I'm surprised Flame didn't say something to him."

"Why would he?" Gina asks with a laugh. "What guy wants to tell a father that he dumped his precious daughter? Especially when that father carries a gun."

I frown when I consider her words. Technically, Flame was the one who broke up with me, but I was the one who made the mistake. I knew he misunderstood the situation, but I let him continue to believe what he thought. Because deep down, I know Flame deserves better. He needs someone strong. Someone who will make a

good Old Lady, like Tally and Evie. I'm not strong. I'm weak. I'm also not pure like Caitlin. I'd be a detriment to Flame, not an asset. No, he's better off without me. I just wish I didn't feel so gutted whenever I think of him with someone else.

I shake off thoughts of Flame as I review the case records for those currently in the ER. So far, we have nothing too serious. A man with chest pains who's resting and a young woman with a broken ankle. It's fairly quiet, but I know that can change in without warning.

I need to address the misunderstanding about Flame with my dad, and soon. I also need to talk with Tony and help him understand we will not happen.

When I hear my name over the PA calling me into surgery, I rush forward to join the paramedics pushing a gurney with Tally running alongside it. I move to the opposite side and almost lose my footing. Laying on the gurney, with his pale face turned toward me and his back covered in blood, is Flame. What the fuck happened?

CHAPTER THREE: FLAME

Will someone turn off that incessant beeping?

When it persists, I struggle to move so I can smash whatever is making that annoying sound. But my frustration turns to panic when I realize I can't open my eyes. I also can't move. Fuck, what the hell is going on?

I struggle to force some part of my body to work. Any part. But only my ears seem to function. Besides the beeping, I can make out voices. Forcing myself to ignore the beeping and concentrate on the voices, I finally make out what they're saying.

"Flame." My name, but who's speaking? The voice is male and familiar. Finally, the haze clears a little bit more and I realize the person talking is Reaper. But how is that

possible? Reaper is in Las Vegas with my sister.

I hear another voice, female, answer him, and I recognize it immediately as my sister, Ashlyn. But how is this possible?

Flashes of memory distract me from their voices. Shield and I helping a pregnant woman out of her home. Convincing her to rely on us to get her to a safe place. Shield and I talking outside a building, waiting for someone. But who? I hear Reaper say the name Deion, and that clears my head a little more. We were waiting for Deion. But why? To kill him? No, I didn't have my gun out. But then I did. I hear a noise, a car pulling up behind us. Then pain.

Another voice and another wave of pain, but this pain isn't physical. It cuts much deeper than that. Brooke's voice. The woman I thought I was going to make my Old Lady until she cheated on me. I hear her talking. Why is she here? Does she just want to drive another knife into my heart? Finish the job she started weeks ago?

"Tally will be here soon to answer questions. He'll wake up when his body is ready. His brain scans are normal." Brooke says.

"But Tally thinks there might be nerve damage?" Ashlyn asks, and I can hear the tears in her voice. "She's worried that he isn't reacting to stimuli."

"The bullet entered near his spinal column, but it didn't damage it. However, he is dealing with swelling. That could be why his nerve endings aren't responding. His body is still healing. Tally can answer all your questions, but there is no reason to worry. He just needs time." I hear Brooke tell my sister.

The more she talks, the angrier I get. Someone shot me? Not only can I not move my legs or arms. I can't feel anything. Just the pain of knowing she cheated on me. That's the pain I focus on right now. I gather all my strength to speak. I need to say

just one thing. “Get the fuck out.” I manage, but I don’t know if anyone heard me. She’s still talking. I need her to stop. I need her to go away. “Get the fuck out.” I manage, and I’m rewarded with silence. Did it work? Is she gone?

“Flame?” Ashlyn says. I can feel her breath on my face and smell her shampoo. I sense someone moving next to her.

“Flame? Are you with us?” Reaper asks. I try to nod, but can’t move my head or get the words out. There’s something on my face. I force my arm up, but someone grabs my hand. Without looking, I know it is Brooke. I’d know her touch anywhere. Fuck.

“Hold on. You have a feeding tube in. Let me remove it.” Brooke says. She’s careful when she pulls the tube out, but it hurts like hell. The pain from her touch and her scent has my eyes watering. She gently brushes those away when she finishes. “Ok, how’s that?”

I glare at her but don’t answer. I want to yell and scream for her to leave, but I can’t force out the words.

“I’m going to get Tally. She’ll want to see him now that he’s awake,” she says before leaving.

I should be happy she’s gone, but now I miss her. Fuck.

“What happened?” I try to ask.

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Reaper leans closer, so I repeat my question.

“You were outside Killian’s apartment waiting for Deion. He was going to help find Trask and turn him over to the cops. Trask must have gotten wind of the plan and came at you and Shield, guns blazing. He shot Shield in the shoulder. He’s fine. Deion got shot in the leg. He’s a couple floors up. You got hit the worst. Shot in the back. Tally operated on you and removed the bullet.”

“I can’t move.” I whisper.

“Yeah. She thinks it’s temporary.” Reaper says, but I hear the fear in his voice.

“When?” I ask. “How long?”

“When did it happen?” Reaper asks before answering. “Three days.”

That explains how they got back from Las Vegas. “Mom?” I ask.

“She’s been in and out.” Ashlyn says. “We’re taking turns sitting with you. Once Tally comes in to see you, I’ll go out and get her.”

“Ok.” I say and give up talking for a while.

“I hear you’re back with us.” Tally says as she breezes into the room. “I was getting ready to pull the plug.” She grins.

“Hey, Doc.” I manage. “I tried to keep sleeping, but these guys were yammering.”

She chuckles as moves closer to examine me. I'm laying partially on my side, but I feel her cool hands against my back. She is checking the wound. I feel her press around the area. It hurts, but it's more like an ache than a sharp pain.

"Swelling looks a little better. You can move your arms?" She asks as she comes around to the other side. I open and close my fists.

"My muscles feel tired." I tell her. "My fingers are tingly."

She nods. "That's a good sign. How about your legs?" I see her shift the sheet out of the way, but I don't feel the fabric against my skin. In fact, I feel nothing. My breathing picks up, and Tally sense it. She places her hand on my arm, drawing my eyes to hers. "The bullet did not damage your spine. But it wreaked havoc on your body. Your body hasn't healed yet. Swelling can cause you to lose feeling in your legs. It is not likely to be permanent."

"But it could be?" I force out.

She pauses but nods. "Once the swelling goes down, you will probably regain feeling. That likelihood is greater than you never walking again. You are strong, young, and healthy. You may need to go through physical therapy, but I will not let you give up hope. Got me?"

I grin at her. "Got you, doc."

She smiles back. "Good. The nurse will be by later to change your dressing. I'm also ordering another CT scan to check on the swelling. Now that you're awake, we'll move you out of ICU and into recovery. In the meantime, sleep."

"Yes, doc." I tell her, grinning when she rolls her eyes.

After she leaves, I drift off. Until I feel a hand on my arm. It's my mom and behind her is Axel, his back to the door, likely on guard duty. I feel a twinge of jealousy when I see my brother in his prospect kutte. Another reminder of what I'll lose if I can't walk again. If I can't ride, I'll lose my spot with the club. Fighting the despair, I close my eyes to calm my thoughts.

"How are you feeling?" My mom asks. She looks older and worn down. Probably from worrying about me.

"Hey." I say, trying to strengthen my voice, but the flash of worry in her eyes tells me I didn't succeed.

"You scared us." Mom says as she adjusts the sheets on my bed.

"I know, and I'm sorry." I'm not sure what to say to her. She was worried that I would end up dead when I joined the club. This incident brought me pretty close. I can't even lie to her and tell her I'll be fine.

"Tally is taking good care of you." Mom says. "So are the nurses. Do what they say and you'll be back up and causing problems again in no time." She smiles at me, but it doesn't reach her eyes.

She's worried, but she's fighting to contain her fear. I need to follow her example.

I will walk again.

I have to.

There is no other option.

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“Hello, Mrs. Barnes. How are you doing?” Brooke says, drawing my attention away from my mom.

Fuck me, she’s gorgeous. Scrubs are functional, but on Brooke, they’re also sexy as hell. Dammit.

“Brooke! It’s good to see you. What torture do you have in store for my son today?” She asks, and it’s then I notice she’s carrying a tray.

“He needs his dressings changed.” She says, grinning at my mom after giving me a quick glance. She places the tray on the table behind me. When I feel her touch me, I can’t take it any longer.

“Not you.” I grit out.

“What?” she and my mom ask.

“I don’t want you touching me. Get someone else to do it.”

I hear my mom gasp and I can see the look of disappointment on her face, but I don’t care. I can’t have Brooke touching me. It hurts too much.

“I’ll get someone else.” Brooke says and I feel her backing away. “Dad, what are you doing here?”

I glance over to see a furious cop at my door. Well, fuck, this day just keeps getting better and better.

CHAPTER FOUR: BROOKE

The pain and anger in Flame's tone when he orders me out of the room slices through me. I force myself to remain professional, but it's hard. I want to break down and beg him to forgive me, even as I know his staying mad at me is the best thing for him. Gina will take care of Flame. That's the best solution.

Turning, I spot my dad and I know by the anger on his face that he's heard Flame. Damn. I never wanted my dad to know how badly I screwed up. "Dad, what are you doing here?"

"I need to interview Mr. Barnes about the shooting. The hospital informed me he was awake and responsive." My dad says, his eyes moving from me to Flame.

I debate staying and playing interference, but I know I'll only make things worse. Stepping into the hall, I go in search of Gina.

I find her chatting with her boyfriend, Curt. He's a security guard in the hospital and they've been dating for several months. I admit he's very attractive, in a quarterback-of-the-football-team kind of way, but he does nothing for me. I prefer my men rugged with a slight edge to them. Like Flame.

"I thought you dumped him?" I ask my co-worker, who giggles when Curt sends me a glare.

"Don't give her any ideas." Curt complains, and I laugh, shaking my head. Those two are so much in love that it hurts to look at them. Which reminds me of why I'm looking for Gina.

"Can you handle the patient in ICU 2?" I ask her. She nods, but when her eyebrows rise, I know she's remembered who is in that room. "He asked for a different nurse."

I tell her so she doesn't have to ask.

"Why?" Curt asks me. "What did you do?"

"He's my ex." I tell him. Curt nods his head in understanding.

"I'll take care of him." Gina assures me. "Would you mind taking the guy in room 215? I was just heading there."

"Not a problem." I assure her and head upstairs.

I enter room 215 to find the patient sitting up in bed talking with his two guests. I smile at the patient before glancing at the others. One is a stunning woman about my age. She's wearing light sweats and a tank top. She has curves, but her arm definition and tiny waist tell me she's fit. I smile at her before glancing at the other person in the room. The look he sends me has my smile slipping. Ever see a guy look at you like you're nothing but a hole to fill? Yeah, it was that kind of look. I repress a shudder and turn my attention back to my patient.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Jones. How are you feeling today?" I ask him as I remove the bandage on his upper thigh.

"Good. Doc said I'd be able to go home in a day or so. Not that it hasn't been fun." He says with a grin. "But it hasn't."

I laugh and nod as I clean the wound and the surrounding area. I knew the person who shot him was the same one who shot Flame. "How is your pain level?" I ask as I replace the dressing.

"I'd say a four." He says. I can tell by the paleness under his dark skin and the tightness around his eyes that he's lying. Either for the benefit of the hot chick or the

guy, I'm not sure. I check the IV and see that he's hardly used any of the morphine. Picking up the controller, I press the button to allow some of the morphine to feed into his system.

“This is your PCA. If you feel pain, press the button here. Don't worry, the system won't let you abuse the med. You need to make sure you stay on top of the pain. It will help you heal faster so you can get out of here sooner.”

He grins at me. “Thanks, Nurse. Wagstaffe.” He adds, looking at my ID. “That name sounds familiar.” Deion muses.

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Since Deion is the head of the street gang, The Spades, I'm fairly certain he's met my dad. Under his official capacity. I finish taking care of Deion and start for the door when Deion stops me.

"Hey, any word on the Demon Dawg guy they brought in? I think his name's Flame or something like that." Deion asks me.

"I'm not allowed to give out any information about a patient." I tell him.

"Not even if he's still in a coma or not?" Deion asks. "The guy took a bullet from someone who betrayed me. I just want to know if he's getting any better."

Seeing as his friends could go check for themselves, I answer that question, but only that one. "He's awake." I tell him. "But that's all I can say."

I step out of the room and stop to get a drink of water when the door opens. The creepy guy steps out and calls me over. "Yes?" I ask him, keeping some distance between us.

"You look familiar." He says, his eyes focused on my face.

"I've worked here for two years. Maybe you've seen me here before." I suggest.

He sneers at me. "You think because I'm part of a gang that I spend a lot of time in a hospital?" He asks.

His tone takes me by surprise, so I take a step back from him. "No, but this is where I

spend most of my time.” I tell him, turning to leave.

He grabs my arm, and as I jerk away from him, I hear my dad call out. I turn to see him stalking toward us, his eyes trained on my obnoxious friend. “You keep your hands off her. Got it?”

“We were just talking.” He says, glaring at my dad before sending me a look. I’m guessing he’s trying to tell me to keep my mouth shut. Not going to happen.

“I’m ok, Dad. He was just leaving after visiting his friend. Weren’t you?” I ask sweetly.

His eyes widen when I say dad, but he slowly nods. “I’m leaving. Have some work to do since my man Deion is stuck here. You take good care of my boss.” He says before walking off.

“You need more security in this hospital.” My dad says. “He could have hurt you.”

“I was just about to scream.” I assure him. “Are you done with Flame?”

He studies me. “Yeah. He gave me the same details I got from Detective Black, not that I was expecting them to differ. Why didn’t you tell me you two broke up?”

I shrug. I really don’t want to talk about Flame, but I know my dad won’t let it go. “We broke up a month ago. It’s fine.”

“He wasn’t very nice to you.” He reminds me. “What happened?”

“We ended on not good terms.” I tell him. “It wasn’t his fault. It was mine. I think I hurt him, and he’s just trying to get some of his own back.”

My dad frowns, but he doesn't press, even though I know he wants to.

"Ok, I should get going. Need to file my report." He says, giving me a hug and leaving me to my rounds.

"Excuse me, nurse?" A man says stepping up to me. He's tall, about six feet, with wavy blonde hair and a slim build. The green of his tie almost matches his eyes. I don't know him, but there is something familiar about him. Especially around the eyes.

"Yes." I respond, taking him in. He's several years older than me, but he's one of those people whose features make him difficult to attach an age to. The blonde hair is light enough to hide any gray. The only sign of age are a few lines around the mouth and eyes.

"I'm hoping you can help me. I'm looking for my daughter." He says.

"Oh, is she a patient here?" I ask. "Do you know her room number?"

He smiles and wow, he's gorgeous. "No, she's not a patient. She's a doctor. Doctor Tallulah Chambers."

My mouth drops. I don't think I've ever experienced that before. I don't have time to consider my reaction, because he's looking around as if trying to find someone else to ask for help, because I'm obviously a dud.

"Sorry. Yes. Dr. Chambers works here. Is she expecting you?" I ask at a complete loss on how to proceed. Tally and Caitlin both had serious issues with their mother, but I wasn't sure how bad things were with their father.

He gives me a pained grin and a sigh. "No, she's not expecting me. I'm pretty sure if

she knew I was coming, she'd have left town. But it's important that I see her, to speak with her."

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I frown and consider my options. I could lie and tell him she's not working today. Or I could take him to the cafeteria or the lobby so I can find Tally and give her a chance to bail. I could also call Dante and tell him that his future father-in-law is here.

"Dr. Chambers?" Tony asks, coming up to shake his hand. "Are you looking for your daughter? I just saw her. Right this way." Tony says, leading the man to ER. Well fuck.

I rush along behind them, not sure what I can do to help. How do you stop a train wreck?

CHAPTER FIVE: FLAME

"Officer Wagstaffe. What can I do for you?" I ask him. I'm expecting him to berate me for my rudeness to his daughter, but he simply scowls at me before greeting my mother. They exchange pleasantries while I wait to see why he's here.

"I heard you were awake. I'm glad to see it's true. We were all worried about you after the shooting." He says, giving me a polite smile. "I need to interview you about the shooting."

I go through the details that I remember while he takes notes. My mom sobs when I describe the pain and blacking out.

"I'm sorry." She sniffles. "That's just hard to hear."

Wagstaffe gives her a genuine smile. "No apologies. Completely understandable. No

one like to see their child hurting.” He turns a less than friendly gaze toward me. “Is that all you remember?” When I nod, he closes his notebook and puts it in his shirt pocket. “It meshes with Detective Black’s version. Thank you.” When he leaves, I turn back to my mother to see her watching me.

“Want to explain what happened between you and Brooke?” She asks.

I sigh, because no, I don’t want to explain, but it looks like I have no choice. “We just broke up. Our personalities didn’t mesh, and we were both getting frustrated.” I tell her. Which is partially true. I thought we were happy and working together to build something. Until I saw a man leaving her apartment early one morning. She and I had been fighting more than usual. We’re both stubborn and she was resistant to being kept in the dark about club business. I knew the other Old Ladies struggled with it, too. I just assumed we’d work out a compromise, like the other guys did with their women, but she didn’t give us a chance.

“Then you work it out.” My mom says. “You need compromise or it won’t work.”

I open my mouth to answer, but there’s a tap on the door before Gina enters. This place is busier than a mall after Thanksgiving.

“Hi, Flame, Mrs. Barnes. How are you both doing?” She asks as she moves to the spot where Brooke stood just a few minutes before. I feel her peeling back the tape holding the bandage in place.

“We’re fine, Gina. Thank you. Brooke didn’t finish dressing Flame’s wound.” She says, narrowing her eyes at me.

Gina snorts. “I know. She came and asked me to do it for her. It’s not a problem. She took my patient, so I think I got the better end of the deal.”

“Why? What’s wrong with the other patient?” I ask, worried that I sent Brooke off into the path of an asshole. A bigger asshole than me, that is.

“He’s actually pretty nice. I think you know him. Deion Jones? I don’t mind him so much, but some of his friends creep me out.” Gina says.

Well, fuck. Brooke is nursing Deion Jones. I’m not sure how I feel about that. “Are they dangerous?”

“Not yet. They just watch you. You know, like they’re wondering how to get you alone in a dark alley?” Gina says.

“That sounds dangerous. Do you think you should have security walk you to your car at night?” My mom asks as I’m considering asking Dante to provide additional men to protect the nurses from Deion’s men.

“My boyfriend works security here, and he makes sure none of the female staff walk to their cars without protection. He’s been covering Deion’s floor, monitoring his visitors.” Gina explains as she finishes up my dressing. “There you go. The wound looks good. You’re healing nicely.”

“I just wish I’d regain some feeling in my legs.” I complain.

“It will come. You can’t give up hope.” Gina says. We turn when someone knocks on the open door.

I spot a guy wearing the uniform of a security guard, and my blood turns cold. He’s the man I saw leaving Brooke’s apartment. So the fucker works here. That explains how they met. I want to get up and pound him, but I’m stuck in this bed, unable to move my legs. So I can’t kick his ass.

“Hi Curt, what’s up?” Gina asks.

“I’m walking Dr. Green and Dr. Barton to their cars. I’ll be back right back. Then we can go grab some dinner.”

“Ok, see ya soon.” Gina says, giving him a wave. He smiles at her and my mother before leaving.

“You and Brooke’s new boyfriend are friends?” I ask Gina.

She frowns and gives me a questioning look. “You mean Curt?” When I nod, she laughs. “I think learning they are dating would come as a surprise to them both.” She says with a chuckle. “Curt’s my boyfriend. Why would you think he’s dating Brooke? She is not his type, and he is certainly not hers. They get along pretty well, although they argue like brother and sister.”

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I frown at Gina. “You’re dating him?” I ask. When she nods, I continue. “But I saw him coming out of her apartment one morning. Early.”

Gina frowns as she considers my comment. I immediately wish I could pull it back. There’s no sense upsetting her. But maybe she’d be better off without the cheating bastard.

“Wait, was this a little over a month ago?” She asks and I nod. “Curt and I were staying with Brooke for about a week while we looked for a new apartment. We were moving in together and wanted to find a bigger place closer to the hospital.”

“But...” I start and realize I don’t know what I’m going to say. When I saw Curt coming out of her apartment, I made an assumption. But when I confronted Brooke about him, she didn’t explain. She got mad at me for spying on her and broke things off. Why the fuck didn’t she just tell me the truth? Why did she get so defensive?

“Is that why you two broke up?” Gina presses. I had forgotten she and my mom were still in the room. “You thought she cheated on you with Curt?” When I nod, she frowns. “But didn’t Brooke explain who he was when you asked?” When I say nothing, she smacks my leg. I don’t feel it, but I still scowl at her. “You didn’t ask?”

“I did.” I protest, but I’m so confused that I can’t think of what to say next.

“What did she say?”

“She just got mad at me and accused me of spying on her.” I defend myself. “I thought she was admitting it.”

I see two similar looks of pity on their faces. Well, fuck. What was I supposed to think?

“And you just gave up?” My mom asks. “Is that how I raised you? To run away from your problems?” I groan because she’s right. She taught us to always face our problems head on.

“I kept expecting her to end things, so I thought that’s what she was doing.” I growl, throwing my head back as I slam my fist on the mattress.

Axel enters the room as I berate myself for how I handled things with Brooke.

“Shouldn’t you be guarding the door, prospect?” I ask Axel, and he nods.

“Yeah, I was, but when I heard all the shouting, I thought you needed my help.” Axel says with a grin. “You’re always pissing off the ladies.”

“Fuck you.” I return only to have mom cluck at both of us about our language.

“Dr. Chambers said she’s moving you after a CT scan.” Gina says as she moves around the hospital bed, prepping it for my move. Brooke rushes in just as Gina starts wheeling me out.

“Axel, you need to call Dante and get him down here. It’s Tally. She needs him.”

CHAPTER SIX: BROOKE

As I follow Tony guiding Dr. Chambers to the ER nurse’s station, I feel like I’m watching a horrendous traffic accident as it happens. Tally has her back to us, and I have this urge to scream for her to run. I know her father won’t attack her here in the hospital, but I prepare myself to jump into the fray if it comes to it.

Tony calls out to Tally, and I see her turn. Her eyes widen, then narrow when she sees her father.

“What are you doing here?” She asks. Her tone is frosty.

“I need to speak with you.” Vance Chamber says. “It’s important.”

“I have nothing to say to you.” She replies.

“Dr. Chambers.” Tony admonishes her. “This man is a distinguished guest in this hospital. You can’t speak to him that way.”

When both doctors turn and yell at him to shut up, I have to stifle a laugh. Tony backs away from the feuding doctors. When he spots me, he comes to stand next to me.

“Please. I only need a few minutes of your time.” Vance says. “I just want to talk to my daughter.”

“You lost me as a daughter after what you tried to do to Caitlin. Or have you forgotten?” Tally asks as she turns to walk away.

Vance grabs her arm and pulls her back around. “That wasn’t my fault. Your sister...” But Tally doesn’t give him a chance to finish that sentence. She closes her right fist and lays him out.

“Dr. Chambers!” Tony yells, and I realize I need to step in. Tally needs help. And the only person who can take charge of this situation is Dante.

Dashing down the hall toward Flame’s room, I’m searching for Axel. When I don’t see him, I rush into Flame’s room. I know he doesn’t want to see me, but he’s going to have to lump it for now. Tally needs Dante, stat. When I see Axel, I yell for him to

call Dante and get him down here. Axel yanks out his phone and makes the call. It's then that I see Gina wheeling Flame out of the room.

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“What’s wrong with Tally?” Flame asks stopping Gina.

“Her father is here, in the hospital. She punched him. Shit. Maybe I should get back out there. I thought maybe Dante could help.” I explain.

He nods. “Good call. Please, go check on her. Axel, you go, too.”

“But I’m supposed to guard you.” Axel complains, but I can see his worried eyes trained on the door. He wants to help their queen.

“You go. I’ll stay with Flame.” I tell him. “You’ll be more helpful than I could be until Dante gets here. He’s on his way, right?”

Axel nods. “Yeah, he’ll be here in ten minutes. Ok, I’m going, I’ll be back as soon as Dante gets here.”

“We’ll be in room 220.” Gina tells him. “We’re moving him upstairs.”

Axel nods as he bolts out of the room.

“I’ll take him.” I tell Gina, who nods.

“Are you sure?” She asks me and I nod. “Good, now I can go meet Curt for dinner. You know, MY boyfriend?” She says the last to Flame, and I realize my secret is out.

“Why did you lie to me?” He asks as I wheel him to the elevator.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Curt is Gina’s boyfriend. That’s who I saw coming out of your apartment that morning. Why didn’t you just tell me you weren’t with him?”

“Why did you think I was?” I retort. I’m trying to act cool, to convince him I’m still angry at him for accusing me of cheating on him. But honestly, I was never angry with him. I understood why he jumped to the conclusion he did when he saw Curt. I could have easily smoothed things over, but I used his accusation as a chance to end things. Not because I wanted to, but because I had to. Flame deserves so much better than me.

“Because I’m an idiot who never believed I deserved someone like you. I knew I was aiming above my pay grade, but I wanted you. I kept expecting you to end it.”

In the elevator, I move so I can look at him.

“You think I’m better than you?” I huff out a laugh. “No, I’m not better than you. I never was. You’re too good for me. You’re the one who deserves someone better. Someone stronger.”

I don’t give him a chance to respond as I hand him off to the technician. I consider leaving and letting another nurse take him to his new room, but I guess I’m a glutton for more pain. Because I stay.

He says nothing until I have him in his room and hooked back up to the monitors.

“Brooke, love, there is no one better than you. How could you ever think that you’re not good enough for me? You’re the best person for me. Please tell me you forgive me and that you’re willing to give us another chance?” The look on his face shows so much hope, it breaks my heart.

I say nothing until he's done

I stare at him, tears falling freely, but I don't know what to say. I want to fall on him and say yes as I kiss every inch of skin I can reach, but nothing has changed. Not really. I'm not good enough for him. And I'm too ashamed to tell him why. "I can't." I sob and my heart breaks at the look on his face. Pain, followed by confusion and finally anger.

"I understand." He says, turning away from me.

I bolt into the nearest bathroom. Sitting in a stall, I use the toilet paper to wipe the tears away. I don't know what to do. I want to be with Flame, but if he knew the truth about me, would he still feel the same way about me? As much as it hurts to not be with him, to have him look at me with disgust. The same look that I have on my face whenever I look in the mirror. That would kill me. Having him mad at me is hard enough.

I hear someone enter the bathroom, so I finish drying my tears and use the toilet before exiting to wash my hands. Standing at the sink, I see the gorgeous woman who was in Deion's room earlier.

"Nurse Wagstaffe, right?" She asks, holding her hand out to me after we both finished drying our hands.

"Yes. You can call me Brooke." I tell her.

"My name is Tanya. Tanya Webster." We shake and walk out of the restroom together.

"Are you dating Deion?" I ask her, and she nods.

“We’ve been together for only a couple of weeks. At first, I wasn’t certain about being involved with someone in a gang. But Deion treats me great.”

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I nod, not because I think Deion is a great guy, although I prefer him over his men. I nod because I know most people feel the same way about bikers.

“I know what you mean. When I was dating Flame, I’d hear about how violent bikers are.” I tell her. “Not that they’re strangers to violence. Flame’s here because someone shot him.”

“Trask.” Tanya says with a scowl on her face. “I’ve never liked him. He always gave me the creeps.” She pauses and considers her next words. “Actually, all of his men make me uncomfortable, except his cousin Killian. But that may be because his sister is my therapist, Dr. Athena Stokes?”

I nod because I recognize the name. She has a great reputation for working with rape victims. I glance at Tanya, who is watching my reaction. She nods when we lock eyes.

“I’m a rape victim. A woman, who I thought was my friend, drugged me and sold me to a vicious man who kept me in his home as his personal sex doll.” She growls at the last words, but then shakes her head. “I escaped and got help. Athena helped me live again. I still have flashbacks and nightmares, but they are lessening.”

“That’s good. I’m sorry you went through that. One of my friends is also a rape survivor. She inherited a large sum of money and is building a haven for victims. I wonder if Athena would work with her on it.” I muse, mostly to myself, as I consider the opportunity.

“Caitlin Chambers?” Tanya asks, and I nod in surprise.

“You know her?” I ask.

“I know of her. Actually, Athena has mentioned wanting to meet Caitlin and understanding her plans. I can’t remember the name of the place.”

“Crossroads.” I tell her. “Caitlin is working with the Demon Dawgs Motorcycle Club on the project. They like to incorporate devil and demon terminology into their names.” I say with a laugh.

“Like, Lucifer’s Den?” Tanya asks and nods. “I’ve been there. Very nice.”

“Caitlin’s sister is a doctor here.” I suddenly remember the brouhaha that I left. “Oh my god, Tally, I need to go. It was nice talking with you. Maybe we can get together later and I can introduce you to Caitlin?”

“That would be great!” Tanya calls after me. “I’ll leave my number with Deion to give to you.”

I wave back to let her know I heard her as I rush toward the ER.

I can hear the commotion and cringe. Tally’s voice carries over the space, and I can hear her anger and her anguish. I step into the waiting room to find Tony standing between her and her father. She has tears on her beautiful face as she glares at Tony.

He’s shouting at Tally. I can’t make out all his words but I hear him say ‘violence’, ‘suspension’ and ‘reversed.’ Tally’s father is shouting at Tony, and I can hear him more clearly. He’s threatening Tony with bodily harm and the end of his career if he fires Tally.

Fuck, what a mess.

I step forward, but I don't know what I'm going to do or if I can help. Dante is the one who takes charge the second he steps through the doors. He lets out an ear-splitting whistle to get everyone's attention. Everyone turns to look at him. Reaper and Chaos enter with him and move to his side. Ashlyn comes in after. She goes straight to Tally and pulls her into her arms. I go to stand with them.

CHAPTER SEVEN: FLAME

Watching Brooke flee the room makes me equal parts satisfied and remorseful. And 100% pissed off. I just don't get it. We were good together. Great, in fact. The best sex I've ever had was with her. But it wasn't just the sex. It was everything. Being with her made me feel complete. I know she felt the same. So what the hell happened between us? I want to call her back and demand an answer.

Since I can't get up and follow her, I let my mind wander back to the day it all went to hell.

We had plans to go out for breakfast because we both had the day off. I was early because I wanted to talk with her in private before we went out. Seeing that man, who I now know was Curt, leaving her apartment sent me into a tailspin. I couldn't think of a single reason for him leaving that early in the morning, except for the obvious one. He had spent the night and was leaving before I arrived. Unlike what I told Shield, I had confronted her. She swore she didn't cheat on me, but she never told me who he was. I don't remember the entire argument, but I remember the end. She accused me of not trusting her and that maybe I had a reason not to.

I thought she was admitting to cheating on me, but now I know she didn't, at least not with Curt. So what did she mean?

With no answers, I drift off to sleep. When I wake up, Gina is bringing me my meal.

“This is my floor now.” Gina explains. “So we’ll be seeing more of each other.”

I nod and thank her. Before she leaves, she turns to look at me. “Don’t give up on her. Something is going on with her. I think she needs you.”

I consider her words and nod. “I don’t know if she’ll let me in, but I’m not going anywhere.”

After she leaves, Axel and Ashlyn step into my room.

“What are you doing back here?” I ask her and roll my eyes when she sticks her tongue at me. “I wasn’t complaining, I was just asking a question. Where’s Reaper? I thought you two were going out to dinner.”

“We did.” Ashlyn says, taking a chair. “Dante called him back to the clubhouse for a meeting.”

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“Why didn’t you go with him to the clubhouse?” I ask. “Why did he bring you back here first?”

“Because we were here when Dante called everyone back. I stuck around. Brooke is trying to get some details about Tally’s suspension.”

“What happened?” I have a special bond with Tally that has made me ultra protective of her. When I was a prospect, Dante assigned me to guard her. The killer we were hunting captured her on my watch. The club found her and rescued her in time, but knowing my failure could have cost Tally her life still sickens me. And that doesn’t cover how her reaction to Dante branding me hurt the club. Tally turned her back on Dante. I spoke with her and explained the situation so that when her life was once again in danger, she called the club for help. Now, she’s the perfect Queen for our King.

“Tally’s father showed up at the hospital.” Axel states. I nod because that was what Brooke said when she came to get Axel.

“Right, you were to call Dante and get him down here. Why?” I ask. “Was he threatening her? Does he know about...?” I let my question trail off because I don’t know how much Reaper told Ashlyn about the capture of Standish and his son, as well as Tally’s mother and brother. Ashlyn rolls her eyes at me while Axel shakes his head.

“No, at least I didn’t hear him ask Tally about their whereabouts. He said something about how he never really knew his wife and that her lies cost him his daughters.” Axel says.

“Damn.” I murmur. “So he came here to apologize?”

Axel shrugs. “I don’t know. Tally went off on him. Screamed at him to go away. When she tried to walk away, he grabbed her arm. She decked him.”

I bark out a laugh. “She did? Damn. I know she and the other Old Ladies have been learning self-defense moves from their men, but I wouldn’t expect Tally to punch someone. Evie and Kingsley, yeah, but not Tally.”

“She was pretty pissed off.” Ashlyn chimes in. “Although I don’t think he meant to attack her.”

“He attacked her?” I ask. “Fuck, Dante will kill him.”

Ashlyn rolls her eyes. “Not physically. Verbally. I saw his face after she went off on him. He looked sad rather than angry.”

“He looked terrified when Dante showed up.” Axel says with a chuckle. “You should have seen Dante barge in and take charge. He’s a force.” I share a look with my sister over the obvious hero worshipping between our brother and Dante. Although, I’d be the first to admit that Dante lives up to the hype. “He calmed Tally down and got her father to agree to go back to his hotel. He almost decked the HR guy who was yelling at Tally and threatening to suspend her.”

“I thought you said they suspended her?” I ask Ashlyn.

She shrugs. “He was screaming at her about attacking a well-respected physician and how the hospital has no tolerance for violence. Dante got him to shut up and backpedal, I think. I’m not sure what happens next. That’s why I wanted to stay here and talk to Brooke.”

“What would Brooke know about it?” I ask her.

“She’s friends with the HR guy. She was talking to him after Dante left. He likes her, you can tell by the way he looks at her. That and I heard him agree to talk to her if she agreed to spend her dinner break with him. They went to the cafeteria. I’m hoping she comes here when they’re done.”

I clench my fists at the thought of Brooke eating with this ‘HR guy.’ Who was he and why was he insisting she have dinner with him? I glance at Ashlyn and see she’s watching me with one eyebrow raised. “He’s not bad looking.” She says with a cheeky grin. “He’s not as tall as you, but he’s clean cut, wears a suit and tie. He even styles his hair.” She laughs at my expression.

My hair grows fast and in all directions. Even if I wear a bandana under my helmet, my hair looks like I drove through a wind tunnel without a helmet. She smirks when I reflexively reach for my hair. “Shut up.” I tell her, making her laugh. “Do you think she’s interested in this guy?” I ask her.

She shakes her head. “Absolutely not. If she was, she would have jumped at the chance to eat with him. He had to bribe her before she agreed. Brooke loves you. But she won’t keep loving you if you continue treating her like shit.”

My mouth drops open. “What are you talking about? I’ve never treated her like shit.”

“Really? So all those times you hooked up with bunnies was what? Showing her how much you love her?” Ashlyn asks. “Did you think she wouldn’t know?”

I open my mouth and close it. Is that what she meant? Not that she was cheating on me, but that I had cheated on her? I shake my head. I didn’t start hooking up with bunnies until after we broke up. But our hookups weren’t what Ashlyn imagined. I never slept with any of them. Not for lack of trying, but because my dick doesn’t

want anyone but Brooke. “I’ve never cheated on Brooke.” I tell her. “Not then and not now.”

“Then what happened?” Ashlyn asks as my brother leans against the wall, as if settling in for a story. I hate to disappoint them.

“I don’t know. I thought we were fine, then one day we broke up.” After telling them about the misunderstanding with Curt, I end the story with her words that day and today. “I apologized, but she won’t forgive me.”

“You don’t remember, do you?” Ashlyn asks me.

“Remember what?” I ask her, because clearly I don’t.

“You don’t remember that you two were having problems before the breakfast fiasco?” Ashlyn asks, continuing when I frown at her in confusion. “Reaper said she hadn’t been returning your calls, and that you were afraid you were losing her. You just didn’t know why.”

I stare at the wall as I recall my conversation with Reaper. It was a week before I suggested our breakfast date. We’d been missing each other’s phone calls and texts. After weeks of being together every day, we started spending less and less time together. I had woken alone again one morning, realizing that I hadn’t seen her or spoken with her in too long. Reaper must have mentioned our conversation to Ashlyn. I’d first mentioned it to Reaper to get his feedback on whether or not I was overreacting.

“When was the last time you were together before she started slipping away?” Axel asks. “Did you guys get into an argument?”

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“We didn’t argue. But I had to cancel our date. We made plans to go out for Chinese Food but I got stuck at work. Some idiot broke into one of our storage units. I had to deal with the cops and the guy renting the space. I remember being pissed because I wanted to be with Brooke. We spent the night together, and she said she understood.” I shrug. “Maybe she doesn’t like how much time I spend working for the club.” I hope that isn’t it, because as much as I love my mom, sisters, and brother, the club is just as much my family.

CHAPTER EIGHT: BROOKE

“Shut the fuck up!” Dante bellows at Tony, who has the sense to cower under his glare. “This is what’s going to happen. I’m taking my woman home. Now. She’ll decide if she comes back to work. If you try to fire her or suspend her, you’ll find yourself in a world of hurt.” He turns away from Tony, who is sputtering his protest.

When Tony takes a step toward Dante, Chaos and Reaper move in his path.

“As for you, Dr. Chambers. I don’t know why you thought it was a good idea to blindside Tally while she was working. As a surgeon, I would expect more consideration from you. You and your family have caused my family enough trouble. Go back to Chicago.”

Vance Chambers holds up his hands, and I can see the sadness on his face as he studies Tally. He glances back at Dante. “You’re right. Of course. I didn’t come here to upset her. I just wanted to talk to her, and she hasn’t been taking my calls.” Dante glances at Tally but says nothing, simply looking back at Vance. “I only want a chance to talk to Tally and Caitlin. I’ve let them both down, and I just want to

apologize. The Feds have shut down my clinic, but I don't care about that. I only care about my daughters and fixing what I broke." He says, his eyes pleading with Tally to believe him. "My lawyer thinks I should be in Chicago fighting for my practice, but I had to come and save something more important."

Tally is leaning against Ashlyn as she watches her father. She moves back to Dante's side. He slips an arm around her.

"I can't speak for Caitlin, but I'll talk with her about meeting with you. We may listen, but not here. Not now." She says as she wraps her arms around her center while Dante lays his hand protectively over her belly.

Vance's eyes go wide as he recognizes the meaning of their stance.

"You're pregnant?" He whispers. "My baby is pregnant?" He looks at Tally. "Please, I'll do whatever you I have to, if you'll just give me some of your time to see if I can salvage even a small part of our relationship. Your mother caused so much damage, but I'm just as guilty for listening to her. I'll likely lose Chambers Group because of her. But I don't want to lose you, too. I realize now that I need to question everything she told me about you, Caitlin, the business, and especially Standish, his son, and your brother."

Tally studies her father for a minute. "I think we've made a spectacle out of our family enough for one day. I'll meet with you, but not today. Go back to your hotel. I'll call you, and we can schedule a time and place to meet." With those words, she whispers something to Dante, who nods. She turns and pushes past Tony and the other spectators to move further into the building.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" Tony demands, reaching out to grab Tally's arm but pulling back quickly when Dante, Reaper and Chaos all growl.

“I’m getting my things.” Tally tells him as she continues walking. I run after her, finding her by the employee lockers, resting her forehead against the cool metal.

“Are you alright?” I ask her.

She sighs and looks at me. “No. I can’t believe I broke down like that, let my emotions take over. We caused such a scene. I can’t blame Tony for wanting to fire me. He should fire me.”

“Don’t say that. You were upset. After everything your family has put you and Caitlin through, I can’t imagine how you could have reacted any differently.”

She gives me a sad smile. “Thanks, but I acted like a teenager with daddy issues.” She chuckles. “I guess that isn’t far from the truth.”

“Are you going to talk with him, listen to what he has to say?” I ask.

She nods. “I am. I realized when he mentioned mom and her lies, that Caitlin and I dealt with her more than him. He was always working. I remember most of my arguments about what I was doing after graduation were with her, not my dad. She was the one who pushed me to join Chambers Medical Group. When he heard I wasn’t joining them, he was sad, but he wasn’t angry. Not like her. I forgot about that.” She muses. “How often do we see our parents as a set instead of two separate individuals?”

“You think she was pressing her agenda, but not necessarily theirs?” I ask, and Tally nods.

“I need some time to think, and I need to talk with Caitlin. I don’t know how long I’ll be gone, or if I’m coming back. You’ll take care of Flame for us, right?”

I gulp. I can't imagine not working with Tally. She's one of my favorite doctors and a great friend. I'll miss her terribly. But what is more problematic is how can I take care of Flame? But so as not to cause Tally more stress, I nod. I'll figure something out.

"Do you think you can talk to Tony? I hate to ask, but I know you and he are friends. Can you see if he's thinking of letting me go? Dante will go ballistic if Tony plays that card. Maybe he'll just give me a few days of unpaid leave and a note in my file. I know Dante will destroy him, and maybe this hospital if Tony fires me."

"I'll talk with him." I promise. "I'll play the pregnant card. That's worked for women for years."

I walk back out to the lobby with her. I see Chaos and Reaper escorting Vance Chambers out of the building while Dante opens his arms for Tally.

"Dr. Chambers..." Tony begins, but stops when Dante snarls at him.

"Leave her alone." He says. "She's pregnant, and I won't let you attack her. You do what you have to do, but know this. My club has a couple of exceptional lawyers on our payroll. We've provided your hospital with several donations. If that isn't enough to have you reconsidering your threats against Tally, remember that Angela Westbrook will have plenty to say to the board of directors if you fire her daughter-in-law, the mother of her first grandchild. Do we understand each other?"

At each statement from Dante, Tony grows paler until he's almost the same color as Tally. Considering his normally tan skin, that's a little frightening.

Without waiting for an answer, Dante and Tally leave. But not before Tally sends me a pleading glance before glancing at Tony. I nod back at her. I understand my mission. Find out what Tony is planning so I can help Tally avoid Dante unleashing

hell on Tony and the hospital.

I sidle up to Tony, who's still staring after the power couple. "You ok?" I ask him, glancing at Ashlyn, who is watching us.

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“No. I’m not. I need to file a report and contact our lawyers.” He says. “I’m so angry, I’m shaking.”

“Look, why don’t you go have some dinner and calm down before you get started?”

He glances at me. “You don’t think I should fire her, do you?”

I answer him honestly. “No, I don’t. I understand why you’re upset, but Tally is an amazing doctor, one of our best. You don’t know the history between her and her parents, so you don’t understand why his coming her has her so upset. Maybe you could just give her a couple of days without pay? Administrative leave?” I repeat Tally’s suggestion.

He looks at me, and I can see something in his eye that has me wanting to backpedal.

“I might be willing to listen if you keep talking while we eat.” He suggests with a grin.

Ugh. I was hoping he’d just see the advantage of following my suggestion without adding his own. But I want to help Tally. And since I’m not likely to fulfill my promise to care for Flame. I guess I could at least ensure Tally’s position at the hospital.

“Ok, let’s go.” I tell him, sending an eye roll to Ashlyn, who suppresses a smile just as Tony looks her way.

Thinking he might try to turn this into an actual date, I’m glad when he leads me to

the cafeteria. After grabbing a salad, I find a table in the center of the room when I see him veering toward a booth.

“You know what I don’t understand,” He starts after he swallows a bite of his cheeseburger. “Why is Tally the golden child of this hospital? I’ve checked her record. In her first few years, she was diligent about covering her shift and would often volunteer to cover other doctors. But these past couple of months, she’s been unavailable almost as much as she’s been at work.”

“She had some family issues.” I tell him. Although I’m not sure how much I can share. I know that the same man who killed one of our nurses beat and raped Caitlin. But she didn’t report it. No one had. “Someone attacked her sister, mugged her. Tally took some time to care for her.”

“Doubt it was a mugging.” Tony mutters as he chews his food. Ew. He could at least swallow first. When he does, he continues. “I hear her sister is dating one of those bikers. He probably beat her.”

I choke on the bite that I just took and swallow some water before unloading on him. “Scar would never hurt Caitlin. He adores her.” I protest. “None of those guys would ever hurt a woman. That’s just not who they are.”

He looks at me with suspicion. “Are you dating one of them?”

I shake my head. “I used to, but we broke up. But I know most of them and attended several parties. They’re good guys.”

“But you heard Dante threaten me?” Tony protests.

I glance at him and feel a little sorry for him because he’s an innocent. He’s a little dog who thinks he has a chance against the big dogs, the Demon Dawgs. He couldn’t

be more wrong.

“Tony. Dante doesn’t make threats. He told you exactly what he would do if you hurt Tally. She’s carrying his baby, which is also Angela Westbrook’s grandchild. Do you really want to fight against them when you could be the better man and forgive Tally for having an emotional response to her estranged father showing up out of the blue?”

He looks a little green as he pushes his plate away. “What kind of precedent would I be setting? She crossed a line. How can I overlook that? What would be a good enough excuse?”

“Pregnancy hormones?” I suggest.

When I see his eyes light up and his shoulder snap back, I know I have him. Good. One crisis contained and one promise fulfilled. Now to see how to fulfill my second promise.

“Ok. I’ll consider it.” We continue eating in silence. “I appreciate your help with this. I know you are friends with Tally, but it seems like you also want to help me.”

I nod. “I do. You’re good at your job.”

“I am.” He says, smiling. “Maybe you and I could go out sometime away from here.” When I frown. He chuckles. “As friends, of course. We work together, we could never date.”

“Oh. Ok. Then sure. Dinner some time would be great.”

CHAPTER NINE: FLAME

“Since it’s just us here, I have a question for you.” Ashlyn says.

“I’m almost afraid to hear it, but go ahead.” I tell her.

“Are you happy working at Styx?” she asks.

Her question surprises me. Styx is our towing and storage business. We took it over when the previous owner couldn’t pay back a loan. He gave us the business and moved to Northern California to work with his son. Feral, our Road Captain, took over as manager using Reaper and Ghost to help run it when they were prospects. When they patched in, they took over the business. I kind of fell into managing it with them.

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“I haven’t really thought about. Why?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. It seems like you’d get bored. You used to love learning new things. You were always on YouTube learning how to fix something or learning how to build or create items. It seems like once you patched in, you stopped.”

I frown as I consider her observation. Working at Styx is a job, maybe not a demanding job, but it isn’t an awful job. Plus, I get to work with my best friends. “Living at the apartment complex with mom, I had to learn how to fix things so I could help her.” I explain. “I guess I enjoyed learning, but I did it more to help mom out.”

“So, you’re satisfied working at Styx?” she presses.

“Why are you asking?”

“Reaper and I were talking. He told me he was thinking of creating a new business for the club. He has several ideas, and he’s excited about the opportunity to create something new. It just got me thinking about you. Why aren’t you doing something similar? It seemed when you were prospecting, you had several ideas for what you could do once you patched in.” Ashlyn reminds me. “I was wondering why you didn’t follow through with any of them?”

Axel, who has been mostly quiet as he stands near the door, chimes in. “She’s right. I remember when you were a prospect, what excited you the most was all the opportunities. They own several businesses, and Dante is always interested in adding new ones. You had a list of new businesses that you could start with Reaper and

Ghost, or just on your own. But then you stopped talking about it after you patched in.”

I feel a twinge in the brand on my chest. Dante gave me the brand when I patched in. It was my punishment for letting a killer capture Tally. He had given me the choice of staying a prospect for another year or accepting the brand after patching in. I’d chosen the brand. I knew I’d see that brand every day and strive to do better. But if I’m honest with myself, the brand is also a stark reminder of what happens if I screw up again. I absently rub the brand and consider the implications. Have I been a coward? Taking the easy way instead of pushing myself because of the mistake I made in the past? Even the pain of receiving the brand hadn’t squashed the thrill of getting my patch. When did I lose that excitement?

“How are you doing?” Brooke asks as she sails into the room. I lock eyes with her and see the concern. “Tally asked me to check in on you.” She explains before she focuses her attention on Ashlyn and Axel, who take turns giving her a hug.

“Did you talk to that HR guy?” Ashlyn asks. “Is he going to fire Tally?”

“I got him to cool down a little and to understand that it was her father’s fault for trying to talk to her at work, so I don’t think he’s looking to fire her. I also reminded him she’s pregnant. There isn’t a medical professional here who won’t back her reaction as resulting from pregnancy hormones.” Brooke explains with a grin.

While I’m grateful to Brooke for any help she can give Tally, I can’t get past the jealousy. What kind of relationship does she have with this guy? One where she can work her magic and get him to agree to back down? “What did you have to give him in return?” I ask her. I try to keep the bite out of my tone, but the twin looks of disgust on Axel and Ashlyn’s faces, combined with Brooke’s blush, tell me I didn’t succeed.

“We’re friends.” Brooks says. “That’s all. We hit it off when he took over after they fired the last HR manager over his inability to curtail Dr. Marshall’s harassment. He’s trying to do a better job than his predecessor.”

Hearing her defend him just spikes my anger and my jealousy. I open my mouth, but before I can say something to further piss her off, my sister interrupts.

“That’s good. I’m glad they did something. They should have fired that asshole the first time he used his position like that. Did he ever try anything with you?” Ashlyn asks. “Marshall, I mean.”

Brooke chuckles, and the sound hits me right in the chest. Fuck, I love the sound of her laugh.

“He did. Once. I told him to back off, and he threatened my job. Told me the board wouldn’t believe a nurse over a doctor.” She explains. I remember the story. Brooke’s way of handling Marshall was satisfactory, even though I wanted to kill him. “I told him I wouldn’t bother going to the board. That I would go to my dad, who is a cop, and he would believe me over Marshall without a doubt.” She frowns. “I threatened to have dad check him out and see if he harassed other nurses. Damn, I wish I had. Maybe they would have arrested him before he attacked Tally.”

“Hey, don’t do that.” I tell her. “Tally is fine. She survived and Marshall is in jail. Besides, his attack on her facilitated her and Dante get back together.”

Brooke gives me a smile and nod. “You’re right. They’re together and they’re happy. While Marshall is rotting in jail and hating his life.”

We all chuckle as Reaper and Ghost stroll into the room.

“What are you laughing about?” Reaper asks as he pulls Ashlyn into his arms and

kisses her.

“Guy in a hospital bed here.” I protest. “Don’t make me throw up or kill you.”

Reaper chuckles as he pulls Ashlyn onto his lap before giving me a smirk. “You can try, but you’ll have to get off your ass first. I think I’m safe.”

I flip him off and look at Ghost. “What’s going on? How’s Tally?”

“She’s fine. Waffles between chewing nails and sobbing with guilt.” He chuckles. “I’ve never seen Dante so off balance.”

“What about her father?” Brooke asks. “Is she going to talk to him?”

Reaper nods. “That was the plan when we left. Caitlin decided. She wants to talk to him. To hear his side and then tell him what he and her mother did to her. Tally agreed. She realized Caitlin was the one that had to make the call. Their parents did nothing to Tally, except cut off communication with her when she chose San Diego over Chicago. Caitlin was the one they traumatized.”

“So, when are they meeting?” I ask.

“They’re meeting tonight. At his hotel.” Reaper says as he rubs his hand on Ashlyn’s thigh. I’m trying to ignore it, but when she shifts, I want to puke.

“Stop that.” I tell them. They both roll their eyes at me, but at least Reaper stops petting her.

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“I need to get back to my rounds.” Brooke says. “Technically, you shouldn’t have this many visitors.” She reminds us. “I’ll be back by here in a couple hours. Can you try not getting me in trouble?”

“I’m here to relieve Axel.” Ghost tells her before turning to Axel. “You can head back to the clubhouse whenever you’re ready.”

“We’re heading off, too.” Reaper says as he lifts Ashlyn up from their chair they were sharing. “I’ll come back tomorrow after Church. Dante said he’d fill us in on their meeting then. Want us to patch you in?”

“That would be great.” I tell Reaper, although I keep my eyes on Brooke. I see her glance back at me and then look away. It was only for a second, but I know I see what I hoped to see. The same look of yearning that she had before I screwed us up.

With everyone gone, I try to sleep, but my mind keeps replaying the day. One thing about being stuck in a hospital bed is that you’re alone with your thoughts, with no way of running away from them. No matter how much you want to.

Ashlyn was right when she pointed out that I lost my fire, my drive. I’ve been coasting. I know some of that is fear. Fear that I’ll screw up and end up branded again, but that’s not fair to Dante. He isn’t callous and he would never brand a member for a simple mistake. But fear was only part of the reason I’ve been coasting. Losing Brooke was a blow. I’ve been riding in neutral instead of adding throttle. Being here, with her so close, I have to get her to talk to me. To fix what went wrong and get us back on track.

CHAPTER TEN: BROOKE

Leaving Flame's room, I make my way through the ward and check on my patients. It's coming on ten so many are sleeping, or at least trying to sleep. Most of them are alone. We don't keep strict visiting hours, but most people leave their loved ones at the hospital and go home to their loved ones there. Standard practice for the Demon Dawgs is that no member or family member stays at the hospital without a guard. This was a practice I approve of. I knew they hadn't caught the guy who shot Flame yet, and I know I'd worry myself sick about him if Axel or Ghost weren't with him. I give a finger wave to Ghost, who is now sitting outside Flame's room, alert and watching the corridor.

Unfortunately, Flame isn't the only victim of that bastard in the hospital. I enter Deion's room, one of his men is there with him. He's sitting in the corner, playing on his cell phone. If he's there to guard his leader, he's doing a poor job of it. Ignoring him, I move to my patient and run through my checklist before entering updates on the computer. I turn to leave when the guard dog speaks.

"I remember where I recognize you from." He says.

I consider ignoring him and walking out the door, but he hasn't really done anything to deserve my rudeness, so I turn to look at him.

"I'm sorry. Were you speaking to me?" I ask, keeping my voice professional.

"Yep." He says, standing to move toward me. "I knew I recognized you earlier. I couldn't figure out from where, but as I was going through some footage, I remembered." He gives me a grin that chills my skin.

"Footage?" I ask. I'm nervous but not concerned. I can't imagine what footage he could have.

“We offer security for some stores around town where thieves and shoplifters have hit.” He says, his grin widening when I gulp. “One of those stores is a beauty shop. They have a pesky problem of people walking off with their merchandise. They paid us to put in some cameras to try to catch them. While I’m here guarding Deion, I’ve been studying the video. Imagine my surprise when I see you enter the store.”

I want to run, but I can’t move. All I can do is pray that he didn’t see me do anything but enter the store. I can tell by the look in his eyes though that he saw more and what’s worse, I’m sure he sees the guilt in my own eyes.

“You have light fingers for a nurse. I thought nurses got paid well. Why would you need to steal makeup?” He studies my face. “You hardly wear any.”

I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. What the hell do I do? My worse nightmare is coming true. Well, not my worse. My worse is being caught by security and them calling my father. Right now I’m just caught.

“What would your daddy the cop say if he knew his little girl liked to steal from stores?” He asks me.

“I paid for it.” I protest, lying through my teeth.

He laughs. “No, you didn’t. I checked. And also, this isn’t the only video I have. It isn’t the only store we monitor. I have you on other recordings.”

I close my eyes and want to sink into the ground and disappear. I want to run out of the hospital and hide in my apartment. My deepest, darkest secret is out. My shame is complete. “What are you going to do?” I finally ask him.

“Well, that depends on you.” He says as his eyes narrow as they roam my body. My fear ratchets up another notch. There is no way I’m letting him touch me. Even if he

threatens to post the videos on YouTube. I'd rather take my chances in prison. The thought of prison has my stomach roiling and my body shaking.

"I'm not having sex with you." I tell him.

He laughs. "Why the fuck would I want a scrawny, pasty girl like you? I prefer my women dark, tasty and hot. Fucking you would be like fucking an ice cube. No thanks."

That's a tremendous relief, even if it is a little insulting. "So, what do you want?"

"Pills." He says simply.

I frown. "What pills?"

"I'll make a list. Use those light fingers to lift the pills I need and I'll bury the footage. Just as long as you keep filling my orders." He says.

"Where am I supposed to get pills?" But my head clears before I finish the question. Oh shit, no.

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“This hospital has a pharmacy, right?” He asks, confirming my suspicion.

“I can’t...” I start, but he grabs my arm in a painful grip.

“You will, or I’ll give the video to the store owners and suggest they report the theft to Officer Wagstaffe directly.”

I yank my arm out of his hand and turn to leave, but he grabs my phone out of my pocket. He hits the screen a few times, and I hear a ding coming from his phone. “I’ll send you the list in a few minutes. I’ll tell you when and where to drop off the goods.” He says, handing me my phone back.

I glance over to Deion, who is still sleeping. I don’t look at my tormentor as I leave the room. Well shit, what am I going to do now?

Outside the room, I lean against the wall and close my eyes. My ears are ringing from the sound of my world crashing around me so I don’t hear Ghost until he’s standing in front of me. When he grabs my arms, I let out a squeak. Ghost’s eyes grow wide. He turns those eyes to the door next to me and narrows them. “Did they hurt you?” He demands and shifts toward the door.

“No.” I tell him, placing my hand on his arm. “No, I’m fine. Deion’s bodyguard was there, and he startled me. That’s all. I feel like an idiot. Really, I’m just embarrassed.” I tell him, trying to smile.

The look he’s giving me tells me he doesn’t believe me, but at least he’s no longer moving to confront them. I walk with him down the hall back to Flame’s room.

“You sure you’re alright?” He asks me and I nod.

“I’m fine. Just tired. It’s been a long day. I’m headed to the cafeteria and get some coffee. Can I bring you anything?”

“Coffee would be great.” Ghost replies. “Unless it’s shit.”

I laugh. “Only if it comes out of the machine or the break room.” I tell him. “The cafeteria coffee is decent.”

“Decent? Wow, you know how to sell it.” He says and I laugh again.

“Brooke?”

When I turn, I see Tanya walking towards us. I’m standing so I can see Ghost’s reaction and I half expect his eyes to pop out of his head and his tongue to fall to the floor like in the old cartoons. I snicker, which earns me a side-eye from him.

“Tanya. What are you doing here so late?” I ask her. “Visiting Deion?”

“Yeah, I had a late session and thought I’d say goodnight before heading home.” She replies, giving Ghost the once over.

“Tanya, this is Ghost. Ghost, Tanya.” I introduce them. “Ghost is one of Flame’s brothers. He’s guarding Flame in case Trask shows up here.” I explain.

Tanya smiles at Ghost. “Really? How sweet of you! I know Deion has someone with him as well, just in case.”

“You said you had a late session. What do you do?” I ask Tanya.

“I’m a physical therapist.” She replies. “I do some work here in the hospital and at a care facility a few blocks over.”

“Really?” I ask. “I’ve never seen you here before.”

“No, the hospital position is new. I just started right before Deion got shot. Will probably work with him on his leg. I’m not looking forward to it.” She grimaces. “I have a feeling it will be a test on our relationship.”

“I wonder if you’ll be working with Flame.” I muse. “He hasn’t regained feeling in his legs yet, but he just woke up today. So hopefully the swelling will go down and we’ll see some improvement soon.”

“I’ll grab his case.” Tanya says. “I feel like I owe him.”

She says goodbye before entering Deion’s room.

I turn to study Ghost, who is staring at the door as if hoping she’ll turn around and come back out.

“Are you really thinking of hitting on the chick dating a gang leader?” I ask him.

Ghost shrugs and looks at me. “Probably not, but a guy can dream, can’t he?”

I laugh and head for the cafeteria. I’ve forgotten about my problem until my phone pings and I see the list of drugs. “Fuck.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN: FLAME

I must have dozed off, but the sound of Brooke and Ghost talking outside my door wakes me. Actually, it's the sound of her laugh. God, I love her laugh. I miss it. I miss her. Waiting until I hear silence, I call out to Ghost.

"Yeah, man?" Ghost asks as he enters the room. He props the door open, which I find odd, but don't comment.

"Was that Brooke?" I ask him.

"Yeah." He frowns. "She's getting me a cup of coffee. Said she was tired, but I think something's wrong."

I use my arms to scoot up and angle my body so I'm not pressing hard on my wound. It's still tender, but I'm tired of laying on my side. "What do you mean?" I ask. "She seemed fine earlier."

"Yeah. I thought so too, but she was upset after coming out of Deion's room. Something happened in there. I'm certain of it."

"You think they hurt her?" I ask, anger flowing through me along with frustration that I can't go into Deion's room and demand answers. Maybe I should see about getting access to a wheelchair.

Ghost shakes his head. "No, but she had red marks on her arm. I think one of them grabbed her. All I know is someone upset her. I was going to go in and talk to Deion

about it, but his girlfriend just showed up, and I didn't want to confront him in front of her. She just got off work and looked tired."

I study Ghost and shake my head.

Ghost grins. "She's hot. What can I say?"

"Say that you will not hit on the girlfriend of a gang leader. Dante would kick your ass if you brought war on us." I tell him.

He shrugs. "I know. I won't do anything to hurt the club. I've just never met anyone as gorgeous as she is. But you'll find out soon enough. She's a physical therapist, and Brooke asked her to handle your case." He tells me with a grin.

I look down at my legs. "I hope it helps. If I can't ride..." I start, admitting something that I've been avoiding to consider after waking up.

"Knock that off." Ghost chides me. "You'll walk and you'll ride again. You think Tally would give you false hope? Let your body heal."

I nod as Brooke comes back into the room carrying a tray. She hands Ghost his cup of coffee before unloading two containers. She hands one to Ghost and the other to me. "I thought you two might be hungry. They hadn't shut the grill down yet."

I open the container to find a cheeseburger with fries. "You're an angel." I tell Brooke as Ghost whoops in happiness. She and I lock eyes. The electricity between us sparks, even though I see sadness and regret in her eyes. That look gives me something I haven't had since I woke up. Hope. Hope that I'll walk again, hope that I'll ride again, hope that I can win this woman back. I know that having Brooke in my corner is key to my happiness.

“Thanks for this, Brooke. I appreciate it.” Ghost says, finishing his burger. “Do I owe you anything?”

She waves him off. “No. I wanted to do it. Just wanted to show you my appreciation for how well you’re protecting Flame. I found Deion’s guard playing on his cell phone. Anyone could have gotten past him. You would never let that happen.”

“Speaking of guard duty. I guess I better get back to it. Can’t have you complaining to Dante about me shirking my responsibilities.” Ghost says, giving a hug to Brooke before stepping outside, closing the door behind him.

“Deion is one of your patients?” I ask her, and she nods as she sits and sips her coffee. “How is he doing?”

“Pretty good. He should be out of here soon.” Brooke says. The relief and hope in her voice has me studying her. She’s avoiding eye contact, and she’s gone pale. What the hell is that all about?

“Is he giving you problems?” I ask her. “I can go talk to him.”

“No.” she says quickly. “He isn’t. The guy who is guarding him creeps me out a little.” She admits. “He’s rather scary.” She chuckles. “But I guess I’d feel the same way about anyone from your club if I didn’t know them.”

“You’d tell me if he was bothering you, right?” I push.

She shrugs but doesn’t answer.

“Brooke...” I start, but she stands and waves me off.

“I have to get back to work.” She tells me, ending our conversation.

“Before you go, do you think you could get me a wheelchair?” I ask her.

She frowns at me. “Why?”

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“I have a feeling I’ll go nuts if I’m stuck in here much longer. The chance to go outside would be nice.” I tell her. “You know how I feel about being stuck inside.”

She nods in understanding and gives me a smile. “I do. The doctor said you should try getting up and moving. Sitting in a chair instead of just lying in bed. I guess a wheelchair counts. Let me see what I can do for you.”

I nod and watch her leave. I’m hoping she follows through, because I want to talk to Deion and his guard about Brooke. Maybe all the guy did was flirt with her, but Ghost seemed genuinely worried about her. Brooke is confident and strong. No way could anyone upset her unless they threatened her. I mean to find out. Because whether or not Brooke wants to admit it, she’s mine, and I protect what is mine.

As I lay in bed, I know I should sleep, but thoughts of Brooke keep my mind busy. These past few weeks without her have been... I can’t think of the word to describe it. Hell? Maybe. More like... empty. That’s it. I’ve felt more today than I have for weeks, not even including the days I was in a coma. Fighting with her is preferable to the fog I was in. It was stupid of me to think I could move on from her. It was weak and cowardly of me to not fight harder for us. I need her. I need to feel her breath on my face, her lips against mine. Fuck, I need to be inside her, lost in each other.

My mind slips back into our first time together. It was also in a hospital bed, after I saved Grimm’s life. While recovering from burns and smoke inhalation, Brooke took great care of me. I remember her hands, soft and cool against my legs and arms as she carefully removed bandages and gently applied ointment. I craved her touch from the beginning. But more than that, I craved our time together. Hearing her talk about her day and her other patients became the highlight of my day. Although I wanted

desperately to touch her, I also wanted to know her. Something that had never seemed important with any women before her.

Toward the end of my hospital stay, Brooke spent more and more of her breaks and free time with me. She'd bring me food, like she had tonight. She even brought her laptop so we could watch movies while he munched on pizza or Chinese Food. I fell in love with her during that time and we hadn't even kissed much less done anything more physical.

But all that changed one night. We were watching a movie curled up in my hospital bed together. Brooke started stroking my leg. Which woke up another appendage that had long been out of action.

Where her fingers touched my inner thigh, an electrical current shoots straight into my dick. Like a heat-seeking missile, he zones in on her, desperate for her heat. I almost leap out of bed when her fingers brush down his length. I don't, but it's close. Instead, I let out a low moan as she applies more pressure. Glancing at her profile, I see a small smile playing on her lips. The little minx knows exactly what she is doing to me. Fuck, that is hot.

"Baby, not that I'm complaining, but if you keep that up, I'm going to have a hard time explaining to the night nurse why I need a sponge bath." I tell her.

She chuckles. "Oh, you don't want a sponge bath?" She asks, turning from the movie to look at me.

"Only if you're offering..." I say. What started as a joke turns into pure lust when she slips her hand under the covers to grasp my cock. "Oh, fuck." I groan out as I push against her hand. With each stroke, she wipes her thumb over the tip to capture my leaking cum. "Oh, fuck, baby, damn, you're good at that." I moan as she strokes. When she replaces her hand with her mouth, I lose it. Her mouth is hot, wet, and

fucking amazing. She swirls her tongue around the tip before sliding him deep down her throat until I feel her nose brush against my pubes. That's when she swallows and I lose all control. Shooting streams of cum down her throat, she empties my balls as she uses her fingers to massage every drop.

"Mmmm." Brooke moans as she licks her lips. I follow the movement and feel my cock twitching back to life. She gives me one of her beautiful smiles before kissing me. I taste myself on her tongue and feel an overwhelming need to claim her. To spread my cum inside and out, marking her as mine. I've never felt so possessive of anyone or anything in my life. The feeling rocks me to my core, and I know right then that I can easily fall in love with her.

The door opens, bringing me back to the present. I glance over to see Brooke backing into the room with a wheelchair. Seeing her gorgeous ass encased in scrubs is such a turn on. I glance down at my lap and realizing my dick is already awake and taking notice. Fuck.

I try thinking of something that will calm him down, but having Brooke nearby is all he needs to stay at attention.

Brooke parks the chair near my bed and turns to me. Her eyes shift down and widen. "Well, that's an excellent sign." She says, grinning at me.

Fuck. My. Life.

CHAPTER TWELVE: BROOKE

Why did I say that? I ask myself for the tenth time since leaving an obviously aroused Flame back in his hospital room. I can't start up with him again, I just can't. Letting him go almost broke me. Hell, who am I kidding? It broke me. I'm no longer whole. Work is all I have. I have nothing to look forward to any longer, only guilt and shame

to live through.

As a reminder of my circumstances, Deion's door opens and his guard steps out. He says nothing, but his eyes lock on mine and he watches me walk by. When I turn the corner into the nurses' station, my phone buzzes. I know who it is, but I still look.

A text message: 2 PM today.

Fuck. My. Life.

I lose myself in work, knowing that this may be my last day. A few of my coworkers give me odd glances as I keep disappearing into the bathroom to break down. Since I could never hide my emotions from Flame, I avoid his room completely. I know I won't steal the drugs. Which means my father will soon learn my secret. I'm in a no-win situation, but I won't compound the problem by supplying drugs to assholes.

When my shift ends at two, I know I should go home and get some sleep. But I don't want to be alone. I'm scared. By this time tomorrow, I may be in a jail cell, knowing my life is over. Even if they don't prosecute me, I'll likely lose my nursing license. I'll also lose the respect of everyone I care about. My parents. My friends and coworkers. Flame. If I need to pick up the pieces and start over, I need all the strength I can get. Only one person ever gave more than he took. Flame.

Maybe I should have come clean with him before now. But the thought of seeing him looking at me with disgust was too hard to contemplate. He hates thieves, therefore, he'll hate me. But I inflicted pain on him because I couldn't face up to seeing that hate. God, I'm a horrible person.

Ghost frowns at me when I smile at him as I push open the door to Flame's room. He's asleep. I watch him for several minutes recalling the times I would get off shift to come home and find him in my bed. He'd try hard to stay awake so he could

welcome me home, but he worked hard and was always sleeping when I returned. I loved those nights because I could watch him sleep. He's so beautiful that my heart hurts. This man was mine, and I ruined it. I must let out a sob, because I see his eyes open and fix on me.

He opens his arms, and I can't stop myself from taking advantage of him one last time. I lay against him, sobbing as he strokes my hair. He doesn't ask me questions, he just lets me cry. When I finally run out of tears, he takes control.

"Sleep. We can talk in the morning." He strokes my back and kisses the top of my head.

My crying jag exhausts me, so it doesn't take long for me to do exactly what he suggests.

When I awaken, I revel in the feeling of once again being in Flame's arms. I don't know how I'll give him up again. Maybe sleeping with him was a mistake. But I don't regret it. I wouldn't have slept if I'd gone home. Flame makes me feel safe. He always has. He makes me feel like anything is possible. I slip out of his arms and make my way across the room, glancing back when I reach the door. I study his beautiful face and feel my heart shatter.

Stepping outside, I find Reaper.

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“Ghost went home?” I ask him.

He nods as he studies me. “You back with Flame?”

I shake my head and wipe the tears from my face. “He’s better off without me.” I admit.

“He loves you.”

“I love him, too. Which is why we can’t be together. You’ll understand later today. I promise.”

I walk outside and get in my car. I need to get home, shower, and change. Before I blow up my life, I need to get my affairs in order.

I don’t know if it was the sleep or the hot water of my shower, but my brain finally kicks into gear and gives me an idea. I don’t know if it will work, but it’s the only chance I have to salvage what’s left of my life. After I dress, I grab my phone and see that Flame’s left two voicemails and half a dozen texts. I can’t handle them right now.

I eat lunch and make a shopping list. There are a few items that I need if I’m going to pull this off. Checking my watch, I see I have three hours. I consider calling my dad, preparing him for my betrayal, but I can’t do it. If I succeed, he never needs to know. Not until I’ve made things right. However, whether I succeed or fail this afternoon, I’m telling Flame the truth and I’ll deal with the fallout. I wash my dirty dishes and straighten my home before leaving. I hope I’ll be back here one day, but I know it’s a

possibility that I won't. With a heavy heart, I get into my car. I have some shopping to do before I return to the hospital.

Before I leave my car, I stuff my packages in my bag. I turn when I hear someone call out my name, groaning when I see Tony heading toward me. My nerves are on edge. I don't have the energy to deal with him.

"You're here early today." He says, smiling. "Do you have time to get lunch before you start?"

"I'm sorry, I just ate." I tell him, feeling a little guilty when his smile droops. "We could get a coffee later, or maybe dinner?" I offer.

He smiles. "I'd like that."

As he walks with me, he chats about the changes he's made to his department. I listen with half an ear as my mind moves up to the second floor and my upcoming confrontation. When he mentions Tally, I turn my attention back to him.

"I spoke with her and she apologized. Explained the situation with her father and why his arrival upset her so much. I didn't realize they had problems." He explains. "I told her I'd forget about everything that happened."

"That's good." I tell him. "Tally is an amazing doctor. You won't be sorry."

"I'm glad you're happy." Tony says, smiling at me. "She's lucky to have you as a friend. I'm happy to count you as a friend, too."

I squeeze his arm and grin. "Me, too." I tell him, even though I know we likely won't be friends for much longer.

When I reach the nurse's station, Gina comes over to me. But before she can say anything, my phone dings. Radiology needs me to pickup Patient Jones and return him to room 215. My palms sweat as I respond. Well, fuck. Seems like my confrontation is going to be sooner than I planned. I duck into the nearest bathroom and paste the microphone to my chest and the recorder in my bra. Deion's guard dog may or may not check my phone to see if I'm recording the conversation, but I don't think he'd expect me to wear a wire.

When I reach Radiology, I chat with the receptionist until she tells me Deion's ready to move. As I push Deion through the hospital, his guard dog follows behind like an obedient puppy. I consider feeling Deion out with small talk. I still don't know if he's aware of the blackmail.

"I hear you might get out today." I mention. "Depending on the results of your x-rays."

"Yeah. About fucking time." He says as we enter the elevator. A doctor and another nurse enter with us, which interrupts our talk.

We exit on the second floor; I see Axel is now guarding Flame. As I push Deion into his room, I smile at Axel. I have a panic button and I know if I scream, Axel will charge in to help me. It's nice to have backup. I hook Deion back up to the machines while the men chat about Deion's plans, specifically his plans with Tanya. Once I'm done, I turn to leave and see the guard dog blocking the exit.

"You have the stuff?" Deion asks me. I guess I have my answer.

"What stuff?" I ask him, needing one of them to make the threat again, so I have it on the recording. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"The pills, cunt." Guard dog speaks up. "Get us the pills or your father gets a phone

call and learns the truth about his precious daughter.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I bluff. “My father knows everything about me.” I bluff. “Besides, I’ve got you on record trying to force me to steal drugs for you.” I tell them, shifting my shirt to show the recorder as I also raise the panic button. “If you come near me, I press this, and security will take you down.”

“You fucking bitch. Don’t play games with us. You’ll lose.” Deion snarls. “You either get us those drugs or your daddy arresting your skinny ass will be the least of your problems. If you don’t bring us the pills, we’ll fuck you up. I’ll let my men fuck every one of your holes until you bleed to death, and then we’ll dump your body on your daddy’s doorstep.”

“You just made the biggest fucking mistake of your life.” The guard dog growls as he moves toward me.

“Not as big of a mistake as you have.” I hear a voice behind me. I turn to see Tanya step out of the bathroom. Her dark brown eyes flashing as she looks from Deion to his man and back again. “I thought you were different, but you’re not. You are filth, just like the man who bought me. Come on, Brooke.” She says, ignoring Deion as he tries to scramble out of the bed. The guard tries to stop us, but he’s no match for two pissed off women. Tanya punches him in the throat while I knee him in the balls. We push him to the side as we run out into the hall and right into a wide-eyed Axel.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: FLAME

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The stinging in my right leg wakes me from a deep sleep. I grab my leg and let out a groan as the pain intensifies. That pain turns to euphoria when I realize the reason for the pain. I'm gaining sensation back in my leg. I can feel my hands rubbing the skin. With some care, I try lifting my leg. The movement is slow and not at all graceful, but I see my leg shift an inch or two off the bed. I look over at Brooke, only to have my happiness disappear again when I see she's no longer in bed with me.

"Reaper." I call out. The door opens, but Axel walks in.

"It's me. Reaper left about thirty minutes ago for Church." Axel says.

I nod. "Do you know where Brooke is?" I ask him.

"She went home. Reaper said she left about eight this morning."

My heart hurts, but I need to look at the positives. First, she came to me last night. I won't think about why she left, but focus on why she sought me out. Second, I can feel my fucking leg!

"I can feel my leg." I tell Axel. "Can you find a nurse?" I ask him.

He looks at me funny before heading to the bed and pressing the call button. Jeez, nothing is more humiliating than looking like an idiot in front of your younger brother. I grimace at him. "Thanks."

"I'd make a comment about getting shot in the back and not the head, but you were stupid before the shooting, so that won't work."

“Fuck you.” I grumble as I continue rubbing my leg as Gina enters the room.

“What’s up?” She asks, her eyes following my hand as she breaks into a huge smile.

“You’re getting feeling back?” She asks.

“Right leg only.” I tell her, and she nods.

“That’s expected. Most of the swelling is on your left side. It doesn’t mean that you won’t start regaining feeling there, too, but this is a good sign. I’ll let the doctor know.”

“Is Tally back?” I ask.

“She’s not in today, but I heard she is coming back soon. Likely tomorrow.”

“Good. Is Brooke here?”

“She comes in at eleven.” Gina says before leaving.

I grab my phone and call Brooke. When she doesn’t pick up, I text her. A few times. She’s who I want to share my good new with, but her continued silence saps my happiness more. I put my phone back on the table and try to temper my disappointment. Having her in my arms last night was the first good night’s sleep I’ve had since we broke up. Even though I can tell she’s struggling with something. I have a feeling that she left early because she knew I’d pry out of her whatever has her upset. She believes she’s not good enough for me, yet she’s the best person I know. She’s a fucking nurse and I’m a biker with a 1% club. We may not be violent sociopaths, but we certainly aren’t saints. She’s hiding a secret that she believes makes her unlovable. I’m not giving up on us, I need to prove her wrong.

A doctor I don’t recognize comes in to check my leg and assures me this is a good

sign. He mumbles something about physical therapy, but my mind is back on Brooke. Ok, he probably didn't mumble, but since I'm not listening to him, all I hear is mumbling. I don't even catch his name. I want Brooke back, and Tally is the only doctor I'll listen to.

By 10:30, I'm ready to crawl my way out of the room to the nurse's desk to wait for Brooke's arrival. I have a strong feeling that she'll continue to avoid me if I don't do something drastic. Dammit. I'm reaching for the wheelchair when my phone rings. I answer it, hoping it's Brooke, but realize quickly it's my President and we're having Church.

"You able to be on the call, or do you want us to catch you up later?" Dante asks when I answer.

"I'm good." I tell him as I settle back against the pillows.

"Any updates from you before we start?" Dante asks.

I tell them about the feeling returning to my right leg and hear shouts of encouragement around the room. The sound of my brothers rooting for me sends my euphoria back into the stratosphere. This is what being in an MC is about. Finding a family that cares about what happens to you.

Once everyone's congratulations die down, Dante starts the meeting. "As most of you know, Tally's father arrived in town yesterday and confronted her at the hospital. Tally, Caitlin, Scar, and I all met him for a late dinner at his hotel. It was a loud meeting, which you'd expect, but we made progress and we learned some new information about what's going on in Chicago. Scar, you want to discuss his conversation with Caitlin?"

"Vance admitted he pushed Caitlin to marry Standish only because of input from his

wife. He truly believed that Standish would offer Caitlin a good life based on Vivian's praises of him. He claims he didn't want to pull her tuition, but that again, he acted under his wife's suggestion. She told him that Caitlin was in love with Standish, but was afraid to leave home and take on the responsibility of being a wife. She accused Vance of babying her because she was the youngest and not as scholastically inclined as Tally and Colin."

"Did you buy that?" Shield asks.

"Yes, and no. I will say I think Vance had doubts back then and now regrets ignoring his gut. When Caitlin ran away, he realized he had misjudged the situation. Although, by then, she was gone, and he didn't know where she went. He learned Tally and Caitlin were in contact when Tally berated him for Caitlin's kidnapping by Gareth and Vivian. That's when he started watching his wife and then later on, his son, more closely."

"Did he know what they were up to?" I ask. "I mean the human trafficking?"

"Not right away. He figured out that they were trying to steal Caitlin's inheritance." Scar says. "When he learned what they were doing, he gave instructions to the lawyer, ensuring he didn't speak to anyone but Caitlin about the inheritance. He then paid a private investigator to learn everything he could about Tally and Caitlin."

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“For what reason?” Ranch asks.

“According to Vance, he only wanted to know where they were and if they were safe. He’s known for over a month now where they were living and did nothing with the information. As far as we can tell.” Scar continues.

“What made him come here now?” I ask.

“His wife and son disappeared. Along with Standish and his son.” Dante reminds me with a chuckle. “Vance believes, like most people, that the four of them left the country. He learned about the human trafficking when the FBI swarmed the Chamber’s Medical Group.”

“Are they shutting him down?” Reaper asks.

“Not yet. According to Vance, they’ve only found evidence that Vivian and Colin were involved. Vance took a lie detector test just to help prove that he wasn’t involved.” Dante says. “He swore to Tally and Caitlin that he did not know they were involved in something that horrible. He’s livid that they may have used CMG to move women.”

“Do we know for certain that they moved women through there?” I ask.

“No. At least not that they’re telling Vance. The FBI removed Vivian’s files and they’ve searched through Vance’s, but they didn’t take any of his files. He believes they were looking for specific information. Either about specific patients or specific types of medical treatments. He isn’t certain which. Most of his patients are

extremely wealthy and powerful, so it's possible they didn't take the files because of potential consequences. However, he believes they may have been looking at Vivian and Colin's work with the underprivileged. They offered services to those who couldn't afford the work of plastic surgeons to repair scars, burns, etc. He said it was Vivian's pet project and he let her handle it."

"That's one way to find victims or bring existing victims in for modifications." Smoke says.

"Yep." Dante agrees.

"How's Tally?" I ask.

"Confused. I think she wants to believe him, wants to believe that at least one of her parents is a decent person. She still doesn't trust him, but she's willing to give him another chance. But I think that's primarily because Caitlin has completely forgiven him." Dante says and chuckles.

"If anyone can forgive anybody for just about anything, it's her." Scar says, and the love and adoration he has for her permeates his tone.

It's exactly how I feel about Brooke. I just need to make sure she knows there is nothing she could do to make me stop loving her. As if she's reading my thoughts, she rushes into the room, followed by a gorgeous stranger and Axel.

"What's going on?" I ask as I hear Dante mimic my question over the speaker.

"I don't know." Axel says. "These two came running out of Deion's room like someone was chasing them. I thought it best if I brought them in here."

"Brooke? What's going on?" I ask her. She looks at me and I see genuine fear in her

eyes. I straighten myself in the bed and notice that my left leg now tingles, but I can't concentrate on that right now. "Brooke?"

"This is my fault. I had a plan, but I didn't think it through. I'm in trouble." She says, before looking at Tanya. "We're in trouble."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: BROOKE

It isn't until after I give Flame and Axel the highlights do I realize they aren't the only ones listening to me.

"Deion was blackmailing you?" I hear Dante ask over Flame's phone.

I raise my eyebrows at Flame, who twirls his finger to encourage me to answer.

"Yes. He wanted me to steal drugs from the pharmacy for him. It was his bodyguard that approached me first. I wasn't sure if Deion was aware of the plan or not. But when I told them I wouldn't do it, they both threatened me. I have a recording of the conversation."

"Play it." Dante orders, so I do. I hear grumblings coming over the line, and I realize it isn't just Dante on the phone. The entire club must be there. It's then that I realize they must have been having Church when we barged in.

"I heard it all, too." Tanya says.

"Who is this?" Dante asks after a pause.

"Tanya Webster. I was Deion's girlfriend. But not any longer. I thought he was different." She trails off and says nothing more.

“Brooke, can you reach out to hospital security? See if they can keep Deion and his bodyguard contained. I’m sending men your way. Can you both stay in Flame’s room until they arrive?”

I agree as I pull out my hospital phone to call security and tell them enough to get them to block Deion’s room.

Tanya takes a seat near the window and pulls out her phone while Axel stands near the door. I glance at Flame to see him watching me. When we lock eyes, he opens his arms, and I rush over to fall into them. Being in Flame’s arms is like coming home after a long, horrible trip. I just want to stay here and never move, but I can’t, not yet. Not if he can’t forgive me for shutting him out and not if he can’t continue to love me once he knows my secret.

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“Baby.” He whispers. “Please trust me. Please tell me what’s going on. I can’t help you if I don’t know and believe me, all I want is to help you and be with you again.”

I shift to look up into his gorgeous face. I open my mouth to answer, but then bite my lip. He gently pries it from my teeth and brushes his thumb over the mark I made. “Please.”

“You’ll hate me.” I whisper.

“Did you cheat on me?” He asks, his eyes full of sadness until I shake my head. “Then I promise, whatever it is, we’ll deal with it. Even if you cheated on me, I couldn’t stop loving you.”

I take a deep breath and dive in. “I steal things. Little things. Makeup, knickknacks, accessories. Nothing really pricey, but I can’t help it. If I go into a store, I take something. Every time. I try to avoid going into any store, so thank God for online shopping, but sometimes I have no choice. Once I’m inside, I can’t make myself leave until I’ve pocketed an item.” I tell him. I see the frown on his face and I feel the tears forming. Here’s where he gives up on me. “I know you hate thieves. I’ve tried to stop...”

“You’re a kleptomaniac?” He asks, and I nod.

He tightens his arm around me and kisses my temple. “Sweetheart, that doesn’t make you a thief. You know that, right? It’s a disease, one with treatments. Like alcoholism. You can’t do it on your own; you need help. Have you sought therapy?”

Shaking my head, I snuggle closer to him, hiding my face. “I’m afraid of people finding out.” I admit.

“Hey, don’t. You have nothing to be ashamed of. Deion and his guy threatened to tell your dad?” He guesses and I nod, sitting up.

“They have surveillance video from at least one store, likely others. I only saw the one, but Deion’s bodyguard claimed to have access to more. He said they offer protection to some of these stores, which is why they have the video.”

“Ok, let’s worry about that later. No one needs to know why he’s blackmailing you if you don’t want to tell anyone else. I’m going to support you any way I can. I love you.”

“Even though I’m a thief? You said the night those guys broke into the storage unit that you hated thieves.” I remind him.

“Which is why you started pulling away?” He asks, and I nod. “You aren’t a thief, you have a problem that I’m going to help you overcome, but honestly,” he grins at me, “I couldn’t hate you even if you were a master thief and was the one responsible for England’s Great Train Robbery.”

“Which happened before I was born.” I reply drolly.

“I think the woman I love can do anything...” He says laughing as he kisses me.

Dante enters, followed by Reaper and Ghost. Dante comes over to me and places a hand on my back. “You ok?” He asks and I nod as I slide out of Flame’s bed. Dante moves over to Tanya and introduces himself to her.

“Shield is talking with the security guards. Deion and his man left before they could

block the exits.” Dante explains. “Reaper has attempted to contact Deion and his cousin, Killian. My primary concern is to protect the two of you.” He says, glancing to me and then Tanya.

“I’ve reached out to Killian’s sister and Deion’s aunt, Athena.” Tanya says. “I told her what I overheard, that Deion was threatening Brooke to force her to steal drugs from the hospital. I also told Athena about Deion’s threat to physically harm Brooke. She’ll let us know if she discovers his location. Deion had her and Killian fooled. They, like me, thought he would never hurt a woman.” I notice Ghost is standing near Tanya as if guarding her. I suppress a smile and glance at Flame, who is watching his friend.

“You’re both going to need protection until we can either find Deion and talk to him or the police arrest him.” Dante says as Reaper’s phone rings. He glances at Dante and mouths ‘Deion’. Dante nods and Reaper puts the phone on speaker before answering.

“Deion.” Reaper says.

“Look, man, I don’t know if you’re aware of what happened today.” Deion starts and I shudder as I glance at Tanya, who’s glaring at the phone. “But there’s a nurse at the hospital that’s crazy, man. She’s paranoid and thinks we tried to blackmail her into stealing drugs.”

“Is that so?” Dante asks, and the line goes silent for several minutes.

“Who is that?” Deion asks.

“It’s Dante, President of the Demon Dawgs. I thought I made it clear the last time we spoke. You don’t want to piss me off. Trying to blackmail a member of my family and then threatening to torture and kill her is pissing me off. You made a mistake.

Here's how you're going to fix it. Whatever blackmail material you think you have on Brooke, make it disappear. Now. You will avoid Brooke and Ms. Webster at all costs. If you see them on the street, you will turn around and leave before they see you. If you get injured and need a hospital, you will go to any other hospital but Alvarado. This goes for all your men. Do you understand me?"

"I've destroyed the evidence." Deion says. "But you can't keep me from Tanya. She's my woman."

"Not anymore." Tanya says clearly. "I never want to see you again. I like Dante's suggestion. If you see me, run the other way."

"But..." Deion starts, but Dante interrupts him.

"This is non-negotiable. If you defy me, I will destroy you. You may think you can fight my club, but it isn't just my club you'll be fighting. I have chapters all over the states who will come if I make one phone call. Got it?"

"Yeah." Deion says, ending the call.

"I still want protection on you both for now." Dante says, looking at Tanya and me. We both nod. "Brooke, you've been through this before, but Tanya, this might be new for you. You'll have a shadow twenty-four seven until further notice. It's important that you don't lose him."

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Tanya nods. “No worries there.” She assures him. “I appreciate your looking out for me, even though I’m not one of you.”

Dante glances at Ghost, who is staring at Tanya, and smirks. “No? You saved one of ours and we would never leave someone vulnerable. Besides, I’ve heard good things about you.” Dante says, grinning at her look of surprise. “Ok, I’m out of here. Axel, you’ll stay on Flame, Reaper, you have Brooke and Ghost, I assume you have Tanya covered?”

Ghost gives him a grin and his high cheekbones show a little color, but he nods.

When Dante leaves, I turn to Reaper. “You know you can’t follow me around the hospital.” I remind him. “But I promise to tell you where I’m going if I need to leave the floor. I won’t leave the hospital without you knowing.” I assure him. He nods and takes a seat.

“I’ll be in here or outside this room.” Reaper tells me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: FLAME

“Before you go.” I call out to Brooke and raise my right leg as high off the bed as I can.

Brooke squeals and runs over to kiss my face. “Oh my god, that’s fantastic. I’m so excited.” She says, before placing her hand on my leg and rubbing it.

“You’ll want to be careful there.” I tell her as my dick swells at her touch. The little

imp just grins at me.

“What about your left leg?” Tanya asks, coming over to place her hands on my left foot. “Do you feel that at all?”

I’m thrilled that I feel her touch. It doesn’t have the same impact as Brooke’s does, of course.

“I do. Not as much as the right, but I feel some tingling in my leg and I feel the pressure of your hand.”

“That is excellent.” Tanya says. “We should have you up and walking in no time. Just need to put in the work.”

“You’re a physical therapist, right?” I ask, and she nods.

“I’m your physical therapist. They assigned your case to me. I was coming to see you, but stopped in to say hi to Deion.” She says.

“How did he not know you were in his room?” Ghost asks. “I mean, I’m guessing he didn’t know you there when he threatened Brooke.”

“I was in the bathroom. The room was empty when I got there. I ducked into the bathroom and was drying my hands when I heard them return. I almost opened the door, but then I heard them talking about drugs. It was the threatening tone of Deion’s voice that gave me pause. I’d never heard him talk like that. With me, he’s always been kind and sweet.” Tanya shrugs. “I knew he lead the gang, but until today, I hadn’t seen that side of him. When I heard his threat to Brooke, I almost threw up. I went through something horrible and he helped me learn to trust again. I feel like an idiot.”

“You said it yourself, he treated you kindly, and he’s the cousin of someone you trust.” Brooke consoles her. “Don’t get down on yourself because of it. Are you going to be alright if I leave you here with them? I promise you can trust them.”

“I’ll be fine. Thank you.” Tanya says to Brooke.

“Thank you for having my back.” Brooke says to her before giving her a quick hug of thanks. She then turns to Reaper. “I’ll check in with you during my shift.”

He thanks her, and I watch her walk to the door while Axel holds it open.

“Ready to start your physical therapy?” Tanya asks as she returns her attention to me.

The smile Brooke flashes back at me before she steps through the door is all the motivation I need. “Absolutely.”

While Tanya makes notes, I turn to Reaper and Ghost. “If the three of us are here, who is running Styx?” I ask. “Feral?”

Reaper shakes his head. “Pete’s working there now.”

“Who’s Pete? A new prospect?” I ask.

“He’s the trucker who helped us out.” Ghost says. “Dante offered him a job, and he took it.”

I nod when I realize who he’s talking about. Pete was the man who was supposed to drive the truck carrying Tally and the other Old Ladies to Chicago. “He’s a good man. Trustworthy.” I add. “Ashlyn said you’re wanting to start a new club business.” I say to Reaper.

“I want to build or buy a shooting range. After what happened in Vegas, Ashlyn mentioned wanting to learn how to shoot as well as learn better how to defend herself. She was outstanding when she went up against Reverend Jordan’s men, but I know she wants to learn more.”

A gasp draws our attention to Tanya. Her gorgeous dark skin has a gray twinge as she stares at Reaper with fear in her eyes.

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“Are you alright?” Ghost asks her, moving to stand next to her and taking her hands in his. He moves her back to the chair and kneels in front of her. “Do you need something? Water?”

She shakes her head, her eyes shifting from Reaper to Ghost. I glance at Reaper and see the guilt on his face. Frowning, I want to ask questions, but I don’t want to upset Tanya any more than she already is.

“How do you know the Reverend?” She asks Reaper, her voice quiet and shaky.

“I don’t know him, but I’ve had dealings with him. He tried to buy my Old Lady, Flame’s sister, from a woman living at the apartment complex where she lived.” Reaper explains. “Trask was working with her and waylaid Ashlyn for Deion to use as a bartering chip to attack me and the club.”

“Deion held her prisoner and Trask worked with the Reverend?” Tanya asks, shaking her head. “I’ve been blind.”

“No, you’ve been through more than anyone should have to.” Reaper says. “I’m amazed you’re still capable of trust.”

“You know?” She asks, her voice a trembling whisper.

“I’m sorry.” Reaper says. “I don’t expect your forgiveness.”

“Did you sell me to that bastard?” Tanya asks, her voice gaining back strength.

Reaper gives her a small smile but shakes his head. "I didn't. But I could have saved you. I didn't know about you, not then. I found out about a week ago." Reaper explains about finding the recording made by a man who wanted to destroy the reverend for what he did to his sister. He told her about Tanya being the woman in the video. How, if he had just watched the video back then, he could have rescued her.

"But you didn't leave, knowing I was there, did you?" Tanya asks.

"Of course not." Reaper tells her. "If I'd have known, I would have rescued you."

Tanya nods. I see tears coursing down her high cheekbones. "There is nothing for me to forgive. Do I wish you could have saved me before he ruined me? Yes. But I can't blame you for not acting when you didn't know what was happening in that house."

"I promise you we won't let anything like that happen to you again. We'll keep you safe." Reaper promises. "Thank you for forgiving me."

Tanya retreats to the bathroom, and I hear the water run. A few minutes later, she returns and sits down to write up her observations. We all watch her, but I realize she needs a few moments to gather her thoughts. I give them to her.

"Has Dante approved the shooting range?" I ask Reaper.

"I haven't brought it up yet. I had a few ideas, but this is the one that I'm most excited about."

"What about you?" I ask Ghost. "Are you staying with Styx or going to work at the gun range?"

"Actually, I want to start a self-defense school." Ghost says. "Ashlyn suggested it."

She heard about what happened in Yuma and asked if I'd be willing to teach her and the other women some self-defense moves. My uncle owns a dojo downtown, and I thought about either joining with him or opening a second one closer to the club."

"I didn't know you have family in San Diego." I say. "You never mentioned him before."

"I didn't know he was here. He's my father's brother, and I haven't seen him in several years." Ghost admits. "He's only been in San Diego for a year. He has a storage unit at Styx, which is where we ran into each other."

"I'd love to learn self-defense." Tanya says, giving Ghost a shy smile. "I think many women would. It isn't safe for us out there. Too many men who think women are there for the taking."

"You're right. It's one reason I want to do this." Ghost says. "Plus, I want to offer courses to those at Crossroads. I know the women may not want to learn from a man, so I'll likely want to hire at least one instructor who is female." He muses.

"What about Izzy?" I ask. "She'd be a great instructor. Ashlyn may even be interested once she's learned enough."

Reaper nods. "I think she would. She feels pretty strongly about it after what's happened to our other women and then the attacks on her."

"What about you?" Ghost asks me. "Any thoughts on what you want to do, or do you want to stay at Styx?"

I consider his question as Tanya packs up her bag and I realize how much I want to do something more to benefit the club. Now that Brooke is back in my life, I feel like I can accomplish anything I set my mind to. The ideas flow, but nothing sparks an

interest. But that's ok. I want to talk with Brooke about this and get her thoughts and ideas. The thought of her being back on my team makes me happy. Now I just need to get back on my feet.

"I don't know what I want to do, but I want to do more than work at Styx. I like that Pete's there. It gives us an opportunity to do something else. I just need to get my legs all the way back." I turn to look at Tanya, who nods at me.

"Then that's what we're going to make happen. I want you to work on strengthening your leg muscles, but don't try walking yet without someone around to help you." She warns me. "Once you're out of here, you can come work out with me. I have the equipment that will help get you walking again."

"And riding." I add.

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“And riding.” She agrees, waving as she and Ghost leave.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: BROOKE

I kiss Flame and hug Tanya before returning to my duties. It’s only been thirty minutes, and no one seems to know I’ve been missing. Small favors.

The change in how I feel is night and day to the stress I felt when I arrived at work. I should have trusted Flame and his brothers, told him what I was going through. But at least now Tanya knows what kind of person Deion really is, so maybe it was all worth it.

I finish my rounds and spot Curt talking with Gina at the nurse’s station.

“So, what was that about earlier?” Curt asks as I join them.

“Deion?” I ask, and he nods.

“He threatened me. He and his guard dog. They wanted me to steal pills from the pharmacy.”

“What made him think you’d be willing to do that?” Gina asks in surprise. “Your dad’s a cop. Doesn’t he know that?”

I shake my head. “I don’t think he cares. He told me he’d have his gang rape and kill me if I didn’t.”

“Fuck. You should call the cops.” Curt says.

“They know.” I tell him. “Besides, Dante talked to Deion and made some threats of his own.”

“Good.” Gina says. “He’s better protection than the cops. No offense against your dad, but the Demon Dawgs are a little more intimidating.”

“Plus, they don’t have to follow the rules.” Curt agrees. “I’m glad Dante’s looking after you.”

“Does this mean you and Flame are back together?” Gina asks me.

“Yeah.” I tell her with a sappy smile.

“Good. I don’t know why you two broke up. He asked me about Curt. Suggested that you two were dating because he saw Curt leaving your apartment one morning. I told him we were both staying there.”

“It was a misunderstanding, but we’re good now. Better than good.”

“Fuck.” Curt says in a whisper, glancing around to make sure no one heard him. “You let Flame think I was his competition? What did I ever do to you?”

“I’m sorry. I told him we weren’t together. We broke up when I accused him of spying on me.”

“I’m glad you’re back together. You two are a great couple, and I know you were happiest when you were together, and miserable when you weren’t.” Gina adds.

“And I’m glad I don’t have those guys looking to kill me. Next time you want to piss

off your boyfriend, leave me out of it.”

Gina and I laugh. “I promise. You’re safe. He knows that you’re with Gina, and he knows I love him. I was worried that I wasn’t good enough for him. But I realize now that I’m a better person with him in my life.”

“Brooke.” Tony says as he steps up to the nurse’s station. His smile is wide, and he looks as happy as I feel.

“Hi, Tony. What can I do for you?” His smile slips a little.

“We’re having dinner together, remember?” He asks and though I want to groan, I glance at my watch and pretend I just realized the time. I don’t want to eat with him. I want to grab food and eat with Flame, but I can’t do that to Tony. He’s been a good friend.

“Is it that time already?” I ask. “This day has been so busy. I need to make one stop, then I’ll meet you in the cafeteria?”

“I ordered Chinese Food.” Tony tells me. “It’s in my office. I thought we could go over some positions that are opening up in the hospital. See if anything looks interesting to you. Make it a working lunch.”

The idea of being alone with Tony isn’t filling me with joy, but I can’t think of a reason to refuse his offer. “Let me use the restroom and check on one of my patients, then I’ll be right there.”

Tony taps on the counter twice and smiles. “See you soon.”

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“Are you going to tell Flame that you have a dinner date?” She asks me.

I scowl. “It is not a date. At least not for me.”

Curt watches him leave. “Pretty sure he thinks it’s a date. Be careful.”

I balk. “Do you think he’d try something? Here in the hospital?” I ask.

Curt shrugs but turns back. “No, but I don’t like him. Something off about him. Want me to check on you?”

I’m touched by Curt’s offer. “Thanks, but I’ll be fine. I need to let Flame and Reaper know where I’m going, though. Reaper’s my guard until Dante’s certain Deion is no longer a problem.”

When I reach Flame’s room, I’m happy to see Reaper outside. I don’t want to tell Flame about my pseudo-date, even though he has nothing to worry about. I want to avoid waves while I can.

“Where’s Axel?” I ask him.

“Went to go pick up dinner for everyone. I think he’s getting you something in case you want to eat with us.”

“I have a meeting with the HR Manager.” I tell him. “It’s downstairs in the administration section. He ordered Chinese.”

“Is this the guy who’s hitting on you?” He asks with a frown.

“He’s just a friend.” I tell him, even though I feel like I’m lying. Until today, I didn’t really believe Tony was interested in me, but too many people have told me otherwise. They may be right. “I love Flame.” I tell Reaper. “Nothing can change that.”

Reaper nods. “I’m glad you two are back together. He’s more like himself. He’s even talking about doing something other than working at Styx.”

“That’s good news.” I tell him. “He’s too smart to stay there. How did his session with Tanya go?”

“Good. I think. She seemed pretty happy with his progress and feels confident he’ll be walking and riding again soon.”

“That’s good.”

“She told us about the Reverend.” Reaper adds. “I told her about the video I have and apologized for not watching it back then.”

“She was the one you saw in the video?” I ask him, and he nods. While we were sitting with Flame, Reaper had told me about the Reverend and his obsession with Ashlyn. He also explained about finding a video that proved Trask provided women to the Reverend. “Was she upset with you?”

“No.” Reaper says. “She should hate me, but I’m grateful she forgave me.”

“But you still feel guilty?” I suggest, and he nods. “If we can help her move on from Deion and welcome her into our family, then it will all work out. Ghost has a thing for her.”

Reaper grins. “Yeah, he does. Check in with me after your meeting. Ok?” He asks and I wave my agreement as I head for the stairs.

Tony’s office is at the rear of the hospital and away from the hectic halls. I don’t realize how secluded it is until I reach his office. It’s at the end of the hall near an exit. I knock on the door, but there’s no answer. I try the door, but it’s locked. Shrugging, I turn to leave when I hear a noise behind me. A figure in black steps through the exit door. Opening my mouth to scream, I smell something medicinal before my mind shuts down.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: FLAME

After Tanya leaves, I dose off. When I wake up, I’m alone. My first thought is of Brooke. I miss her. She has to work, but I wish she could be my private nurse. I think with a smirk.

My second thought is about my legs. I try lifting each one off the bed as Tanya instructed. My right leg goes higher than my left, but I can feel more in my left leg than I did earlier. Progress.

My third thought is I’m starving. My stomach growls loudly as I realize I missed lunch. Glancing at the swing table next to my bed, I find a covered plate. Lifting the lid, I curl my lip at the dry chicken breast and cold vegetables. I force down a few bites of chicken before putting the cover back on the plate. Maybe I can talk Axel or Reaper into getting me some actual food.

Picking up my phone, I dial Reaper’s number.

“Yo.” He says as he enters the room. I shut down the call.

“I’m starving.” I complain.

He smirks as he lifts the cover off the food. “Here you go.”

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“Fuck you. I want food.” I whine.

“Axel’s grabbing some burgers for all of us.” He says, and I nod. My stomach growls in anticipation.

“See if Brooke can join us.” I suggest. My chest tightens when I see his frown.

“What?”

“She’s having a working dinner with that HR guy. She doesn’t want to, but I guess they arranged it earlier, and she can’t get out of it.” He says.

“Asshole. He’s probably hitting on her.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Reaper says. “She loves you. No idea why, but there you go.”

“Fucker.” I grumble as both our phones go off.

Frowning, we check the displays and then glance at each other. “Ghost.” On a group call with the whole club.

“Yeah.” I answer, putting the call on speaker.

“Someone grabbed Brooke. Tanya and I saw him carry her out of the hospital.”

“Son of a bitch.” Reaper cusses. “Did you see who it was?”

“We’re trailing him.” Ghost says. “Black Mercedes SUV. Can’t see the license plate, it’s covered in mud.”

“I’ll hack into the hospital security, but it may take a while.” Smoke says.

“Find Gina.” I tell Reaper. “Her boyfriend works in security. He might get us access faster.” Reaper runs out of the room while I reach over to pull the wheelchair closer to the bed. I need to be a part of this.

“We’ve got a lock on you, Ghost.” Shield says. “Are you on your bike?”

“No, Tanya’s driving, I’m riding shotgun. We spotted Brooke when I was walking Tanya to her car.”

“We’re coming in from the north to block him off.” Dante calls out. “Keep your eye on him. Any idea who it is?”

“We couldn’t see him clearly. He’s wearing a baseball cap pulled low, and he’s dressed in black.” Ghost replies.

“Deion’s men dress like that and a few of them drive black SUVs.” Tanya says. “Including Tops.”

“Who is Tops?” I ask. “Deion’s guard dog?”

“Yes. The one who threatened Brooke.” Tanya confirms.

“Fuck.” I grumble as I shift into the wheelchair. Taking my phone, I roll out of the room and head to the nurse’s station where I see Reaper and Gina. Gina’s on the phone. Reaper turns when I get close.

“She’s calling Curt.”

“Curt. We need your help. Somebody kidnapped Brooke. Can you check security cameras?” She glances at us and nods.

“Where?” I mouth. She points down.

“Flame and Reaper are coming to you.” Gina says as she hangs up. “First door on the right once you enter the Administration Wing.” She says.

Reaper runs to the elevator, and I follow.

I hear the others chatting as they track Brooke and her kidnapper. My heart pounds as we reach the first floor and follow the signs to Administration. When we see the door marked Security, Reaper pounds on it after finding the door locked. Curt opens the door and to let us in.

“I’ll likely get fired for this, but I don’t care.” He says, moving back to the wall of cameras. “I paused where someone grabbed her.” He tells us, pointing at a screen where a frozen Brook stands, a man in black covering her face with his hand. Curt restarts the video and I see Brooke go limp before the man drags her out the door.

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“Go back to when she first appears.” Reaper says. Curt follows his instructions. We watch Brooke walk down the hall and knock on the last door. When she tries the door and finds it locked, she turns away, which is when her attacker enters and grabs her.

“She was supposed to have dinner with that HR Manager. Tony something.” Reaper says.

“Tony Younger.” Curt agrees. “I heard them talking. That’s his office. He told her he was going straight there.”

“Might want to check on him.” I tell Reaper, who nods and runs out into the hallway. “Can you rewind and see if you can see anything before Brooke gets there?” I ask Curt. I watch the screen as I hear my brothers converging on the SUV.

“Fuck, he pulled into a garage.” Ghost says. “We can’t follow, it’s gated.”

“Ram the gate.” I order.

“Metal gate. Covers the opening. Tanya’s car won’t make a dent in it.” Ghost says. “You need a decal on the car to get inside. Smoke, we need to know who lives here. Looks like condos or apartments.” Ghost says, reeling off the address.

“I’m going inside and off-speaker.” Shield says. “I’ll question the staff, but let me know if you have a name and address.”

“Who’s that?” I ask Curt as he slows a recording to show a man walking down the hall. He’s wearing black pants and a white dress shirt with a tie.

“That’s Younger.” Curt replies as we watch the man enter his office. A few minutes later, he comes out wearing a black baseball cap and a jacket. He locks the door before stepping through the exit.

“Son of a bitch. It’s Younger. Tony Younger. He’s the HR Manager. I think he’s the one who grabbed Brooke.” I shout through the phone as Reaper runs back in.

“He’s not in his office.” Reaper says.

“I know, because he’s the bastard who has Brooke.”

I follow Reaper out of the security office, with Curt following behind us. “Thanks for your help.” I tell him.

He nods. “What now?”

“Shield is at the apartment complex, and Byte has given him the number. They’re heading upstairs now.” Reaper replies, hold his phone closer to his ear to hear.

We get in the elevator and return to the second floor to join a concerned Gina. She’s at the nurses’ station, fighting back tears. Curt goes to her and talks softly in her ear.

“I’ll fucking kill him.” Gina says. “I knew he was trouble, but I didn’t think he was crazy.”

We wait in silence as we hear Shield knocking and calling out for Younger to open the door. When no one answers, Shield orders someone to unlock the door. We’re holding our breath as Shield and Officer Wagstaffe clear the space.

“She’s not here.” Shield reports.

“Fuck. Where are they?” I shout out.

“Pull everything you have on Tony Younger. Find out if he owns any other vehicles.” Dante orders. “Smoke, is there another exit from the garage?”

“Fuck.” I hear Ghost mutter. “I didn’t think of that. I didn’t catch on that he knew we were following him.”

“He might not have.” Dante snaps back. “He may have planned this out, just in case someone saw him take her. Let’s focus. Maestro, see if you can find the SUV on any traffic cams.”

“Brooke’s phone.” I call out. “She likely has it on her, unless he dumped it or turned it off.”

“Her hospital phone, too.” Curt says. “Although Younger would know she has that.”

“Ok, I’ve got a ping on her phone.” Byte chimes in. “She’s heading on I-94. Heading toward the airport.”

Panic washes over me as I consider the possibility of him vanishing with her.

“Does he have a private plane?” I ask.

“He has a boat.” Gina says. “He owns a boat.”

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“On it.” Byte calls out. “I have payments made to a pier off I-94. That may be where he’s taking her.”

“The rest of us ride. Follow Brooke’s phone. If you get an exact location on the boat, let us know. If you get a name on the boat, get it out.” Dante orders.

“He has a photo of the boat in his office.” Gina says.

“On it.” Reaper calls out, dashing toward the stairs.

I feel worthless, but I know my brothers have all the angles covered.

A few minutes later, I hear Reaper giving the name of the boat. Younger Lust. What a stupid name for a boat.

“I need to get out of here.” I tell Gina and Reaper. We need to find Younger and destroy him and his stupid boat.

“Axel is waiting outside.” Reaper tells me.

“Let’s go.” I say as I wheel toward the elevator.

“You should probably change into your clothes first.” Gina reminds me.

I glance down at my hospital gown and swear.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: BROOKE

I wake with a splitting headache and my mouth feels like I've been sucking on cotton balls. But it's the rolling motion that has me vomiting on the floor. Once my stomach is empty, I'm in worse shape. My head is pounding, my breath is atrocious, and I realize I'm a prisoner on a boat.

I avoid the vomit as I take in my environment. I can see water outside the round porthole, but I can also see land. If I can get onto the deck, maybe I can jump overboard and swim to freedom? The only problem is that I don't know what I'm up against on the other side of the door. Is it Deion and his men? I doubt I can avoid an entire gang. I wish my gang was here.

Patting my pockets, I find my phone and give a thank you to whoever is looking out for me. Tears prickle my eyes when I hear his voice.

"Brooke? Is that you, baby?" Flame asks. I can only manage a sob before I take a deep breath.

"I'm on a boat. I think we're heading out to sea. But I can still see land. I'm going to jump off, but I don't know what I'm up against."

"It's that asshole Younger." Flame says.

I breathe in relief. "That means I just need to avoid him."

"We're tracking your phone." Flame says. "We're working to find you and rescue you."

"Should I stay on the boat?" I ask, although I dread the idea.

"How close are you to land? Do you think you can swim that far?" Flame asks instead of answering.

I move to the window and calculate the distance. If I was at 100%, it wouldn't be an issue, but I can still feel the effects of the chloroform. "Not sure." I admit. "I'm still woozy from the chloroform, but I think the water might wipe away the last remnants. Regardless, I have to try. If he gets me out into open water..." I trail off as I consider the nightmare that awaits me. "I'm going to jump and swim like my life depends upon it. Not losing you again, I just got you back." I tell him.

"You better make it." He says, and I can hear the love and fear in his voice. "Wait, a minute." I hear mumbling but can't make out the words, but he's soon back with an explanation. "Dante's mother is on her boat and heading toward you. She's close enough that they can pick you up if you get into the water. It might be your best shot at rescue."

"Ok, then. I'm on my way. Wish me luck." I say. "I love you, Aaron."

"I love you, too, baby. Be safe. Stay strong." Flame says as I end the call.

Trying the door, I find it locked. Fuck! But the door isn't thick. It's more like a pocket door. I push on it and can feel a slight shift. But it isn't enough to get my fingers into the space so I can pry it open. I glance around the room, looking for something thin enough to slide into the space to give me leverage. It's when I back away from the door and glance up I see something that gives me hope. I reach up above the door and pull down a key.

Shoving the key into the lock, I twist and the door opens. I want to do a little dance, but I don't have time. Sliding the door open, I glance into the short hallway. There is a small galley across from me. Carefully opening drawers and cabinets until I find what I'm looking for, a chef's knife. Clutching the knife, I move to the bottom of the stairs leading upwards. I know Tony is likely steering the boat, but I don't know how close I am to his position. If he's right above me, he could drop on me before I reach the edge.

Staying close to the wall, I slide up the stairs until I can get a better view. I can still see land, which fills me with hope. I shift so I can see behind me, and that's when I spot Tony. He's only about ten feet away, which doesn't give me much of an advantage. However, his back is to me. I know little about boats, but I know they have engines. Which means I need to get far enough away from the boat or risk injury. Even though I want to slide down the side as quietly as possible. But the thought of getting caught in the blades sends a shiver down my spine. No, the best thing to do is dive away from the boat and put some distance between me and it. The engine pushes water out behind the boat, making it less likely to pull me in, so that's my target.

Taking a deep breath, I run and dive overboard. I hear Tony shouting behind me. His voice disappears as I dive under the water, dropping the knife. When I break back to the surface, I swim hard for the shore. I can feel him behind me, but I don't stop to look. Needing to put distance between us, I swim hard. But I'm not stupid, I know I can't out swim the speed of his boat. Risking a glance behind me, I see him steering the boat toward me. Taking a deep breath, I duck under the water. He knows I'm trying to reach land, so I need to stay out of sight. When I feel the panic rise, I push it away and think of Flame. I have to survive. I have to get back to him.

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I rise to the surface and take in air before diving back under. Each time I do this, I change course slightly. It will take me longer to reach land, but I'm hoping it makes it harder for Tony to track me. On one of my forages for air, I hear a sound that jolts me. Gunshots. I turn to see a massive yacht bearing down on Tony's smaller boat. The gunshots are coming from the yacht. I can see a woman standing at the bow of the yacht. She's aiming a gun at Tony and firing off shots.

I tread water and watch Tony ducking down behind the wheel as he maneuvers his boat away from the yacht. I'm so focused on the action that I don't notice a dingy sliding up next to me.

"Give me your hand." A woman calls out to me, startling me enough to have me sucking in water. I'm coughing as I look at her. "I work for Dante's mother." She explains. "Now give me your hand."

While I'm still coughing, I reach up and grasp her hand. With little effort, she pulls me out of the water and into the dingy. She moves to the motor and soon we're heading right for the yacht. "You are Brooke, right?" She asks with a grin. "I probably should have asked first. For all I know, you could have been out having a swim, and Brooke is still out there."

"I'm Brooke." I tell her with a chuckle. "Thank you for rescuing me."

"I'm Maia." She says. "We'll soon have you safely onboard the Libertas."

I study the woman and realize that she's older than I originally thought. She's wearing a one piece bathing suit which shows off defined arms and toned legs. She's

tied her dark blonde hair into a tight bun. Her pretty face is free of makeup, which shows off a healthy tan. Dark lashes highlight almond-shaped eyes that are the same color as the sky.

“Thank you so much for rescuing me.” I tell her. “I wasn’t sure I could make it to the beach.”

“You were doing fine.” She says with a grin. “Good moves. I had a hard time tracking you, but once I figured out your pattern, it helped.”

I grimace. “I was trying to be spontaneous, to lose that bastard.”

“You did alright. It’s hard to be spontaneous when flight kicks in. Don’t beat yourself up. You were in a tough spot and you handled yourself well.”

We pull up to the yacht, which is bigger than I first thought. Maia holds the dingy steady while I climb onto the platform. She locks the dingy in place before directing me to the ladder. Waiting at the top is a beautiful woman with dark waves of hair and grey eyes. Grey eyes I recognize.

“You must be Dante’s mother, Ms. Westbrook. Thank you for rescuing me.” I tell her, holding my hand out to shake hers. She surprises me by pulling me in for a hug.

“Call me Angela and it was my pleasure.” She says, letting me go. “I’ve called Dante to let him know we have you safe. He and his brothers are coming to my house to get you.”

“Thank you.” I say. “Can I sit down? I’m a little tired.”

“I’ll do you one better. Come with me.” Angela says and I follow her to what must be her master suite. Leading me through a gorgeous room done in teal and paprika and

into a show-piece bathroom. She leans over to turn on the faucet and soon the tub is filling with steamy water. She sprinkles something into the water before backing up. “You have time to relax, and I’ll have clothes for you outside the door.”

I open my mouth to thank her again, but she puts her hand on my arm. “You’ve thanked me.” She says with a smile. “It was my pleasure. One thing that I’m most grateful for in this world is that Dante has surrounded himself with amazing men who find even more amazing women.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN: FLAME

“There they are.” Dante says, pointing toward the yacht docking at a nearby pier.

We’re at Angela’s home, standing on a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean. This is where Tally and Dante will hold their wedding next weekend, but right now, it is where I watch Brooke come safely back to me. I don’t realize I’m holding my breath. It swooshes out of me when I see her step onto the pier. She doesn’t look up, so she doesn’t know the entire club is on the cliff waiting for her.

We return to the house just as Angela reaches the top of the steps that lead to the beach and pier below. Brooke is right behind her. She stops when she sees the wall of leather waiting for her, but then her eyes land on me. I can see the tears forming, and I doubt she sees anything as she rushes over to me.

I feel almost whole when she climbs on my lap and wraps her arms around me. The guys leave us alone as she cries. I stroke her back and revel in how lucky I am to have her back.

“Should you be out of the hospital?” She asks me when she leans back to study my face.

“I needed to see you.” I tell her. She stays on my lap as I wheel us into Angela’s mansion. Almost everyone is gone. Only Axel and Reaper are still here, and Dante.

“Thank you for rescuing her.” I say to Angela, who leans down to kiss my cheek, and then Brooke’s.

“You’re most welcome. I assume I’ll see you both next weekend for the wedding?” Angela asks, and I nod.

“We’ll be here.” But then I realize that I never asked Brooke to attend. I turn to her. “You can make it, right?”

Brook laughs. “I’m in the wedding party, remember?” She reminds me.

“Oh, yeah.” I say.

“What happened to Tony?” Brooke asks.

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“He took off when I shot at him. I know your dad is in contact with the Coast Guard. They want to find him and bring him back here. If he’s smart, he’ll just keep sailing and get lost out there.”

“I don’t understand what he hoped to accomplish.” Brooke muses. “Besides kidnapping me. I never saw it coming. Do you think he was working with Deion?”

Dante shrugs. “I doubt it, but we’ll look into it. Byte’s running a background check on him, see if anything pops. I’m sure you’ll have to speak with the police, but for now, let’s get out of here.” He gives his mother a hard hug before kissing her on her cheek. Brooke thanks her again as we head outside.

With Reaper’s help, I get into the club SUV while Brooke climbs in with me.

“Where are we going?” She asks as Axel drives us down the long driveway for Angela’s home.

“Clubhouse.” I say, turning to her. “If that’s ok? We could go to your apartment.”

She shakes her head. “No, the clubhouse sounds great. Although, maybe we could stop at my place so I can pack a bag? I’d like to stay with you. If that’s ok?”

“Babe, you never have to ask or leave.” I tell her, squeezing her hand. “Axel, can you stop by Brooke’s place and go with her?” I ask, and my brother nods.

“No problem.”

Brooke takes no time at all to pack a suitcase and return to the SUV. She's changed out of her scrubs and into a sundress and sandals. Have to say, I miss the scrubs, but I do like the sight of all that skin.

Once we're at the clubhouse, I hold Brooke's suitcase while she pushes me down the hall to one of the guest bedrooms. I can't climb the stairs, so I'll need to switch rooms until I get my legs all the way back.

"Want me to pack up your things and bring them down?" Brooke asks as she takes her bag and drops it on the floor near the dresser.

"Axel's handling it." I tell her as I cast my eyes over her gorgeous body. The feminine dress is giving me many ideas. "I think you need to come sit on my lap." I tell her.

"Oh yeah," she says, grinning as she lifts the skirt high enough so she can straddle me.

I rub my hands along her smooth thighs as I nibble her neck. Her skin is soft over firm muscles, and I feel my cock springing to life. Brooke shifts her body, rubbing against my hardening member as I capture her mouth. Her slow undulations soon have my pants feeling tight. I want to move her to the bed, but I can't seem to stop kissing her. Something floral overlays her normal coconut scent, but all my senses recognize her as my Brooke. When she breaks the kiss, panting, I make my move.

Rolling over to the bed, I nudge her off me and use my hands and good leg to shift out of the wheelchair and onto the bed. "You're going to have to do most of the work." I tell her. "I'll just sit back and enjoy the show. Now get naked, woman."

She giggles as she drops the dress to reveal her naked body.

“Fuck, if I’d had known you were naked under there...” I say.

“You wouldn’t have done anything with your brother driving.” She reminds me.

I grimace. “No talking about my brother. Now help me get naked, too.” I order as I remove my shirt. When her hand brushes over my abs as she unfastens my buckle, I moan. “This may be over fast.” I warn her.

“Missed me?” She asks as she drops the belt on the floor and unzips my pants.

“You have no idea how much. I was afraid I’d never get hard again.” I admit to her.

She removes my boots before slipping my jeans off. “Because of the bullet wound?”

“No, because I lost you.” I admit, as she leans forward to lick my nipple. When she leans back, I moan at the loss. Opening my eyes, I see she’s studying me. “What?”

“Are you saying you haven’t had sex since we broke up?” She demands.

“Of course, I haven’t.” I tell her.

She frowns. “How is that possible? I heard you were with...” She trails off and I can feel her distancing herself from me.

Lifting my hands to capture her face, I stare at her until she locks eyes with me. “I haven’t been with anyone else. Not because I didn’t try.” I admit. “I thought I needed to get over you, but it didn’t take me long to realize my body only wants yours. You can ask the bunnies if you don’t believe me. I flirted with them, even got drunk enough to ask them back to my room, but I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t even let them cross the threshold. The thought of someone else in my room made me ill. I love you, Brooke. You ruined me for anyone else.”

I brush the tears from under her beautiful eyes as she gazes at me with love, but also with belief.

“I haven’t been with anyone either.” She tells me. “Didn’t want anyone but you. I want no one but you.”

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I hold her face as I attack her lips and her mouth. I suck in her bottom lip and nibble on it until she's rubbing her pretty pussy against my dick. The dick that is growing hard as steel. When I attack her upper lip, I shift my hands to her breasts. My hands remember them. Using my thumbs, I circle her areolas until the nipples peak. When I flick them, she moans as she grinds down on me. I feel her gushing over my cock until he's slick with her essence. She increases the pace as I pinch and twist her nipples. When her body tenses and her first orgasm slams through her, I shift my hands down to her waist and lift her up so I can pull her down on my face.

I have to taste her. It's been too fucking long sense I've tasted her honey. She slams her hand against the wall as she bucks against my tongue. I clean off every drop just before she explodes again with a scream of pleasure.

Without words, she shifts until she hovers over my fully erect cock. I hold him in place as she slides onto him. I have to bite my lip to keep from coming right then. Hell, I'm fighting tears and my orgasm. This is home. I'm home. And I'm never, ever leaving.

I hold her hips as she slides up and down my shaft. Her breasts, bouncing with the movement, mesmerize me. But when my eyes move to hers, I can no longer hold back. The love I see in them does me in. I explode inside her as I cry out her name. I think she follows me over, but the euphoria is all-consuming. Too many weeks of pent up frustration, desire and sadness have me blacking out.

She falls forward, so I wrap my arms around her to hold her close. I can feel our combined essence trapped between our bodies. Right here, right now, I'm happier than I've ever been. I have my woman back in my arms and I'm regaining the feeling

in my legs. I kiss Brooke's sweaty temple and resist the urge to lick her face like a puppy.

CHAPTER TWENTY: BROOKE

I reluctantly leave Flame's arms to retrieve a washcloth from the bathroom.

"That's my job." Flame complains as I wipe him clean before doing the same for myself.

Grinning, I lean forward and kiss him. "Next time." I toss the cloth into the hamper and crawl back onto the bed. "Let me check your wound." I say as I nudge his arm.

He rolls over onto his stomach so I can remove the bandage. It's crumpled and needs replacing. I feel a little guilty for not taking care of it sooner, but we both needed to connect again. Throwing on a pair of sweats, I duck out of the room to find Scar in the infirmary.

"How's he doing?" Scar asks as he digs through his supply cabinet.

"Better. The wound looks good. I may have Tally look at it tomorrow." I tell him.

"He can come by here, and I can look." Scar offers.

"Ok, I'll tell him." I reply.

"What about his legs?"

"He has feelings in both, so that's amazing. He's calling Tanya tomorrow to set up a schedule for his physical therapy. I know he misses riding his bike."

“Tanya’s here in the clubhouse.” Scar says as he hands me what I need. “Ghost talked Dante into letting her stay in Flame’s room, since you two are in one of the guest rooms.”

“That’s great. Maybe they can start tomorrow.”

I leave with the supplies and find Flame drifting off. I apply the new bandage so he can roll back over. Crawling under the covers, I snuggle into his arms. Placing my face on his chest so he can wrap his left arm around my back. I breathe a sigh of contentment, knowing I’m back where I belong.

I wake to find Flame nuzzling my breasts. I’m instantly wet. How did I live these past few weeks without him in my life?

“Hmmm.” I moan as he sucks a nipple into his mouth.

“I want to taste you again.” He growls. “Climb onto my face.”

I do, but I align myself so I’m eye-to-eye with his gorgeous cock. As his tongue slides through my folds, I wrap my fingers around his base before slipping my mouth around his tip. We let out equally deep moans that leaves me giggling until his talented tongue gets busy. I run my teeth along the underside before flattening my tongue against the top. His flavor bursts over my tongue. I get lost in the senses he’s creating with his tongue and teeth while I worship his cock with mine.

Pleasure jolts through me when he plunges a finger into my passage. My hips jerk as he slides in a second finger and scissors them. I mimic the contractions of my pussy muscles by hollowing my cheeks. His hips jerk, and I relish how powerful I feel having this man react to my touch. When he curls his finger and nips my clit, my orgasm shatters through me.

“Oh, fuck.” I mumble around his dick because no way am I letting him go.

He slaps my ass. “Reverse cowgirl.” He orders. “I want to watch this ass jiggle.”

I scramble into position, aligning myself over his cock and slowly lowering myself onto him. Before I’ve fully enveloped him, he shocks me by slamming his hips up. The nurse in me marvels at how much improvement he’s showing in his range of motion, but the pleasure quickly turns me into a quivering mass. I can no longer think, just feel. He smacks my ass as he continues to thrust his hips up. The pleasure surging through me sends me forward until my hands fall on his thighs. I use them to leverage my hips up and down as I ride him hard. I’m racing toward my next orgasm. He slaps each of my cheeks hard, sending me over the edge. His body tenses under me just before he fills me with his hot cum.

“Damn, baby, you have the best ass.” Flame says as he continues to squeeze and knead my flesh. I glance over my shoulder to see his eyes glued to said ass with his bottom lip trapped between his teeth. Seeing him worshipping me with his eyes sends a small wave of pleasure through me. My channel pulses around his shrinking cock, making his eyes widen before he moves them from my ass to my face.

“I love you.” I tell him and he grins.

“I know. It’s a good thing, because I know I can’t live without you.”

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When my stomach growls, I laugh. “I need to eat, but I want to take a shower first. Want me to help you bathe?”

With a few cuss words and plenty of laughter, I help him wash his hair and body before taking care of myself. I’m glad he’s laughing, because I know how frustrating it must be for him to be reliant on someone else. But I’m happy to see how he’s keeping his good spirits.

“I should have Tally look at your wound, but Scar said you could stop the infirmary, and he’d do it.”

Flame nods as he pulls on his shirt. “I’ll stop by the infirmary. He’s had enough practice with gunshot wounds. Probably more than Tally.”

When we reach the infirmary, I remember Tanya. “Tanya’s here in the clubhouse.” I tell him. “Or at least she was here last night. She slept in your bed.”

Flame nods. “I forgot. Ghost asked me earlier, and I told him it was fine. I’d rather she was here than out there where Deion or one of his guys could get to her.”

We find Caitlin in the infirmary with Scar. She dances over and hugs Flame before hugging, too.

“You’re in a good mood.” I tell her.

She grins. “I am. I get to go to Crossroads today. Carver said they were finishing up the first apartment and wants to get my feedback. It’s just so exciting to see it come

together.”

“That is good news.” I tell her. “Have you met Tanya yet? She’s a physical therapist, and she knows Athena Stokes. I know you mentioned wanting to meet Athena and talk to her about joining Crossroads.”

“I do, but I haven’t seen Tanya yet. Maybe I’ll see her around. I would like to meet Athena. I’ve heard great things about her.”

“How is it going with your dad?” I ask. I’m a little afraid to ask, but Caitlin’s smile settles me.

“I’m happy he’s here. Tally still wavers between trusting him and believing he’s plotting our destruction.” She says, making me laugh. “I really think he didn’t know what mom was up to, especially regarding Gerard and my inheritance. Tally has residual resentment because of how he dismissed her career choice. He couldn’t understand how she could choose to work in ER at another hospital instead of choosing to join his baby, Chambers Medical Group. But personally, I think she pricked his ego when she came here instead. I don’t think he thought working ER was a bad thing. But that’s the message he sent her.”

I nod in understanding.

“Brooke was right. Your wound looks good.” Scar says as he applies a new bandage. “Let’s give it another day and maybe tomorrow you can remove the bandage for good.”

“Good. Now I just need to get my legs working again.” Flame says as he wheels toward the door. “Let’s go see if we can find Tanya and get some sessions scheduled.”

“We’ll go with you.” Scar says, as he and Caitlin follow us out to the common room.

“I’ll grab us some breakfast.” I tell Flame.

In the kitchen, I find Tamara busy fixing French Toast and sausage while Jenna fiddles with the coffeemaker.

“Yum.” I say when I enter the room.

“Help yourself.” Jenna says as she moves to the coffee pot carrying a carafe full of water. “I’m just fixing some fresh coffee. How is Flame doing?”

“Getting stronger. His wound is healing and his legs continue to get stronger.”

“Oh, good.” Tamara says. “It probably helps that he has you as his nurse.” She says grinning.

I shrug. “I’m happy we’re back together.”

“Us too.” Jenna says with a laugh as she pours in the water. “Hopefully you two will have sex soon, if you haven’t already.” She continues, her back to us so she can’t see my mouth drop open or Tamara’s smirk. “He’s been a nightmare since you two broke up. I offered to give him a blow job just to relieve some of the stress, but he said no.” Tamara rolls her eyes at me as Jenna continues. “He said no to all the girls.”

Jenna is a sweet and naive girl who pretends to be one of the kutte bunnies, but the truth is none of the guys will touch her. Not that they don’t find her attractive, but she’s under Shield’s protection and he’s threatened dismemberment to anyone who treats her like a bunny.

Jenna turns around and must notice the look on my face or maybe she sees Tamara

struggling not to laugh. “Did I say something wrong?”

I laugh and shake my head. “No. Flame said he hadn’t been with anyone. I believed him, but...”

“You’re bound to have doubts.” Tamara says, nodding her head. “But in this case, he wasn’t lying. I heard the bunnies complaining about how at first, he’d start flirting, but then when they thought they had him hooked, he’d wiggle off and swim away. Then it got to where they didn’t even try. Some guys give off the ‘leave me alone’ vibe. Flame sure did.”

I suppress my self-satisfied grin as I carry the plates back into the common room and find Flame sitting with Tanya and Ghost. The other two are about halfway through their breakfast when I set a plate in front of Flame.

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“Tanya said we can go to her facility this morning. She can fit me in before her other appointments.” Flame tells me.

I nod. “That’s good. The sooner you get started, the better. After breakfast?”

Ghost shakes his head. “No, we’re having Church first. Maybe after that.”

“Church?” Tanya asks.

“Club meeting.” I tell her. “They call it Church. Although I really don’t know why?”
I turn to Flame.

“They’re mandatory, and you better have a damned good reason for missing one?”
Ghost offers with a laugh,

“I always thought it was because riding is like a religious experience.” Flame muses.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: FLAME

After we take our seats, Dante starts Church.

“Wanted to give everyone an update on that asshole, Tony Younger. The Coast Guard caught up to him. They confiscated his boat and turned him over to the SDPD.” Dante glances at me and I can read the look on his face. I won’t like what he has to say next. “He’s claiming Brooke seduced him and asked to go on a boat ride. That she freaked out, acted crazy, and fought with him. When he tried to push her off, she tripped and fell into the water.”

“Fucking bastard.” I growl, and Dante gives me a quick nod.

“Agreed. Luckily, we have the video from the hospital, and the dock has security as well. It’s clear that Brooke was not conscious when she left the hospital or when he carried her onto the boat. The cops have arrested him and are filing charges. Evie will keep us updated, as will Shield and Officer Wagstaffe. But Younger wasn’t the only threat to Brooke. We’re still on alert for Deion and his men. Brooke and Deion’s former girlfriend, Tanya Webster, are staying here at the club and are under our protection. I don’t think Deion will be stupid enough to go after Brooke, but he may still want to convince Tanya to go back to him.”

“Fuck that.” Ghost grumbles and Dante smirks.

“As you may have guessed, Ghost has taken charge of Tanya’s protection.” A few snicker as Dante continues. “He’ll be tasking the prospects to fill in when he’s unavailable. Flame, I assume you’ll do the same for Brooke?”

I nod.

“I know it’s hard to keep them protected considering their positions at the hospital. HIPAA makes it impossible for you to stay close. I’ve talked with the hospital administrator about beefing up their security. I never feel comfortable when Tally’s there.” Dante admits.

“We might have an alternative solution, although it will take time to implement.” Scar chimes in. “Caitlin said her father wants to move to San Diego. He’s talking about building a new medical group. One that will work closely with Crossroads. He wants to focus on helping women, especially victims. Give them a safe place.”

Dante’s eyebrows rise. “Really? Tally hasn’t mentioned it.”

“I don’t think he’s talked to her about it yet. I think he was trying the idea out on Caitlin to gauge her reaction before he approaches Tally.”

“What did Caitlin tell him?” I ask.

“That she loved the idea. When she mentioned it to me, she was giddy. She’s envisioning a facility where women can go in with confidence, knowing the staff is on their side. Caitlin’s heard that some healthcare professionals mistreat rape victims. They either doubt their claims or treat them like victims instead of people with feelings and pride. She also wants to give women in an abusive relationship a sanctuary from their abusers when they seek medical care.” Scar says. “I think she sees guards keeping the abusers out of the hospital until we can move them to Crossroads.”

“Is that what Dr. Chambers wants to provide?” Dante asks, and I can hear the skepticism in his tone.

Scar shrugs. “You know, Caitlin, she sees the best in him. She’s also committed to Crossroads, so her imagination is on overdrive as she thinks of ways to help these women and children. I think we need to talk to Chambers and get a better understanding of what he’s offering. We also need Tally involved.”

Dante nods. “It would be nice to have a medical facility where Tally can work, and maybe Brooke, if she’s interested. We’d handle the security. I like that idea. Where would this facility be? On the grounds of Crossroads?”

Scar shakes his head. “I don’t think so. Caitlin thinks it should be outside the walls, but nearby.”

“What about that place next door?” Smoke asks, looking at Grimm. “The one with the cameras we used to check for activity around Acid’s kid’s place when she went

missing. Maestro's dad was selling it."

Grimm nods. "It's in a suitable location. It's near Crossroads, but not on the premises."

"I'm taking Caitlin to look at the work we've completed on Crossroads." Carver chimes in. "She could give her opinion on the place."

"We have to talk with Chambers first." Dante says.

"Why?" I ask.

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Dante scowls at me, so I hold my hands up. “I’m not saying we don’t get his input. But if we think the clinic is a good idea on its own merit, then why not look at the building and get started on fleshing out the idea?”

Scar’s nodding as he glances at Dante. “Flame’s right. We already discussed the possibility of building a clinic. We don’t really need Chambers. But if he’s being honest and really wants to do this with Caitlin, we’ll still want to be involved.”

Dante nods. “You’re right. Let’s move forward. But I’m pulling Chambers aside to talk to him about this project before we bring Tally into it. I want to make it clear to Chambers what will happen to him if he screws over this chance with Tally and Caitlin.” He looks at Byte. “See if Maestro can get us into the building.”

Byte nods.

“One last note.” Scar says, glancing at me. “Caitlin is considering asking Officer Wagstaffe to either run security at Crossroads or at least take a job there. She said he was a tremendous help to Lenora Matthews.”

I nod. “He would be good. Not sure if he’s ready to quit the force yet, but he may be close to retirement.”

“May be closer than we think.” Shield says, ominously. “Brooke needs to the police station today to press charges against that bastard and give the detective in charge of the case a statement.” Shield sighs. “I have to warn you and her that the guy is a bastard.” Shield says. “He’s the type who thinks all women are liars and that they cry rape to get the guy in trouble. He also isn’t a fan of our club.” Glancing at Chaos, he

continues. “Detective Billings.”

“Asshole.” Chaos moans. “He’s the bastard who tried to arrest me for murdering Debbie.” Chaos chuckles. “Although Evie wouldn’t mind a chance to face off against him again.”

“Why the fuck did they give the case to him?” I ask, horrified on Brooke’s behalf.

Shield shrugs. “His name came up. But I also think this might be a test by his commanding officer. I don’t like that he’s using Brooke this way, but I think he believes she’s made of sterner stuff than other victims. That and she has the backing of her father. It might not be a bad idea to have Evie on speed dial, in case she needs her.”

I glance at Chaos, who nods. “I’ll let Evie know. She hasn’t eviscerated a cop lately. I’m sure she’d love the opportunity, especially him.”

We chuckle at that as I try not to let myself worry about Brooke. I know she’s strong, but yesterday was a nightmare, one that would break most people. She needs to know that the club is behind her.

“Can we do a background check on Tony Younger?” I ask Byte. “I find it hard to believe that this was his first kidnapping attempt.”

“Good point.” Shield nods. “He didn’t kidnap her on a whim. And the way he evaded Ghost and Tanya seems planned rather than a lucky maneuver.”

“I’ll get on it right after the meeting. If I don’t have information before Brooke goes to the station, I’ll get it to Evie. She’ll be able to push her way into the interview. Just tell Brooke that if someone asks her if she has a lawyer, to say yes.”

I nod.

“One more thing before we end.” Dante says. “While you were in the hospital, we offered Pete a chance to take over the management of Styx. Temporarily. He proved his worth driving the truck to Chicago after he helped rescue our women. He isn’t interested in prospecting, but he jumped at a chance to work for us. I thought Styx was a good option since I knew Reaper and Ghost would want to take turns guarding your back.”

“How is he doing?” I ask.

“Good.” Feral responds. “He’s been learning both sides of the business, taking up the slack when either Reaper or Ghost aren’t there.”

“That’s good, because I want to look into starting a new club business.” Reaper says before telling everyone about his idea for a shooting range. “I’m still working the numbers with Penny, but so far, they look good.”

“He has some solid ideas about advertising and drawing in fresh blood.” Penny says. “Most of the gun ranges around here cater mostly to men. Reaper wants to draw in more women.”

“Ashlyn gave me the idea. She wants to learn how to shoot and even get a license to carry. Especially after what happened in Vegas. It made me think that women who come to Crossroads might want to learn. We could make it a members-only club, like what we did with Lucifer’s Den.” Reaper continues. “But even if we don’t go the member-only path, I want to make sure that the women who come feel welcome. Some guys get their egos twisted where women are involved, especially in a hobby that is dominated by men. We could go with one or two days a week where it is women only, but I’d rather have rules in place that let us boot the offenders.”

Dante nods. “Get the numbers together as well as plan and distribute it to the members so we can vote on it. Who would work with you on this?”

“I was thinking Laser could assist.” Reaper says. “He and I have spoken about this project, and he’s excited.”

“Ok.” Dante nods. “Anything else?”

“I have an uncle who owns a dojo out near Clairemont. He claims the business does well, and he’s mentioned expanding. This made me think about building our own dojo, or partnering with him. I haven’t mentioned it to him yet. Wanted to bring it up here first. I haven’t even run the numbers.” Ghost says.

Dante nods. “Look into it, get with Penny. I like that idea. It’s another self-defense option for the residents of Crossroads.”

Their suggestions have me thinking about what I could do to help the club bring in more money and maybe help Crossroads at the same time. I’m considering a few ideas when Dante ends Church.

Shield walks out with me as we go in search of Brooke to tell her the bad news. What we see waiting for us in the common room makes us all stop in our tracks.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: BROOKE

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While we wait for the guys, Caitlin and Tanya discuss Crossroads. Tanya agrees to set up a meeting between Caitlin and her therapist, Athena.

“Athena has mentioned your plans for Crossroads.” Tanya says. “She thinks it’s something our community needs. Although, tying it to an MC can scare away potential victims.”

Caitlin’s shoulders droop. “I know. I’ve thought about that, but I can’t do this without them. And I don’t want to. These guys would go through fire to protect innocent women and children. I’ve seen them do it. Heck, they rescued me, and I was a complete stranger to them.”

Tanya nods. “I’m not saying you shouldn’t work with them. I think it’s more important to focus on how their involvement helps victims.”

“How?” Caitlin asks as her father and Tally join us.

“Aren’t there stories that you can share which highlight ways the club has helped victims?” She presses.

“They saved the life of my baby.” Vance says, brushing his hand down Caitlin’s hair. “A few times, if I’m not mistaken. Didn’t they rescue Ashlyn from that gang? They rescued Brooke today.”

Tally nods. “They don’t always follow the law.”

Tanya shrugs. “I don’t think you have to provide specifics. You only want to give

enough information to show that they're the good guys. The ones who help others."

"It's all PR." Vance says. "I think it's important for future victims to know that you provide them with real protection. After all, who would you rather have on your side? Cops who may or may not provide real protection, or a group of scary ass bikers who most bullies would hide from instead of face?"

Tally grins at her father's description. "Well, you know the choice we'd make."

"I'm hoping that if you let me be involved in the clinic, that we'll expand on their reputation."

"What clinic?" I ask.

Caitlin explains the idea of building a medical group, or clinic, that takes all patients but provides a special level of security and service for victims. Specifically, women and children.

"We want to not only make the victims feel safe, but we don't want to compound their problems by treating them as just victims or worse, as criminals." Vance says. "I'm sorry to say that it took almost losing Caitlin to realize how much damage I did to her by not listening to her."

Tally stares at her father for several minutes before speaking. "Do you really mean that?"

Vance nods. "I do. What happened with your mother gave me a jolt. I had to stand back and look at all my previous assumptions and I realized that I often made snap judgements that made my life easier rather than asking questions or digging deeper."

"Like what?" I ask.

“Mostly accusations made against Colin.” Vance says, shaking his head. “We had the police come to the house and to the hospital to question him about claims from women who accused him of sexual assault. Vivian always took his side and told me that the women were just after our money. I never let myself think otherwise.” He wipes his hand down his face. “My god, I raised a monster.”

“Colin’s choices were his, not yours.” Caitlin assures him, grasping his hand.

“Exactly. Look at the daughters you raised. They’re both amazing.” I tell him. “We’re all responsible for our own actions.”

“But if I had stopped to consider other possibilities for why so many women filed charges against him, I would have realized that he had to be responsible. You can’t have that many people making the same claim for it not to be true. I can’t imagine how many I didn’t hear about.”

“Which is why you want to create this clinic?” Tally asks.

He nods. “It is. I can’t make up for my mistakes, but I can choose to do better with my life from this day on. Even if I have to go to jail first.”

“You think that’s a possibility?” Caitlin asks.

“I don’t know. So far they have found nothing that ties me to what your mother was doing with the Standish’s. I wasn’t involved, but she used my medical group. I don’t know if they can hold me accountable or not. My lawyers are working with the FBI. They let me come here understanding that I’ll be back in Chicago after Tally’s wedding.”

“They don’t consider you a flight risk, then?” Tally asks.

“I don’t think so. Although they asked me to hand over my passport. Which I did.” Vance replies. “I have no plans to leave the country. I just want to get past this and move on.”

“Would you keep Marshall Group?” Tally asks.

“No, I’ve already found a buyer who wants to take it once the FBI is done with their investigation.” Vance says. “I’m selling the house, everything. I want to move here and work with you both to make a difference.”

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We turn when we hear the men exiting Church. I smile at Flame as he joins us.

“What are you talking about?” Dante asks as he steps up to kiss Tally on the top of her head.

“Dad’s plan for building a clinic near Crossroads.” She responds. “One that helps victims instead of shaming them.”

“Really?” Dante asks. “That’s a noble effort.”

“I’m really excited about it.” Tally gushes. “I think we need to shake up the status quo. Give frightened women a stronger presence in their corner.”

“Speaking of victims not being given the respect and compassion they deserve. Brooke, the detective in charge of the case against Younger, wants to interview you.” Shield tells me.

I frown. “Why say it that way?” I ask him.

“Because I don’t like the asshole. I’ve seen him in action. He always takes the side of the accused when a woman is filing charges. I don’t know what his problem is. Although, my guess is that women often reject him.”

“Why do I have to deal with him? Can’t I get a different detective to take my statement?” I ask.

“You could, but I think there’s a reason our CO assigned this case to him.” Shield

says. “He’s heard the rumors, and I think he wants to see how he handles your case. He knows that you being the daughter of a cop makes you less likely to allow him to intimidate you.”

I’m nodding as Flame takes my hand. “You don’t have to take him on. It isn’t your job to fix the cops.”

I smile. “He can’t hurt me. And being forewarned will make it easier for me to remain in control.”

“We want Evie to go with you, or at least be available in case you need backup.” Dante says. “I know you probably feel you’re the one accused of a crime...”

“I’m feeling that way, yes.” I agree. “But that isn’t your fault. Let me see what this guy does. He may not be an asshole, but if he is, Shield’s right. I’m better equipped to handle his attitude than some other woman might be.”

“This is something I want to consider for Crossroads.” Caitlin says. “If we need to bring the cops in for any reason, I want to make sure we get ones who won’t make the situation worse.”

The only way to ensure that is to identify those cops who will treat the victims with dignity. I know my father is one, so is Shield. I can use this opportunity to see if the detective in charge of my case is one we need to avoid.

“I’ll do it.” I say. “When do I need to be down there?”

“Any time.” Shield says.

“Chaos is calling Evie. She’ll be available if you need her.” Dante says. “Byte is doing some digging into Younger’s background at Flame’s suggestion. His attack on

you and the subsequent cat-and-mouse game with us leads us to believe that he may have done this before. He'll get the information to Evie and if necessary, she'll push to see you. If someone asks you about your lawyer, just tell them she's yours."

I nod as I consider his words. I hadn't thought about the possibility that I wasn't Tony's first. But not only was he prepared to grab me after luring me to his office, but he didn't drive straight to his boat. At least that's what the guys told me. I, of course, was out cold.

Chaos steps over. "Evie will be at the station in two hours. She said she can meet you there then. She suggests recording the interview. The detective should record it as well, but it doesn't hurt to have your own copy."

I nod.

"I'll go with you." Flame tells me.

I smile. "Good. But since we don't have to be there for another couple of hours. Maybe Tanya can help you with some physical therapy."

Flame groans but laughs. "Fine. Do you have time?" He asks her.

She grins and nods.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: FLAME

I'm not excited about going through physical therapy, but having Brooke attend the sessions helps. Because she's the reason I want to get back to full health. Her and my bike. Maybe I should think about positioning my bike so I can see it as well for added motivation. Ghost and Brooke sit off to the side while Tanya runs me through a few stretching exercises. She follows this up by testing my leg strength. My right leg is

still stronger than my left, but I'm pleased at how much stronger my left leg is today versus the yesterday.

“You're obviously getting better, which is to be expected. Swelling was primarily the reason you lost feeling in your legs. Practice mindfulness when you're doing any physical activity, including sex. You want to push yourself, but don't overdo it. If you feel pain, stop whatever you're doing. If your muscles feel fatigued, rest them.” She says. “It's pretty much common sense. You know your body the best, so listen to it.”

I nod. “I will.”

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“Let’s try the parallel bars next.” Tanya suggests.

I make several passes, most of which I can accomplish using just one hand. Since my left leg is the only one still a little wobbly. When she calls an end to the test, she’s all smiles. I’m happy that I don’t feel tired or out of breath. I assumed I’d be more out of shape after spending so many days in a hospital bed.

“That was great.” Tanya says, handing me a cane. “Let’s see how you do with just the cane. Walk between the bars in case you need to grab hold.”

I do what she says and turn to see all three of them grinning at me.

“You can ditch the wheelchair and use the cane. You need to keep building your strength. Let me show you how to fall. It will help ensure you don’t cause injuries.”

Once she’s giving me some tips on falling, it’s time for her next patient.

Ghost tucks his phone back into his pocket.

“Caitlin wants us to come to Crossroads later because Athena will be there.” Ghost says. “Also, Maestro reached his step-father, Alexander Marquette, and he’s agreed to give a tour of the building next to Crossroads. Tally and Caitlin are really excited about seeing it.”

I glance at Brooke, who has a look of longing on her face. “We can go by there after your interview at the police station.” I tell her. She nods and gives me a smile.

“Yeah. I’d like that. I’m curious to see Crossroads and I was super excited about Vance’s idea for a clinic. The goal behind it is very intriguing.” Brooke says.

“What did you think about his claim that hospitals don’t always give enough respect to the victims?” Tanya asks. “You work in one. Does that really happen?”

Brooke nods. “More than I care to admit. I mean, most doctors and nurses are kind, but you get the occasional asshole who seems to take pleasure in making a difficult situation even worse. My heart breaks for every rape victim we’ve treated, but I’ve watched a couple doctors tell a victim that she doesn’t look or act like a rape victim. Like they’re all supposed to look and act the same.”

“Fuckers.” I spit out. “Who are they? Do they still work there?”

She shakes her head. “No. One of them was Kevin Marshall, and we already knew he was the biggest asshole around. We had another one. I can’t remember his name. Gina told me about him. She went to his boss and told him what had happened. I think he was an intern. He didn’t last more than a day or two.”

“Good.”

“The worst are the cops.” Brooke continues. “Not all of them. Of course. But it is one reason I want to meet with this detective today. We’ve had cops try to talk the victims out of pressing charges. Tried to make them feel guilty about ruining the lives of these men. As if they hadn’t already tried to ruin the life of the woman. I just don’t understand it.”

I glance at Ghost, and he looks as angry as I feel. I have two sisters and a mother, all of whom I love. The thought of someone hurting them like that makes me want to do more than just ruin the lives of those bastards.

“We need to get Crossroads built, and the clinic established.” I say, pounding my fist against my leg. “We need to think of how we can help these women so that they don’t feel alone.”

“Hey. Are you alright?” Ghost asks, kneeling in front of a crying Tanya. “I’m sorry. Were we being callous?”

She shakes her head and touches her fingers lightly to his face. “No. You weren’t. You are all amazing. After what happened to me, I felt alone. I talked to the police and some of them berated me for lying about that bastard. Said he was a man of God and that I was hurting his image.”

“He’s no man of God. He’s scum.” I say and Ghost nods.

“I know. You’re right. I just wish I had a place like Crossroads to go to and friends like you to support me. I’m lucky I found Athena. She’s helped me so much. Mostly with gaining back my confidence.” Tanya says.

Ghost brushes her hair away from her face. “You have every right to be confident. You’re amazing, and as beautiful on the inside and the outside. You’re strong and you help others. I’m grateful for every minute we get to be together.”

Tanya leans her forehead against Ghost’s. I can see a single tear slip down her cheek. I glance at Brooke, who is smiling at them. “We should get going. I want to get over to Crossroads.” Brooke says, glancing at her watch.

I nod and grab my cane while Brooke pushes the wheelchair outside to the SUV.

“I need to return this to the hospital.” Brooke says, grinning at me. “You weren’t supposed to take it home with you.”

I shrug as I climb inside. Axel's our driver, so I tell him to stop at the hospital before we hit the police station.

"Are you coming in or are you going to wait out here?" Brooke asks as we pull into the police station's parking lot. "Because I'm fine if you don't want to come in."

"I'm coming in, but I'll leave my kutte in the cage." I tell her as I climb out with my cane. Just being out of the wheelchair has me feeling whole again. Now to just work on losing the cane.

Inside, I find a couple of empty seats together and claim one while Brooke speaks to the desk sergeant. A door opens and I see her dad walk through. He waves at her before coming over to me. He shakes my hand and nods at Brooke.

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“She looks good.” He says, and I nod. “No lasting effects?”

I shrug. “Not so far, but that doesn’t mean she won’t have nightmares or even some PTSD when she goes back to work.”

He nods as he opens his arms to give her a hug when she walks back to join us.

“Detective Billings is on his way to get me.” She says. We both see the expression on her dad’s face. “What?”

“I didn’t know he was the one handling the case.” Wagstaffe says. “He’s, let’s see, how do I say this?”

“Not a friend of the victim?” Brooke asks.

Mark blows his breath out. “No, he’s not.” He glances at me. “I’m glad you aren’t wearing your kutte. He doesn’t like the Demon Dawgs. Not after how Evie tore him a new one when they arrested Chaos.”

“Ms. Wagstaffe?”

We all turn to see the man of the hour.

“I’m Brooke Wagstaffe.” Brooke says, offering her his hand.

He looks at it before shaking it, holding it a little too long for my liking, so I growl. He flinches and drops her hand as if it burnt him. I see Mark smirk.

“Mark. What are you doing here?” He asks Brooke’s dad.

“Just saying hi to my daughter.” He replies with a smile. “This is her boyfriend, Aaron.” He introduces me.

I stand up and hate having to use the cane, but it’s better than falling on my face. I shake his hand and smirk as he straightens his back to appear taller. We’re about the same height, but I’ve got a good forty or fifty pounds on him. All muscles. He’s shaped like a twig.

“You can call me Mr. Barnes.” I say with a grin. Mark shakes his head while Brooke grins at me.

“Mr. Barnes.” Billings greets me with a sneer. “You’ll need to wait out here. Ms. Wagstaffe, are you ready?”

Brooke nods and leans over to kiss me.

“Give him hell.” I whisper to her and watch her walk away. I share a glance with Mark and see he’s just as worried about her as I am.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: BROOKE

Billings leads me into an interview room where another detective is already waiting.

“This is my partner, Detective Harding. Jake, this is Brooke Wagstaffe.”

I shake his hand as he furrows his brow. “Any relation to Officer Mark Wagstaffe?” He asks me and I nod.

“He’s my father.”

“Oh. I didn’t know.” Harding says, glancing at Billings. “Did you know?”

“I just saw Mark in the lobby.” Billings says.

I find their conversation odd and disconcerting. “Is there a problem?” I ask them.

Billings shakes his head. “No, of course not.” He offers me a smile, but it’s a poor attempt, so I don’t return it. I glance at Harding, but he isn’t looking at me. He’s reviewing the information in the folder before him.

I don’t know if it’s all the warnings I received beforehand or the conversations concerning victims being victimized, but I’m already on alert.

“Ms. Wagstaffe.” Billings starts. “May I call you Brooke?”

I’m usually a casual person, preferring my coworkers and patients to call me Brooke, but I’m feeling the need to take some control here.

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“I think I prefer Ms. Wagstaffe.” I tell him.

He frowns and shrugs. “As you wish. Ms. Wagstaffe, I understand you believe Mr. Anthony Younger attempted to kidnap you. Is that correct?”

“He didn’t just try to kidnap me. He succeeded.” I respond coolly.

“Did you see him abduct you?” Billings asks.

I stare at him and then look at Harding, who doesn’t meet my eyes. Narrowing my eyes at Billings, I respond. “I didn’t see his face. He came up behind me and knocked me out using chloroform.”

“How do you know he used chloroform?” Billings asks. “Or did you get that from television?”

I sneer at him. “I’m a nurse. Therefore, I know what chloroform smells and tastes like. I also know its effects.”

“Right.” Billings says, making a note in his notebook. “So you didn’t see Mr. Younger abduct you, but you claim your abductor used chloroform.”

“No. I’m stating outright that Anthony Younger kidnapped me using chloroform.”

“But if you didn’t see him, how do you know it was him?” Billings presses as Harding shifts in his chair. I glance at him, but the other detective is still not looking at me.

“Because I woke up on his boat, locked in one of his cabins.” I reply.

“Mr. Younger claims you asked him to take you out on his boat.” Billings says.

“Well, Mr. Younger is lying.” I reply. “I didn’t even know he had a boat and even if I did, I would never have asked him to take me out on it. I also would not have accepted an invitation.”

“You don’t like boats?” Billings asks.

“No, I don’t like being kidnapped.” I retort. “I liked Angela Westbrook’s yacht. The woman who rescued me?”

At this, Harding looks right at me. “Wait, what?”

“Angela Westbrook fished Ms. Wagstaffe from the water after she jumped into the bay.” Billings says, waving his hand as if to dismiss his partner. “This has nothing to do with her.” He turns back to me. “If he locked you in the cabin, as you claim, then how did you wind up in the water?”

“I found a spare key hidden above the doorframe and used it to open the door.” I state.

“So, in fact, no one locked you in, since you had a key?”

“The door was locked.” I tell him. “Finding the key was serendipitous. I doubt Tony knew it was there.”

“It’s his boat, though.” Billings presses. “You don’t think he knew where the key was?”

I sit back and glare at him. “Why lock the door?”

“Maybe he thought you were in danger?” Billings suggests. “Maybe he saw someone abduct you and he rescued you and took you to his boat?”

I narrow my eyes and take a deep breath. “Are you suggesting that Tony Younger did not kidnap me?” I ask him.

“We’re simply trying to find out what happened.” Billings says, giving me a smug smile. “Your statement of events doesn’t mesh with that of Mr. Younger.”

“Do you honestly think he’s telling you the truth?” I ask, flabbergasted. This is going worse than I expected. “Is this how you usually treat victims, Detective? As if they are the criminals?”

“I’m simply trying to get to the truth.” He replies.

“Then here is the truth. Mr. Younger invited me to his office to review open positions at the hospital. When I arrived, I knocked, but he didn’t answer. A man dressed in black and wearing a black ball cap came through the side door and knocked me out using chloroform. When I woke up, I found myself locked in a cabin on a boat heading out to sea. I found a key and used it to unlock the door. When I saw Mr. Younger steering the boat, wearing the same outfit as the man who had abducted me, I slipped over the edge and swam toward land. An associate of Ms. Westbrook used a dingy to rescue me from the water before taking me aboard Ms. Westbrook’s yacht. That’s my statement. That’s what happened. Now I’m leaving.” I stood up to leave.

“Sit down, Ms. Wagstaffe.” Billings orders. “I’m not done.”

“Well, I am. You can’t hold me. I’m not under arrest. To inform you, I will file a complaint against you.” I look at Harding. “Both of you. I’m the victim here, and I

find your attitude and your questions insulting.”

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“You need to think this through, Ms. Wagstaffe.” Billings protests. “Mr. Younger is an upstanding citizen. Your accusations could affect his career and his life. Are you willing to let that happen?”

I’m facing the door, so I take a deep breath before turning back to face the two detectives. I lean forward to place my hands on the table so I can get in their face. “That man kidnapped me. I don’t know what his intentions were when he got me alone out on the water. But my guess is that whatever his plan was would have more than inconvenienced me. I didn’t ask to be abducted by him, but I ask that you do your damn job. Have you checked to see if he’s done this before?” I snap.

“Mr. Younger has no arrest record.” Billings snaps back. His eyes blazing at my attack.

“So what? Have the police has ever questioned him? Has there been other women who have gone missing from the places where he lived or worked? Maybe his other victims weren’t as lucky as I was. Maybe they didn’t escape. Or maybe it is asking too much to expect you to do your job properly. I’ll be talking with my lawyer. She’ll want a recording of this conversation.”

“We don’t have the recorder on.” Billings says smugly.

I pull out my phone and make a point of ending the recording that I’m making. “Good thing I did.”

I open the door and stalk out of the office. I don’t stop, even when I hear Billings calling my name. “Fuckers.” I mutter as I step back into the lobby.

Flame's eyes go wide when he sees my face.

"I hope nothing I do makes you look at me that way." He says with a mock shudder.

I huff as he pulls me into his arms. I relax against him as I fight back the tears. If this is what other victims go through, it's no wonder most remain silent.

"Let's go." I say, pulling back but not leaving his embrace. "I want to get out of here."

"Do you want to go back to the clubhouse or your apartment?" He asks me. "We can stop at the liquor store and buy you a crate of wine."

I shake my head. "No, I want to meet Caitlin and the others. I want to help them build Crossroads and I want to help build this clinic. We need to create a safe place for victims so they can find help without judgement."

"I take it they judged you?" Flame asks.

"At first, they tried to convince me that Younger may not have been the one to kidnap me, then they tried to talk me into not ruining his life." I huff again. "Fuckers."

"Did you record it, like Evie suggested?" He asks as he opens the door to the SUV.

I climb in and give a smile to Axel, who is watching me with concern in his brown eyes that are so much like his brother's. Once Flame is in the seat next to me, I answer.

"I did. Do you want to hear it?" I offer.

"You can send it to me, and I can listen to it later." Flame offers. "No reason to relive

it if it's that bad."

I shrug and send him the audio file.

"I'll send it to Evie. Maybe she can use it to get them off the case and get someone who will do their job." Flame says.

I shrug. "Maybe. You know, if my dad wasn't a cop or I didn't know Shield, I'd never trust a cop again after that." I tell him. "They made me feel like I did something wrong. That I asked for this and that Younger has no culpability. Why is that?"

"I don't know." Flame says, pulling me against his chest and brushing my hair. "Did they look into his past? See if he was involved in other kidnappings?"

"They said he doesn't have a record. I asked if they even looked into missing person cases where he used to live and work. They acted like I was crazy for asking. I don't think they'll follow up."

"They don't have to. Byte is doing that. If there is something to find, he'll find it. And we're all convinced he's done this before."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: FLAME

It's killing me to stay and comfort Brooke when what I really want to do is find Billings, his partner, and Younger to make them pay for upsetting my girl. But I know, right now, she needs me with her more than she needs me to beat the shit out of them. No matter how much they deserve it. I want to listen to the message, but again, Brooke needs me. Damn, this caring for someone else is hard.

I glance down before placing a kiss on her hair. Pulling her close, I feel a sense of peace when she relaxes against me. Maybe this caring for someone else isn't so hard.

When we reach the parking lot next to Crossroads, I see Ashlyn dismounting from Reaper's bike. Ghost and Tanya slide into the spot next to where Axel parks. Damn, I miss my bike. I take Brooke's hand as we step out of the SUV. I see a group of people near the door of what looks to be an old bank. One of the more elaborate ones that existed to flaunt wealth instead of provide convenience to their customers. The building doesn't even have an ATM.

"How did it go?" Tanya asks Brooke and grimaces when she sees her expression.
"That good, huh?"

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“How did what go?” Ashlyn asks, breaking away from Reaper to join Tanya and Brooke. I drop Brooke’s hand and let her walk with her friends while I join Ghost and Reaper.

“Brooke looks upset.” Ghost whispers so the girls can’t hear us talking about them.

“She is. Those assholes made her feel like she was the one under suspicion. They even had the audacity to suggest she not ruin the asshole’s life by filing charges against him.”

“What the fuck?” Reaper growls. “What are we going to do about it?”

I can’t help but grin at my friend. I wasn’t thrilled when he started dating my sister, but once the shock wore off, I knew there was no one better for her. “She recorded the conversation. I need to send it to Evie. I’m hoping Byte finds something on the asshole. She can take the evidence and the recording to the detective’s boss and ask for a new detective to be put on the case. At least, that’s what I’m hoping she does.”

When we reach the group, I step off to the side and send the recording off to Evie, Byte, and Dante. I want to listen to it, but I stop myself and give all my attention to the group. I see Alexander Marquette talking with Vance Chambers. The two men are very similar. They both have gray hair and are wearing expensive suits. They stand out in the sea of leather. Besides them, only Brooke and Tanya aren’t wearing kutties. This reminds me to give Brooke her kutte soon. I had one made before we broke up, and it’s been sitting in my drawer ever since. Need to get it on her soon and lock her up as my Old Lady. Scar stands with Caitlin while Dante is with Tally. Kingsley, Smoke, and Carver are also with us. I want to ask Smoke about Byte’s findings, but

this is Caitlin and Tally's show right now.

"Where's Athena?" Tanya asks Caitlin. "I thought she was coming."

"She couldn't make it." Caitlin tells her. "Her brother contacted her to tell her that the cops arrested Deion and everyone in his gang this afternoon. She and Killian are working on getting them bail."

"Arrested for what?" Ghost asks.

"She didn't say." Caitlin says.

Tanya glances at Ghost, who pulls her close. They whisper off to the side while Marquette looks over Caitlin's entourage.

"This is quite a group." Marquette says. "I didn't realize so many of you were coming."

"Is that a problem?" Caitlin asks.

Marquette smiles at her. "Of course not. I'm excited about your idea and I hope this place fits your plans. If it doesn't, I have other properties. I'll be happy to show them to you. If you find one that meets your needs, we'll make the transfer quickly."

"I don't want you to lose money on it." Caitlin says. "We can purchase the property."

"Let's see if this fits your needs. I've had this property on my books for a long time. Wouldn't mind seeing it put to good use." He assures her. "Your club is like family to me. You've done so much for Benji, I mean Maestro. He's a different man since he started prospecting for you. I love seeing him so happy and excited about what he's doing. Plus, I think what you're trying to do here is amazing. I plan on helping you

any way I can.”

Caitlin beams at him, and I see Scar nod in appreciation. Caitlin has put her whole heart and soul into this project, so I know it will succeed. No one has a heart and soul as large and pure as our princess.

Marquette opens the door and we follow him inside. I expect it to be dusty and show signs of abandonment, but it’s actually quite clean and very empty. Someone’s removed most of the fixtures, except for the lighting. The windows are clean and the floor is spotless.

“I have someone come in and clean every two months or when I know I’ll be showing the place. Luckily, they came yesterday. As you can see the electricity still works, as does the plumbing. Even the heating and air conditioning still function.”

Considering it’s chilly inside, we know he isn’t lying.

“The structure is sound and easy to keep at a comfortable temperature, the walls contain insulation. You’ll need to make some adjustments if you turn it into a clinic.” He says as he gives us the tour.

The building is rectangle and a descent size. It has three stories, as well as a basement. It isn’t as large as Alvarado but it’s larger than the average clinic. Kingsley and Carver wander the space together while they each take notes. Kingsley is serving as the project manager for Caitlin’s efforts while Carver will handle the renovations.

“We could use the third floor for administration and even have rooms for those who need to stay overnight.” Vance says as we head back downstairs. “I’d like to remove the staircase.” He adds as we’re walking down the grand staircase that takes up a good portion of the bottom and second floor.

“There’s an elevator and another staircase off to the side.” Marquette says, walking toward the far corner of the building. He points to the opposite corner. “There’s also another staircase over on that side. The main staircase was more for show than function.” He adds with a smirk.

“Is there a safe in the basement?” Dante asks.

“There is. You can either leave it or remove it.” He suggests. “The basement extends beyond the first floor by a considerable distance. It almost reaches to the edge of the parking lot.”

“On all sides?” Dante asks.

Marquette nods. “Yes. It’s structurally sound. I’ve had it checked. We don’t get many earthquakes, but we’ve had a few since they built this place. The inspectors found no problems.”

“Can we see it?” Caitlin asks. She’s practically bouncing as Marquette reveals each floor. I grin at her enthusiasm. I glance at her father and see him watching her. Dante and Tally are both watching Vance. It’s an interesting situation.

“She’s so excited.” Brooke says, coming to my side.

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“She is. She wants this project to work for so many reasons.” I say. “Not only to help others, but I think she wants her dad to be here helping as well.”

“Caitlin misses her family.” Brooke says. “I don’t mean she wants her brother and mother back, but she misses what they once were. She said her mother wasn’t always so cold and she has a few fond memories of her brother. She knows they’re lost to her now. They sacrificed her love when they kidnapped her and tried to force her into marriage with Gerard. But having her dad back in her life and making plans to work with her on Crossroads is better than nothing.”

I nod in agreement. Seeing Tally and Dante watching Vance has me worried that Caitlin may end up disappointed. None of us want that to happen. After finding her almost dead and so broken that we all felt her pain, seeing her happy is critical to our well-being.

When we reach the basement, Caitlin glances around the massive space. “What would we use this for?” She asks.

“Could turn it into a surgery.” Tally suggests. “Although I’d prefer that on the first floor if we can manage it. But then we’d only have room for one. It would be better to have at least two.”

Vance nods. “I agree. We could make the second floor surgery with recovery rooms. Leave the first floor for examination rooms and use the basement for storage. But that’s a lot of space that we could put to better use. I’d hate to have administration offices in the basement, but it’s an option. That would leave the third floor for additional rooms.”

“We also need to consider security.” Smoke adds. “This place is going to attract assholes who are searching for our patients. Either to collect them or hurt them more. We need to treat this building as part of Crossroads. Using the same security. We need to limit access while still welcoming in patients.”

“Some women who come to us may be rape victims.” Brooks says. “Are we offering abortions?”

“I’d like to offer counseling for all options if the rape ends in a pregnancy.” Caitlin says. “I know when it happened to me, I had Tally, Evie, and Kingsley to talk with.” She beams at Scar. “And Scar. I’d like to help the women decide what works best for their situation.”

“In that case, we need to consider the protestors who will show up. We’re not part of Planned Parenthood, but if the anti-abortionists know we offer them, they’ll come in and harangue the women to guilt them into not coming inside.” Brooke says. “I know some places have greeters so they don’t have to face the harassment alone, but I think we should do more. Make it harder for them to approach the women.”

“We could put a fence around the place.” Smoke suggests. “We’re doing that with Crossroads. It will keep out anyone who doesn’t have a reason for being inside. We could have a guardhouse with security.”

Brooke nods. “I like that idea. I know it makes this place more like a prison, but I think protecting their privacy is important.”

Dante walks all the way to the west wall, which is the direction of Crossroads. “We could extend a tunnel to Crossroads. Create another access point for those staying there so they can have secure access to the clinic.”

“That’s a brilliant idea.” Caitlin says.

“Does that mean you want this place, or do you still need to think about it?” Marquette asks.

Caitlin looks at Tally, then Dante, then her father. You can see the hope on her face. They all nod at her. No one can say no to our princess.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: BROOKE

My mind is going crazy with ideas of what we could do with the location and the help we could provide those who will come to us. After my experience with the cops today, I want to make life easier for those who have survived attacks by self-centered jackasses, like Tony Younger.

“Ready to go?” Flame asks, and I nod absently. “You ok?”

“Just tired.” I admit. “I want to lie down and take a nap.”

Flame grimaces.

“What?”

“Ghost wants to help Tanya move out of her apartment tonight. Find her a better place with more security. Deion knows where she lives and has a key so she’s reluctant to stay there. Now that he’s in jail, it’s the perfect time to move her somewhere else without him finding out where she went.”

“Where is she going to go?” I ask. “Evie’s apartment?”

Flame shakes his head. “No, she can’t go there. We have the wife of Ashlyn’s soccer coach stashed there. The one who is pregnant?” I nod when I remember my father telling me about her. Her husband attacked Ashlyn in Las Vegas, trying to capture her

for the Reverend. I smirk when I remember how Ashlyn kicked his ass.

“Tanya can stay with me.” I offer. “I have a spare room. She can have it until she figures out another option.”

Flame perks up at that suggestion. “That’s a good idea. It would help to have only one place to guard, and your apartment is secure. You sure you don’t mind?”

“Of course not. I like Tanya.” I say.

“Ghost!” Flame shouts, drawing his and Tanya’s attention. “Brooke says you can move into her apartment for as long as you need. It’s secure, and I doubt Deion will look for you there.”

Tanya looks at me. “Are you certain you don’t mind?”

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“Of course not. I’ve been thinking of getting a roommate, so this will be a trial run. My place is near the hospital, so it’s close to work. If it works out, we could be roommates!”

“I’d like that. It would make it easier than storing my stuff and looking for a place.” Tanya says. “Thank you.”

“How do we want to do this?” Ghost asks. “Axel has one of the SUVs. I can call Cole and have him bring another. Will that be enough?” He asks Tanya.

She nods. “Plenty. I don’t have too much, but I would like to get everything out tonight, so I don’t have to go back.”

“I have furniture in all the rooms, even in your room. I can put clean sheets on the bed for tonight if you don’t want to move the heavy stuff right away. But you’re welcome to bring anything that you want from your place.” I tell her. “You can bring just what you need for now and store the rest. Then later we can compare our stuff and make some changes.”

“Sounds good. I don’t really need any of my furniture. I’ll store everything but my clothes.” Tanya says. “But I need to find a storage unit.”

“You can use a unit at Styx.” Ghost says. “No charge.”

“You’re tired.” Flame says to me. “Do want to go with us and sleep in the SUV?”

“I’d rather go home and take a nap. Plus, I have a few things to take out of Tanya’s

room before she arrives. Can you drop me off at my apartment?”

Flame frowns. “I don’t know if I like you being alone.” He says.

“I should be fine. Deion and his men are in jail and so is Younger. So I’m not in any immediate danger. My apartment is safe and I’ll lock the door.” I assure him.

“Maybe I should stay with you.” Flame says. “They don’t need me. It isn’t like I can carry much using a cane.”

“That’s up to you. But I promise I’ll be fine. Besides, they can use your eyes. Deion’s in jail, but that doesn’t mean he won’t have eyes on Tanya’s place. You want to make certain no one follows you back to my place.” I remind him.

“Which makes me hesitate to leave you alone.” He insists.

I roll my eyes. “It isn’t the same. Deion has more to worry about than me. If he has resources, he’s more likely to use them to track Tanya than me. I’m not a threat to him.”

I can tell Flame is unsure. “If you let me take a nap, I’ll have more energy later.” I tease him, leaning toward him to nibble on his jaw. I know I have him when he growls and pulls me closer so he can capture my mouth with his. He kisses me until I’m dizzy.

“Ok, we won’t be long. Take a nap so I can wear you out again.” He grins.

I follow him to the SUV so he and Axel can drop me off before they head to Tanya’s apartment. Once inside my place, I go straight to the second bedroom and haul out the few boxes I have stored in there. I give the room a good cleaning and put fresh sheets on the bed, just in case. As I’m putting away the vacuum cleaner, my phone

rings.

“Gina. Are you at work?” I ask her, hearing the familiar sounds over the line.

“I’m on my break. I wanted to check in with you and see how you’re doing?”

“I’m ok. Grateful I’m off for the next couple of days. I take it you heard what happened?”

“Yes, and I’m not happy with you for not calling me and telling me you were ok.”
She chides me.

“I’m sorry. Flame assured me they told you when they rescued me. He said you and Curt were a tremendous help. So thank you.”

“No problem. What an asshole. I never liked Tony, but I didn’t imagine he was that big of a creep.” Gina continues. “Although, speaking of creeps, the cop that is working the case is just as bad as Tony.”

“Detective Billings?” I ask her. When she says yes, I give her a summary of our interview.

“He honestly thinks you’re making this all up?” She asks and I hear the disbelief in her tone.

“I don’t know. I think so. He’s an ass. He almost made me question myself, simply because he was right. I didn’t see Tony’s face after he chloroformed me.” I admit.
“But he was wearing the same clothes on the boat, and I know it was him.”

“It was him. Curt showed Detective Harding, the video of Tony coming out of his office dressed all in black and wearing a baseball cap. He went out the side door just

before you arrived. He stepped back in and grabbed you. No way it could have been anyone but him.” Gina insists.

“Did they both see the video?” I ask her.

“Just Harding, as far as I know.” Gina says. “Curt showed it to him and gave him details about how he worked with Flame and Reaper to find you. Curt also told him about how Tony coerced you into meeting him in his office. I told Billings about it, but he only focused on the fact you agreed to have dinner with him. Even though it was a working dinner and he gave you no actual choice.”

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“I could have said no.” I admit. “I should have said no simply because I didn’t want to meet with him. But I felt like I had to. I didn’t want to alienate him. Now I wish I had rejected him. Never again. If someone asks me to have dinner or coffee and I don’t want to go, I won’t go. Screw their feelings.”

Gina laughs. “Just tell yourself that you’re doing them a favor by saying no. After all, you’re just saving them from Flame’s wrath.”

I chuckle. “Good point.”

“Speaking of Flame, how is he doing?”

“Great. He’s out of the wheelchair and using a cane. We dropped off the wheelchair he ‘borrowed’ earlier. He’s been working with Tanya doing physical therapy. She’s confident that he’ll be back to normal soon.”

“That’s a relief. Now just tell him to stay away from bullets.” I snort as she continues. “But seriously, I’d be careful of Billings. That guy is not on your side. You can tell he’s biased. Is there anyway to get someone else to work the case against Tony?”

“I don’t know. I recorded the interview I had with him and sent it to Evie. She’s a lawyer who works with the club. Plus, Byte was looking into Tony’s background, see if there’s anything in his past that hints at him doing anything like this before. The guys said he handled this like a pro. Not like someone who was acting on the spur of the moment.”

“That’s a good point.” Gina says as someone knocks on my door.

“Hold on, there’s someone at the door.” I take the phone and look through the peephole. My blood runs cold when I see the face on the other side. “Fuck, Gina. He’s here.” I whisper as I back away.

“Who?”

“Tony. He’s outside my door. Fuck, what am I going to do?” I scream when I hear something slam into the door. “I think he’s trying to break in.”

“I’m calling the police.” She says. “Stay on the line.”

“No, call Flame. Can you call Flame first?” I beg her as I scan my apartment for a place to hide.

“Good idea.”

I hear her moving on the other end, but I have to focus on my predicament. Another slam against the door and this time I hear wood cracking. Fuck, I have very little time. I consider my options and make a move that I hope doesn’t get me killed, or worse.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: FLAME

I hate having Brooke out of my sight. As soon as we drove from her apartment, I felt like I had made the wrong decision. I fight my need to have Axel turn the SUV around and take me back to her apartment. Luckily, Tanya’s apartment isn’t too far away. Once we pull up in front, I realize how important it was to get Tanya out of her apartment and into Brooke’s as soon as possible.

The building is small, with only nine apartments located around an open courtyard. It was probably once a charming place, but neglect has made it dingy and

unwelcoming. The stucco's worn and stained, likely from water damage or something worse. I hear Ghost curse when she unlocks the door and lets us into her tiny space.

"You need a better lock than this." He tells her. "Why didn't Deion replace it?"

Tanya looks at him and opens her mouth to respond, but nothing comes out. She shrugs. "I never thought about it."

"He should have!" Ghost explodes. He got the name Ghost because of a silent attack he made against a houseful of human traffickers and kidnappers. But of all of us, he's also the quietest. He rarely raises his voice unless he's upset. He's obviously upset.

"I'm moving out." Tanya says, placing a calming hand on his arm. "Remember? It doesn't matter now. And I promise, I'll let you put on all the locks you want on the door in my next place."

Ghost glares at her, but he can't maintain his anger. He gives her a nod before kissing her temple. "I'll hold you to that. You'll need at least fifteen minutes to unlock all the locks I put on your next door."

She rolls her eyes but chuckles as she moves through the space. "Brooke said she has furniture, right?" She asks me. "She said she had a bed in the room I'm using. Do I need to bring a dresser or a nightstand?"

"She has a dresser and two nightstands. There's also a pretty good size closet." I tell her.

"Why don't we leave your furniture in here tonight and just take your personal items over to Brooke's? We can put the rest of your furniture into a storage unit at Styx. The prospects can do that tomorrow." Ghost suggests.

“You don’t need pots, pans, dishes, or anything like that.” I tell her. “But you can probably take food. Want us to pack it up?”

Tanya nods. “That would be great. There’s also alcohol in the cupboards. We should definitely take that.” She says with a grin before moving down the hall to her bedroom.

Axel, who brought in a few boxes, moves to the kitchen and opens the cupboards until he finds the alcohol. I hear him loading the glass bottles as I make my way to Tanya’s bedroom. She has two roller suitcases packed within minutes. I take one and roll it out to the SUV. While I’m out there, I glance around the neighborhood. When I see the black Mercedes parked across the street, I move toward it. I know Deion and his men drive similar vehicles. As soon as I step into the street, the car pulls away and takes off. Fuck.

Pulling out my phone, I send a text to Ghost, letting him know we might have trouble. I tell him I’ll stay outside and keep watch, to let me know if he needs me back inside. Leaning against the driver’s side door of the SUV, I watch both sides of the street to see if the vehicle returns.

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The guys take turns bringing out a couple more suitcases and several boxes. “About done?” I ask Ghost after he loads the suitcase into the SUV.

“Almost. Probably one more trip.” He says. “I talked with Pete, and he has an empty storage unit Tanya can use until she finds a new place.”

“You could find a place together.” I suggest with a grin.

He grimaces. “We’re not there yet. I think she likes me. Not sure if it’s just as a friend or if there is more to it. I don’t want to push her because of her past, plus, she did just break up with Deion.”

“Be her friend. She turns to you and always knows where you are. I think she’s into you, but it’s a good idea to take it slow. She’s been through it.” I agree.

He nods before heading back inside while I return to monitoring the street. If one of Deion’s men is watching Tanya, we don’t want him following us to Brooke’s place.

I smile when my phone rings, expecting to see Brooke’s name on the display. It’s a Wagstaffe, but Mark instead of Brooke.

“Hey.” I say, answering the call. “What’s up?”

“Is Brooke with you?” He asks.

“No. She’s at her apartment. Why?”

“I just learned that they released Tony a couple of hours ago.” He says and I can hear the anger.

“What the fuck?” I snap. “Why the hell did they let him out?”

“I don’t know. Fucking Billings. He’s the lead investigator. He claims there isn’t enough evidence to hold him for kidnapping.” Mark bitches. “I don’t know what the fuck he’s thinking.”

I give him the summary of Brooke’s interaction with Billings and hear the usual stoic cop let out a series of curses that would impress Dante. “I hate cops like that.” He finally sputters out. “She’s the victim and instead of treating her like one, he’s treating the fucking asshole like she’s the one who’s trying to ruin him. Fuck.”

I remember Brooke is home alone and that it’s more than possible that Younger has her address. “Son of a bitch.” The black Mercedes. That could have been Younger seeing if I was out of the picture. “Mark, where are you? Are you near Brooke’s apartment?”

“I’m about twenty minutes away. Why?” He asks.

“Because she’s alone there and some asshole driving the same car as his just left here. If it was him...” I trail off.

“I’ll get someone over there.” He says, signing off.

I try calling Brooke, but the call goes unanswered as I rush back to Tanya’s apartment. I need the keys to the SUV and I need backup. As I step into the courtyard, my phone rings. I look down and see Gina. I almost don’t answer it, but my gut tells me not to ignore Brook’s best friend.

“Gina.” I answer.

“Flame, thank god, it’s Brooke. Tony is at her apartment. He’s trying to break down the door. She told me to call you.”

“Hang up and call the cops. Mark is alerting them as well, but it doesn’t hurt to call it in. I’m on my way to her now.” I rush into the apartment. “Brooke’s in trouble.” I shout out. “Younger is at her apartment and trying to break through the door.”

“Let’s go.” Ghost and the others say, dropping their boxes and rushing out the door with me. I climb into the SUV and Axel floors it.

While he drives, I call Brooke again and then Dante. He promises to get whoever is nearby to head directly to Brooke’s apartment. When I arrive, I can see Shield and Smoke rushing into the building. They don’t hear me call out to them. They’re already on the elevator when I get inside, so I turn to the stairs. It’s not until I stumble on the first step that I realize I left my cane behind. I can’t waste time going back, so I grab hold of the rail and ignore my weak leg as I drag myself up the stairs. Axel charges up with me, and I can hear the rest of the guys pounding up behind us.

When I reach the third floor, my legs are tired, but I continue to push. Brooke needs me more than I need to rest. I turn the corner and see Smoke disappear inside the doorframe. The door is now lying on the floor, cracked.

“Brooke!” I shout even though I hear Smoke yelling her name, too. Shield is silent as he moves through the apartment, opening every door and checking every hiding spot. The place is a mess. Someone has destroyed her apartment. Ripping up furniture, pushing over tables. All of her books are on the floor, some of them with pages torn out. It looks like he had a tantrum or she put up one hell of a fight. The only thing saving my sanity is that I don’t see any blood. “Brooke!” I shout again, and I can hear my voice crack.

Smoke pulls out his phone. “Maestro, I need you to check the cams around Brooke’s building. We think Younger got to her. He may be in his SUV or another vehicle.”

“He’s in his SUV.” I tell Smoke. “I think I saw him watching us at Tanya’s apartment.” He nods and relays the information to Maestro.

“I can’t believe this. How could I have been so stupid? Should never have left her alone. I’m a fucking idiot.” I scream out. Pounding my fist on the wall.

We all turn when we hear a noise coming from the far wall. The curtains billow just as Brooke steps through them.

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“Brooke.” I sigh, rushing toward her. She grabs onto me as I wrap my arms around her. “Where were you? Where’s Tony?”

She shifts, but I don’t let her go. I can’t let her go. In fact, I’m never letting her go again. I hope she’s ok doing her rounds with me wrapped around her, because that’s what I’ll be doing from now on. Going to the bathroom might be difficult and messy, but I don’t care.

“Jesus, man, you’ll smother her.” Ghost says. “Ease up a bit.”

I let her go just enough so I can see her face. She shakes her head at me before telling us her story.

“I was on the phone with Gina when I heard a knock on the door. When I looked through the peephole, I saw Tony.” She takes a deep breath before continuing. “I asked Gina to call Flame and then the cops, while I looked for a place to hide.”

“The balcony.” I say, and she nods, glancing over at the curtains.

“Once I snuck outside, I closed the curtains and the door. I wasn’t sure if he would find me, so I moved far away from the door. Had a plan to drop to the floor below if he came outside. Luckily, he didn’t.”

“Where did he go?” I ask her.

“That’s what we’d like to know.” I hear a voice behind us. I turn to see Billings and his partner. Now it’s Brooke’s turn to hold on to me, because I’m straining to kill the

bastard.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT: BROOKE

I hold on tight to Flame because I can see murder in his eyes. Right now, I don't know if I'm holding him back to protect Flame or because I want to be the one who takes out the prick of a cop. I've never been much for violence, but I'm seriously considering it.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" I snap at him. He steps back before squaring his shoulders.

"Someone called the cops and reported a trespasser at this address." He says. "Looks like you have a houseful of trespassers." He sneers at the guys with an extra glare for Shield.

"Yes. A trespasser. Anthony Younger. He broke into my apartment." I snap back, gesturing toward the mess. "He ransacked my apartment when he couldn't find me and then he took off when he heard my friends arriving."

"Where were you hiding?" He asks.

"Why the hell should I tell you?" I bellow. "Are you going to tell him where to find me so that the next time he comes after me, he succeeds? Get the fuck out of my apartment!"

"What's going on?" My dad comes in and moves to my other side. He glances around the room, nods at Flame's friends before turning his attention to Billings.

"You need to calm your daughter down." Billings says. "She's over emotional and impeding our investigation."

I jerk free of Flame's hold and shoot across the room before either he or my dad can stop me. "Get out!" I shout in his face as he takes another step back. He's now outside in the hall. I follow him. I can see my neighbors standing in the hallway watching the show. Well, I plan on giving them a good one. "You son of a bitch. You let out the man who tried to kidnap me so he could come at me again. Are you two buddies or something? Maybe working together?"

I hear my neighbors gasp, but so does Billings. He reaches for my arm.

"Don't fucking touch her." Flame growls as he comes to stand next to me. The rest of the guys file out behind him. I see Smoke, Axel, and Ghost grinning at me. Shield is glaring at Billings.

"You need to leave." Shield tells Billings.

"You don't call the shots." Billings spits at Shield. "We're answering a call..."

"You need to go. I'll handle this." Harding finally speaks up. He's glaring at Billings, and I see when Billings realizes no one is on his side. That he's very much alone.

Snarling, he turns and pushes his way through the crowd, slamming his finger on the elevator call button. When nothing happens, he hunches his shoulders as we all continue to stare at him. He swings away and pushes through the door to the stairway.

Snapping my eyes to Harding, he holds his hands up. "I swear to you, I didn't know he sprung Younger. I would have made sure you knew. Hell, I would have called you, your dad, and Shield. Fuck, I probably would have called Flame and Dante just to make sure they had you protected. I'm very sorry Younger terrorized you again."

"I don't want him on the case." Flame says. "He's as dangerous to Brooke as Younger."

“I understand, and I will talk with my Lieutenant. I promise.” Harding says. “Can you come to the precinct tomorrow to give a statement?”

“She’s bringing a lawyer.” Flame says. “I heard the recording of the last interview, and I’m not letting you bully her again.”

Harding nods, and I can see the regret on his face before he speaks. “I apologize for my part in that.” He says to me. “I was out of the office dealing with a personal matter when Billings interviewed Younger. I hadn’t reviewed the notes before our interview. Noah gave me a verbal summary and assured me you fabricated the kidnapping. I let him take the lead because I trusted him. I should have put a stop to it when I realized something was off.”

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“You should have.” Flame says.

I put my hand on Flame’s arm and then realize that he’s standing without his cane.

“Where’s your cane?”

Flame glances at me, and then down at his legs before shrugging. “I forgot it in the SUV. I just wanted to get to you.” He pulls me close, and I let him.

“I’ll come to the precinct tomorrow and give you my statement. But I’m bringing Evie Buchanan with me.” I smile when I see Harding flinch.

He nods and leaves us, taking the elevator that Billings called.

“Let’s go get you packed so we can get to the clubhouse.” Flame suggests, leading me into my mess of an apartment.

I turn to Tanya. “I’m so sorry. Here I promised you a safe place...”

“Hey, don’t. Seriously. I think we’d both be better off at the clubhouse.” Tanya says, looking at Ghost for agreement. He nods.

“That’s a good idea. I already told Cole to take your stuff there.” Ghost says.

“I have space in the SUV for whatever you need to bring.” Axel says to me. “Then I’ll run to Home Depot and pick you up a new door. I’ll get it installed tonight.”

“Thank you, Axel.” I say, giving him a hug. I duck into my bedroom and try hard to

ignore the mess. Younger didn't have time to do too much damage, but he dumped all my clothes onto the bed. It made it easier to transfer everything to my suitcase. I shudder when I consider him touching my clothes. If I find a speck of semen, I'm burning the lot.

Once I'm done, Flame lifts the suitcase off my bed and uses the handle to pull it behind us. I let out a sigh when we drive through the gates and I see the clubhouse lit up in front of us.

"What's wrong?" Flame asks me. "Do you not want to be here?"

I glance at him. "Of course I want to be here. It's just frustrating because this is now the only place I feel safe."

He gives me a soft kiss. "I know, and I'm sorry. We'll get your apartment back for you. Unless..."

"I don't want to live in the clubhouse forever." I tell him. "Not that I don't mind staying here once in a while, but it's too much like living in a dorm." I say as we walk through the doors and see a handful of bikers drinking beer and watching a football game. Some have scantily clad bunnies propped on their laps. I look at Flame to see him smirking.

"That's what Tally calls it." He admits. "It's the reason Dante and some others are building homes behind the clubhouse."

"I heard about that. Tally said her and Dante's place is done and that they'll be moving in after the wedding and honeymoon."

"Have you seen it?" He asks me.

“I’ve seen some photos. She’s really excited about it. She mentioned Caitlin and Evie were also building homes.”

“They are. I think Chaos and Evie’s place is almost done. The guys are working on Caitlin and Scar’s place and they started on Grimm and Kingsley’s home.” Flame explains. “Reaper, Ghost, and I have picked out spots, but we haven’t picked out plans yet. I know Reaper wants Ashlyn to help plan it. I’m kind of hoping you’ll help me plan ours.”

“Ours?” I ask softly.

“Ours.” He says with a nod. “I want to marry you one day, Brooke. I’m not asking right now because I want all this bad stuff behind us. Besides, I have the proposal all worked out.”

I stop walking and drop his hand. When he turns to look at me, I see confusion and a flash of hurt. “Unless you don’t want...” He starts, but I shake my head before throwing myself in his arms.

“I love you. When you ask me, I will say yes. I want nothing more than to spend my life with you, to build a family with you. You’re the best man I know, Aaron.”

He captures my face in his hands and kisses me hard. “My room, now.” He growls.

I giggle, but then remember Tanya. “Tanya is in your room.” I remind him.

“Fuck.” Flame says, but he grabs my hand and drags me down the hall to the room where we slept the previous night. Once he slams the door shut, he stalks toward me. The hunger on his face has me backing up until my legs hit the bed. “Strip.” He orders, so I do.

I tear off my top and toss it to the floor, raising my eyebrow when Flame doesn't move. He rolls his finger to encourage me to keep going, and I realize he's planning on watching, so I give him a show. Reaching behind me, I unhook my bra, but don't let it fall. Keeping my breasts covered as I slip my arms through the straps. I can almost feel the heat in Flame's eyes as he focuses on my hands, waiting for the revelation. He shudders when I drop my bra to the floor. I lick my lips as I unbuckle my jeans and slowly unzip them. After towing off my shoes, I bend so my breasts swing as I slip down my jeans. After stepping out of them, I turn slowly so he has a full view of my ass. Hooking my fingers into my thong, I slowly lower them as I bend over. Giggling when I hear him groan. That giggle turns into a squeal when he tackles me onto the bed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE: FLAME

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She's killing me as she reveals every sexy inch of her luscious body. I have to swallow the saliva pooling in my mouth when she removes her bra. I can't wait to get my mouth on those beauties. But fuck, when she bends over and wiggles that ass, I can't take it anymore. Tackling her to the bed, I bite, nibble, and lick her neck before moving down her spine to that ass. That perfect ass.

I smell her arousal as I attack her globes. After biting each cheek hard, I climb off the bed, pulling her with me so she's near the edge. Kneeling on the floor, I lick her from clit to asshole. Her moans have my cock hardening in anticipation. I bury my face in her pussy so I can lick her clean. When I run out of cream, I smack her ass hard. She groans as I hit each cheek over and over until her honey drips out.

Taking my finger, I cover my finger with her essence before sticking my finger into her asshole. "I want to take this ass one day. Will you let me?" I ask her.

"Fuck, baby, you can do whatever you want to me." She growls as she pushes back against my finger. I almost cum in my pants when she bucks through her orgasm. I stand and strip, almost tearing my clothes in my haste. When I'm naked, I flip her over so I can see her face. I lean forward and make love to her mouth. My cock bobs as I slip my tongue in and out of her mouth, fucking her mouth as I want to fuck her pussy. She shifts under me, arching to reach my cock. I snicker at her efforts, but relent by rubbing him through her folds. She shudders each time I hit her clit. I consider making her cum just like this, but I can't wait to feel her heat.

On a downward pass, I shift my hips so I can slide inside. Her channel grabs hold and draws me in. I moan into her mouth as she surrounds me with a scorching heat that burns through me. I shift my knees up on the bed while tossing her legs over my

shoulder. This angle lets me grab her ass again while I pound into her.

I open my eyes to see her staring at me with so much love and lust that my hips jerk and I have to put all my energy into not exploding. I need her to cum first. Unable to hold back much longer, I beg for her to help herself. “Baby, I’m so close. Touch yourself, make yourself cum.”

She grasps hold of my biceps, digging her nails into my skin. “I don’t have to, baby. I’m coming.” She screams the last as her pussy clamps hold and sucks me dry.

“Fuck!” I bellow as streams of cum shoot out of me. I feel as if I’m filling her up, and the thought of planting my baby inside her sends a second orgasm through me. “Jesus Christ.” I shout. I topple onto her, shifting just enough to keep from smothering her. As she holds me to her, I lick her neck.

“That was amazing.” She whispers to me. Shifting so she can look at my face. “You didn’t take my ass.” She pouts and I laugh.

“I will, one day. I promise. But we have to get you ready for him. I don’t want to hurt you.” I tell her. She nods, and I can see her eyes drooping.

Detaching myself, I step into the bathroom to run warm water over a cloth. I return to wash her down and tuck her up in bed. Before joining her, I clean myself and toss the cloth into the hamper. Holding her close settles me until I follow her into sleep.

Brooke uses her mouth on my cock and fingers on my balls to wake me. What an wake-up call. I glance down at her pretty blonde hair and enjoy the view and how her mouth feels. Before she sends me too far down the path, I shift and lift her up off the bed and toss her over my shoulder, smacking her ass as I carry her into the bathroom.

“I was having fun.” She pouts.

“I need to fuck you in the shower.” I tell her. “Or I’ll be late for Church.” I grin.

She shakes her head at me but joins in with enthusiasm. After we’re both sated, I wash her until she squeaks. Of course, that might have been because I bit her nipple. After drying her off, we dress and head out to the kitchen to grab some food.

“After Church, I’ll take you to the precinct.” I tell her. “I’m hoping Byte has an update for us.”

She nods as she chews a bite of scrambled egg on toast. “I hope so. Do I need to call Evie?”

“She’s right there.” I say, nodding toward the hallway as she and Chaos enter the room. Evie turns to Chaos and says something. He glances at us and nods before going to the kitchen while Evie sits at our table.

“I heard what happened.” She says. “How are you doing?”

“I’m pissed.” Brooke admits. “I can’t believe they let him out and didn’t tell me.”

“Yes. I’ll be having a word with him, his partner and his CO. We’re meeting at 11:30.” Evie says. “I have several things I want to discuss with him and the detectives.”

She smiles, but it isn’t her normal smile. This one looks more like a shark just before he chows down. I really hope she’s planning on taking a piece or two out of Billings.

When I finish eating, I kiss Brooke and head into Church. Most everyone is there, so I take my seat next to Reaper.

“How is Brooke?” He asks me.

“Angry.” I reply with a laugh. “But she’s got nothing on Evie. I think Evie is ready to take on the whole SDPD.”

“She’ll be able to.” Byte chimes in. “With the stuff we have on Younger, she’ll have Billings either booted off the force or back at the academy.”

I laugh at the thought of Billings going back through training. It won’t happen, but it would be funny.

Dante calls the meeting into order and fills everyone in on the happenings from the previous day.

“Luckily, Brooke is smarter than Younger and kept herself out of danger.” Dante says, looking at me. “You better watch out. That woman is tricky.”

I grin and nod in agreement.

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Dante glances at Ghost. “I was talking with Tally and Caitlin and they both have expressed an interest in learning more self-defense. You mentioned a dojo that your uncle owns? Would he be willing to offer a class for our women? Or could you do it?”

Ghost nods. “I can train them. Show them a few moves. But my uncle has more experience. I was planning on taking Tanya to meet him tomorrow. I can talk to him about having a class just for us.”

“Good.” Dante says. “Now for Younger. Any word on his location?”

“No. And I don’t like it. It’s almost as if he’s disappeared. I had Maestro checking traffic cams to see if we could find where he went after the attack at Brooke’s apartment, but we couldn’t find him leaving the complex. Maestro had an idea and contacted Axel. Axel was still at the apartment, replacing Brooke’s door. He checked the parking lot and the asshole’s car was still there.”

“Why the hell did he abandon his car?” I ask. “Do you think he’s hanging around the apartment waiting for Brooke?”

Smoke shakes his head. “Axel had an idea and went back into Brooke’s apartment. He found a set of keys to a Mercedes under a pile of books. He tested them and they fit the car. We’re thinking he dropped them while ransacking the place.”

We chuckle as Smoke continues. “Axel called Officer Wagstaffe, and they’re towing the car. Just in case he went home to grab a spare set of keys.”

I nod in appreciation. Smart thinking by my little brother.

“SDPD has an APB out on him.” Shield adds. “I asked that they notify me if they bring him in. We had someone go to his apartment, but he wasn’t there. The doorman said he hadn’t seen him since taking his post, which was earlier in the evening. Before his attack on Brooke. He promised to contact the police if Younger shows up. He’ll tell his relief to do the same.”

“His boat?” I ask.

“They checked it. He wasn’t there, either. Same deal. If he shows, we’re supposed to be notified.” Shield says.

I frown. “Is there a guard at the pier?” Shield nods, which causes my temper to spike. “Then why the fuck didn’t he stop Younger from taking Brooke on board his boat?”

“Younger told him they went for a picnic and she had too much to drink and fell asleep.” Shield tells me. “They had no previous problems with him and knew he worked at the hospital. They didn’t have any reason to think he was kidnapping Brooke. When he found out, the guy was angry. Which is why he’s making sure Younger can’t steal his boat and get away. He locked it down. The owner of the dock gave him permission.” Shield grins and glances at Dante. I feel like I’m missing half of the joke.

“Who owns the pier?” I ask.

“Angela Westbrook.” Dante says with a laugh.

Something niggles at me when he mentions his mom, but I can’t pull it free. But I have another topic to bring up.

“I have an idea that I wanted to pass through the club.” After Dante nods for me to continue, I tell them. “I was talking with Brooke’s dad about the wife of Ashlyn’s coach, Lenora Matthews.” I say, sharing a look with Reaper. “She’s currently staying at Evie’s apartment, but she’s anxious to find her own place, a home for her and her baby. It got me thinking. I know we’re building Crossroads to house victims who need a safe place to land, but I think we need to help them move out of Crossroads when they’re ready.”

I hear murmurs around the room and see several of the guys nod, so I continue.

“Working at my mom’s apartment, I learned how to do home maintenance and improvements.” I explain. “Figure I can use that knowledge to buy homes and fix them up. Make them available when the women are ready to get on with their lives. Like Lenora Matthews.”

“That’s a good idea.” Scar says.

“You can use the prospects to help, or maybe Carver’s men?” Dante asks, looking at Carver.

Seeing him considering the idea, I have another suggestion. “I was actually thinking we could use the projects to try out new hires for Carver. I’d have a better opportunity to monitor their work because it would be just the two of us, or at least a smaller group. Those who pass the test can fill vacancies for Carver.”

Carver grins. “I like that plan. It’s like a pre-screening.”

Dante nods. “Ok, work with Ranch and Penny to get the details figured out, and we’ll give it a vote. Good idea.”

CHAPTER THIRTY: BROOKE

“Nervous?” Evie asks, and I nod. “Why?”

“I was so pissed off last night that I really tore into Detective Billings. My dad wasn’t happy either. He said some things that might get him into trouble. I don’t want to cause him problems with his work.”

“Problems for who?” Caitlin asks as she joins us.

“My dad.” I tell her. “He was pretty upset last night. So was I. I can see Billings causing him problems.”

“He’s close to retirement, isn’t he?” Evie asks, and I nod.

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“He’s past the age and time limit. He’s been a cop for twenty-five years.” I tell her.

“He could retire and come work for me.” Caitlin offers. “I need someone to head security for Crossroads, and he’d be perfect. He could liaise with SDPD and it would take the responsibility off of Smoke and Byte. We already know he’s a great guy and will treat the women and children with respect. He’d also know which cops to call in if he needed them.”

Caitlin is warming to the idea as she lists all the benefits my dad would bring to the position. I smile at her, once again reminded about how this club is a family. I know Flame sees all the members as his brothers, but I see these women as my sisters.

“I’ll mention it to him.” I tell her. “It’s a great idea. I know my mom would like it if he retired from the force. She’d also like it if he had something to do besides sit at home.”

“What does your mom do?” Evie asks.

“She’s a pediatric nurse.” I tell her.

“Oooh.” Caitlin says, her eyes lighting up again. Evie and I both laugh as we watch the wheels spin.

“Evie?” Calls Cole who is working the bar. We turn to see him holding the phone that connects to the guardhouse. “Cops are here. They want to talk to you.”

“Cops?” Evie asks, rising from her seat and heading to the clubhouse doors. “I’ll go

outside and talk to them. I don't want to let them in unless they have a search warrant."

Cole nods and relays the information to Izzy, who is on guard duty.

"I'll go with you." I say, following her, laughing, when I realize Caitlin is right behind us. The guys are not the only ones who travel in packs.

When we reach the gate, I'm surprised to see Detective Harding and another man standing outside the gate. The second guy looks familiar, but I can't place him. Ignoring them, I'm on the lookout for that bastard Billings. Not seeing him inside the Ford Explorer, I return my focus to Harding in time to hear Evie greet the other man.

"Lieutenant DeSaul, do what do we owe the pleasure?" Evie asks. "I thought we were meeting in your office at 11:30?"

The other man nods and gives Evie a small smile. "I know. But after Harding here brought me up to speed on what happened to Ms. Wagstaffe, I thought we'd come to you instead."

Evie glances back at the clubhouse and bites her lip. "I don't think the guys would like me bringing cops into the house without warning. Not that they have anything to hide." She adds.

"I don't have a search warrant. We aren't here to cause the Demons any trouble. We can stay out here and talk or meet at a restaurant. I probably should have called first, but my only consideration was Brooke. I thought we caused her enough problems without forcing her to come back down to the police station."

"Want me to get Dante?" Caitlin asks. Evie nods, and we all watch Caitlin book it back into the clubhouse. A few minutes later, Dante comes out, followed by most of

the club. Flame comes to my side while Chaos wraps his arm around Evie's shoulders.

"Lieutenant, Detective." Dante greets them. "I understand you want to come inside so you can speak with Brooke?"

When DeSaul assures him it is his only reason for the visit, Dante nods at Izzy to open the gate. The two men get back into their vehicle and drive in. By the time we reach the clubhouse, they're climbing back out.

Dante leads them inside and to his office. Flame, Evie, and I take seats around the conference room, along with Dante. Tamara follows us in.

"Do you want anything?" Dante asks. "Water, iced tea, beer?" He asks with a smirk.

"Iced tea would great." Harding says while DeSaul nods.

Tamara takes our orders and ducks out. She comes back quickly with a tray. After placing down the beverages, she leaves, closing the door behind her.

This cues DeSaul. He looks at me, then around the table, before returning his focus to me. "First, I want to apologize for the way we handled the case against Younger. We should never have released him, especially without notifying you." He shudders. "I don't want to think what could have happened to you if you hadn't outsmarted him."

"Do you have him in custody?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "We're looking for him, and we will find him. I'm willing to offer you police protection." He glances at Dante. "But I don't think you need it."

"She doesn't." Flame states, and both cops nod.

“And Billings?” Dante asks. “Where is he?”

“On administrative leave pending an investigation.” DeSaul says without hesitation.

“I can’t talk about it, but we are taking his actions seriously.”

“You heard the recording of his interview with Brooke?” Evie asks.

DeSaul nods.

Flame looks at Harding. “You were there, but you had little to say.” He comments.

I see Harding redden, but he owns up. “You’re right. And I am sorry. I was handling a personal matter when Billings caught the case. He gave me a summary that skewed toward Younger being a victim. Primarily because he has no priors.”

“Neither do I.” I state, and he nods.

“I know. I didn’t know you were the victim until you entered the room.” Harding says. “I gave Billings the benefit of the doubt because I knew he interviewed Younger and looked into his background before our interview. There was nothing to show he was dangerous.”

“Except that’s not entirely true.” Evie speaks up, drawing the attention of both men. “As you can expect, since Brooke is one of ours, our guys did some digging. The police interviewed Younger in the disappearance of three other women in three separate cities. Each of these women were nurses at the hospitals where he worked. They didn’t find evidence linking him to the crimes, but in each case, other witnesses reported he showed an unhealthy interest in each of the women. He also left his position soon after they questioned him. In each case, he claimed that his ailing parents needed him. Younger grew up in the system after the death of both his parents. He aged out. So he lied about his ailing parents. Instead, he moved to a different city and found another job at another hospital.”

Harding and DeSaul share a look. DeSaul opens his mouth to speak, but Evie raises

her hand to stop them so she can continue.

“Not done. The crime scene unit found four sets of unidentified fingerprints on his vessel. I spoke with the head of your lab and requested they compare those fingerprints to those of the missing girls. They matched. The fourth print matched those of another missing girl, one that no one tied to Younger. She was working in Newport at the same time Younger visited there on vacation. We found evidence that he sailed to Newport and docked there for several days, leaving the day of the girl’s disappearance.” Evie concludes.

Harding looks ill while DeSaul looks ready to tear someone’s head off. I’m assuming he’s angry at Evie for overstepping, but he surprises me.

“That son of a bitch.” DeSaul says, clenching his jaw. “There wasn’t a mention of this in Younger’s file. Billings will be on traffic duty, if he’s lucky. I take it you have proof?” He asks. Evie slides a USB drive over to him which he pockets.

DeSaul looks at me. “You could probably sue the department...” He starts, but I shake my head.

“I know not all cops are like Billings. My guess is he assumed I was lying. He screwed up. As long as you take some disciplinary action against him, I’m fine. I just want Younger found and imprisoned so he can’t hurt anyone else.” I swallow when I consider what my fate could have been.

Flame must sense my distress, because he rubs my back with one hand while taking my hand in his other.

“Is that all?” Dante asks them, shifting to rise.

Harding looks reluctant, but he speaks up. “I need Ms. Wagstaffe’s statement on what

happened last night. I won't take up too much more of her time."

I nod and tell him about being on the phone with Gina when Younger arrived at my apartment. I explain about hiding on the balcony, intending to drop to the balcony below mine if he came outside, but he didn't.

Harding nods as he writes. "That meshes with what Ms. Devery provided. I spoke with her since she was the one who called it in. Thank you."

We all rise and return to the common room when Dante's phone rings. He frowns as he answers.

"Mom?" He listens for a few minutes and I see a series of expressions cross his face. First fury, followed by disbelief, and ending in a smile and a chuckle. "I've got the Detective on the case here. I'll let him know." He's still chuckling as he ends the call.

"My mother caught Younger trying to steal her yacht. Her bodyguard has him contained. He's tied up and ready for pickup."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE: FLAME

I bark out a laugh when Dante tells the cops that his mother caught Younger. Their shared looks of stunned disbelief is priceless. We watch Dante lead them out of the office so they can go pick up their prize.

"Let's go for a ride." I suggest to Brooke. "I think you could use some wind therapy. We can ride along the coast."

Brooke beams at me. "Let's go." She says, grabbing my hand and dragging me out of Dante's office. But when we reach the common room, she pauses. "Wait, can you ride?" She asks. "You haven't ridden since the shooting."

“You’re right. I feel great. But I don’t want to risk your safety.” I concede. Damn, I was really looking forward to being out on the road again, with my woman wrapped around me.

“We could all go. We can take a picnic.” Reaper suggests walking up with Ashlyn. Ghost and Tanya right behind them.

“Or Axel can take the girls in the SUV while we ride.” Ghost says. “If you have no problems riding and think she can ride back with you, he can bring the SUV back here.”

“I have an idea.” I say. “Let’s take the picnic, but how about we ride to the property behind the clubhouse? We can take the long way to get a quick ride in.” I look at Brooke, who smiles and nods.

“That’s a great idea. I think Carver’s team finished Caitlin’s park. We can also tour Dante and Tally’s home. Theirs is done. Whereas Evie and Chaos’s is close.”

“You’re building homes behind the clubhouse?” Tanya asks.

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“We are. The club owns all the property, and after Tally complained about having to live in a dorm, he planned the idea of building a subdivision behind the clubhouse.”

Tanya looks excited. “Can we go see? I love looking at new homes.”

“That’s a great idea.” Brooke says as we all go back inside to grab food for our picnic.

Once we have everything loaded into our saddlebags, we take off.

With the bike rumbling under me and Brooke wrapped around me, I feel as if all that I’ve been through these past few months has been worth it because it led us to this moment. This is unquestionably the happiest I’ve ever been. Even if I have to watch my sister wrapped around my best friend and rubbing her hands all over him. I glare at her, but she just gives me a sweet smile. I lose interest in them when Brooke lets her hands explore me. Fuck. Who could ever prefer a cage over a bike? I’ll never understand. You can’t have your woman this close when you’re in a cage.

The ride is quick, but I’m thrilled at how easy it feels to be back on my bike. Holding a bike requires arm and leg strength. I feel no different from before my hospital stint.

When we pass by the new guard tower, we can see the markings outlining the wall that they’ll build to keep the homes secure. We see Dante and Tally’s house next door to Evie and Chaos’s as we drive down what used to be a simple dirt road. It is now paved with additional paved roads flowing off it. We pull up on the street leading to the back entrance to the club. This is likely the path most members will take when heading home once they move in. This entire area used to be as barren as the rest of

the desert that stretches away from us, but now it's an oasis.

I hadn't been back here for several weeks, so I'm stunned to see the new park sitting on the spot where we found Caitlin that day. Now there are trees, shrubs, flowers, and grass. But when I step on the grass, I see it is artificial and springy.

"Safer for the kids." Ashlyn says. "Caitlin explained the idea. She considered using natural grass, but that would waste water. Plus, this has cushioning, so if the kids run and tumble, they won't hurt themselves like they would on real grass. They're going to do something similar with the playground." She says, pointing to the section across the street. "They're installing different sizes of playground equipment for different ages. They have plans for a swimming pool, tennis court, and a basketball court. I even heard talk of a water park. The guys are still taking suggestions, so who knows what we'll end up with?"

I laugh as I go back to looking at the new park. Brooke wraps her arms around my waist. I glance down into her pretty face.

"What's wrong?" She asks. I notice everyone is looking at me, probably because my eyes are moist.

"Nothing is wrong. This is beautiful. I remember when Caitlin suggested putting a park here and making it a place where we can barbecue and have events, like her wedding, I couldn't imagine it. I kept thinking we'd still see the horror."

"What horror?" Tanya asks.

I glance at her and then Ghost and Reaper. Fuck. I forgot she wasn't one of us.

"There was a man terrorizing women in San Diego a few months back. He raped and killed five women. Dumped their bodies in the desert." Brooke explains.

Tanya nods. “I remember something about that. I didn’t read the stories because I was dealing with my trauma, but I remember the police found his truck abandoned in the desert. They think he died when he tried to walk out.”

My brothers and I look at each other. Nerd died in the desert. We made sure of it.

“Caitlin was one of his victims.” Brooke continues, keeping Tanya’s attention. “Dante and a few of the guys were riding out through that gate, and they saw his truck hightailing it out of here. That’s when they saw her broken body.”

“I was there. Can still remember everything about that day.” I chime in. “God. She was a mess and so tiny. We were stunned when we found her alive. I went and got Scar and he saved her life. Well, he and Tally.”

“Did he dump Caitlin’s body here because of Tally?” Tanya asks.

“No.” Reaper says shaking his head. “When they learned Caitlin had a sister who was also a doctor, Dante had Shield kidnap her and bring her to the clubhouse to care for Caitlin.”

“Sometimes tragedy has a way of improving one’s life.” Tanya muses. “Tally and Dante are an amazing couple and are so happy. Scar and Caitlin as well.”

“And it is how I met Brooke.” I add, before gesturing to the park. “This park is another good thing to come out of it. Caitlin is a genius.”

“She is.” Brooke agrees. “She’s an artist. Artists take the ugly and make something beautiful.”

“I’m starved.” Reaper says, making Ashlyn giggle as he chomps on her neck.

Seeing her happy makes up for having to watch my best friend groping her. Almost.

We grab the food and spread a blanket on the ground. There are several picnic tables and grills around the place, but this is better. Reaper and I lay with our heads in the laps of our women while Tanya leans up against Ghost. He's sprawled on his side with his hand propping up his head.

We all take turns telling Tanya stories about the club, including how Reaper came to join us after being part of Deion's gang.

"Why did you come back here instead of staying in Vegas?" She asks him. "Your uncle is the President there, right?"

"He is." Reaper tells her. "He offered to let me prospect with them, but my mom and dad are here, and San Diego has always been my home."

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“I’m glad you came back.” Ashlyn says, brushing a finger down his cheek. He takes her hand and kisses her palm, giving her a smile.

“Me, too.”

“What’s your uncle like?” Tanya asks. “Is he anything like Dante?”

We laugh. “No. Puma and Dante are each unique. They both have a powerful presence, though. Dante has a forceful personality, one that takes over a room whenever he enters it. Puma draws attention more because of his physical presence.” I say. “Puma is built like a tank. He’s fucking huge. He used to play basketball. Pro. When he retired, he bulked up.”

“You’ll meet him next weekend at the wedding.” Ghost tells her. “He’s officiating Dante and Tally’s wedding. He started officiating at weddings when they built the casino 1% in Vegas. Turns out having a scary ass biker officiate at your wedding is a huge draw.”

Tanya’s eyes go round and we laugh again. Fuck, it feels good to laugh and just enjoy being who we are. I feel a sense of trepidation, like something bad will take away the good. But I shake it off. Right now is all that matters.

“So, are you building a house out here?” Tanya asks us.

“Let’s show you the spots.” I say, jumping up and helping Brooke to her feet.

We walk down the street and turn onto what is still a dirt path. Someone, probably

Ranch, has placed flags outlining the various lots. Each group of homes will form a cul-de-sac with the main road circling around to the other side in case we need more lots. We have enough lots for the current members, but since the club is growing, it makes sense to be prepared.

Reaper heads to the lot he selected for him and Ashlyn. It's at one end of the cul-de-sac. I chose the one next to it while Ghost's is on the other side of Reaper's and across the street from mine.

"This is ours." Reaper tells Tanya. "Flame is next to mine. We're planning on building a home between the two where Flame and Ashlyn's mom can live. She and their sister still live at what will soon be Crossroads, but we want to give them a place away from there."

Tanya nods and looks at Ghost. "Do you have a spot?"

He nods and points to his lot. "I've got that one. But I don't know what I'm building yet." He watches Tanya's face as she stares out over the property. I can see the hope there. The hope that she'll be the one to help him pick a design and live there with him.

"The views are amazing. I know you're building a wall around the place. Even so, this is a gorgeous spot." Tanya says, smiling at Ghost.

I glance at Brooke. "We'll need to pick out a plan soon." I remind her.

"Not until I get my proposal." Brooke says, pretending annoyance.

I tickle her until she snorts, which causes all of us to laugh. And right then I see it. Our future. Me and Brooke, with our kids, living next door to our best friends and their families. Fuck, I can't wait.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO: BROOKE

We take a tour of Evie and Chaos's home. Theirs is in the Spanish style with gorgeous tile flooring throughout and soft warm colors. The kitchen is massive with gorgeous granite countertops. I feel a twinge of envy at how beautiful their home is, but I have to admit, it fits the two of them perfectly. The counters are higher than average, because they're both so tall. The master bath is close to completion and I want to crawl into their tub and do laps.

We shift over to Tally and Dante's house, which is next door. It's Mediterranean style is a compliment to the other house. It too boasts tile floors and warm colors. You can tell they didn't scrimp when designing their home. They've already decorated the room nearest the master suite with tiny motorcycles and beautiful ocean and desert landscapes.

I sigh when we walk back to the bikes to head home.

"What's wrong?" Flame asks me.

"Nothing. Not really. A little jealous, I guess, about what they've built. Those homes are spectacular."

"They are exactly what Tally and Evie wanted. When you're ready, we can talk about what you want in a home." He says.

I look at him, and I see it. The promise of our future in his warm brown eyes. I kiss him before climbing onto the back of his bike. "How are you feeling?" I ask him, realizing that I didn't think about his injury on the way over here.

He shrugs. "Great. I feel as good as I did before the shooting."

“We still need to move my stuff.” Tanya reminds Ghost, who nods.

“And I need to clean up my apartment.” I complain. “I really hate that guy.”

Flame laughs. “Me too. Axel and Izzy cleaned your place up. You may need to rearrange a few things, but they did what they could.”

I feel so much gratitude to them. I need to find a gift for them to show my appreciation.

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“Let’s go to Tanya’s and finish getting her moved into my place.” I suggest. “It will be nice to get settled.”

Flame gets on his phone to ask Cole and Simon to meet us at Tanya’s apartment. When we arrive, Ashlyn and I go with Tanya to her room to help her pack, leaving the guys to finish packing up the rest of the apartment. We’ll take the food and alcohol to my apartment.

“Thank you for the help.” Tanya says as we finish packing up her room.

“Do you want to bring your bed?” I ask her. “I have one in the guest room, but it’s a little smaller than this one.”

“It will be easier to just put in storage for now.” Tanya says. “If you don’t mind my using yours.”

“Of course not.” I tell her. “I put new sheets on it last night. Tony didn’t enter that room, so everything should be ready for you. Unless we end up staying longer at the clubhouse. Do you know when they’re releasing Deion?”

“No. That’s a good question. Let me call Athena and see what she knows. I still don’t know why they arrested him and his men.”

Tanya pulls out her phone as we walk back into the living room.

“Athena, hi, it’s me, Tanya.” Tanya says. The guys move to stand around her and I see the concern on Ghost’s face.

“Really? That’s interesting. I didn’t know they were doing anything like that. Ok. When are they releasing him?” Tanya asks. She frowns at the response. “That soon? Ok. Thanks, Athena.”

Tanya hangs up and looks at Ghost. “The cops arrested Deion for extortion and burglary. Seems like he and his guys were running some kind of scam where they rob several stores in the area and then extort money out of others to protect them from the same fate. They found dozens of cameras that they placed in various stores, claiming they were using them for security. They found cameras in places where there should not be any cameras. Including dressing rooms and bathrooms.” She shakes her head. “I guess they tried to destroy the video evidence, but the cops found enough to arrest them on invasion of privacy. It’s a mess.”

I glance at Flame and feel ill. If the cops have the video of me shoplifting, what will they do with it?

“What did she say about their releasing Deion?” Ghost asks her.

“They’re posting his bail sometime today. So it’s a good thing I’m getting out of here.” Tanya says, glancing around the apartment. “I think that’s it.”

“I’ll drive the SUV with Tanya’s stuff over to my apartment.” I offer. “If Cole and Simon want to take the rest to the storage unit?”

Flame pouts. I know he’d rather I ride on the back of his bike, but I want to get this done as soon as possible.

“That way we can get back to the clubhouse faster.” I say to Flame, who grins at me.

“Fine. But soon we’re going for a long ride on my bike.” He threatens me with narrowed eyes.

I giggle. “Such a threat.”

At my place, it only takes a few minutes to unload the few boxes she has. I give her a quick tour of the place, showing her the balcony that makes a useful hiding place. By the time we finish, we’re coming up on dinner time.

“Should we go back to the clubhouse and see what Tamara and Jenna have made, or should we go out to eat?” Reaper asks.

“We could order in.” I suggest. “There’s a pizza place nearby that delivers, and the pizza is great.”

When everyone agrees to order in, Flame orders the pizza after calling Simon and Cole to join us. Soon all eight of us are sitting around my place, munching on pizza.

“Reaper mentioned that you’re thinking of building a dojo.” Ashlyn says to Ghost. “I think that’s a great idea. Are you offering self-defense courses?”

Ghost nods. “That’s the plan. I’ll offer other programs, but self-defense is the primary focus. I’m hoping to entice the women from Crossroads to take lessons.”

“I’ll take them.” I say. “After what happened with Tony, I want to know how to defend myself.”

“Sign me up, too.” Ashlyn says, toasting him with a slice of pizza. “I’d like to learn how to train others as well.”

Flame looks at Reaper who chuckles.

“What?” Ashlyn asks.

“Ghost mentioned wanting a female instructor, and we thought of Izzy. But I said you would be interested.” Flame tells her.

She nods. "I would."

"I'd love to take classes." Tanya says. "I've been looking into it, but I haven't pulled the trigger. It would be great to take lessons with friends." She adds, looking at Ashlyn and me.

"So come tomorrow?" Ghost pleads. "He can get you started on some basics, and it will give Flame and Reaper a chance to see what I have in mind."

Tanya nods in agreement.

When we finish eating, we clean up and head back to the clubhouse. Flame drags me into his room. We'd been staying in a guest room, but now that he's walking again, we don't need it.

"Where is Tanya sleeping?" I ask him as I sit on the bed to toe off my shoes.

"She's shacking up with Ghost." Flame says with a grin. "I guess she slept in there last night. She needed him after what happened to you."

"Poor thing. At least she has Ghost to comfort her. He's a good guy. She couldn't do better." I remark as I shimmy out of my clothes.

I feel the bed dip behind me as Flame crawls over to me. He attacks my neck with kisses and bites. I squeal when he sucks hard enough to leave a mark.

"You think Ghost is better than me?" He demands.

I turn and study him. “Well, since you asked—”

I scream when he grabs me and rolls me over on the bed until I’m under him and completely at his mercy.

“I see I need to prove to you who’s better.” He growls as he kisses his way down my chest to capture one of my nipples.

I open my mouth to tease him some more, but I can only manage a deep sigh. He knows exactly how to make my body sing for him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE: FLAME

I worship Brooke’s breasts, sucking her nipples into my mouth so I can twirl them into hardened peaks with my tongue and teeth. Brooke moans, and I feel her body shudder under my administration. I love how responsive she is when I play with her breasts. I missed these beauties when we were apart.

When I know she’s on the brink of an orgasm, I shift so I can kiss down her cleavage to her stomach. Rubbing my nose against her soft skin, I breathe in deep and revel in her scent. This is the reason my cock wouldn’t respond to anyone else. Making love to Brooke isn’t about sex. Well, it isn’t only about sex. No, it’s about her. The scent of her arousal, the soft moans from her lips, the softness of her skin all combine to control me.

She gives me a hard shudder when I dip my tongue into her belly button. She’s ticklish there, just like the soles of her feet. Chuckling at that memory, I kiss her hip and nip her inner thighs before nuzzling her pussy. The taste of her cream and the scent wafting from her folds are intoxicating. Their power crashes through my bloodstream and straight into my cock. I suck, lick, and nibble until I feel her body convulse. I lift my eyes to watch her fall through her first orgasm. Her pretty pink lips

are open in a wide O, while her face glows with a thin layer of perspiration.

Before she can recover, I slide a finger into her passage and then another, scissoring them as she writhes under me. When I push them in and out, increasing the rhythm, her hips jerk. I watch her breasts bounce for a few moments before diving back into her pussy. I find her clit and suck it between my lips as if it's my favorite piece of candy. Which it is. She moans, and I feel her channel flutter around my fingers. I my forefinger until it brushes against her spongy center and watch her erupt again.

With my hand soaked in her juices, I bring them up to my mouth and lick them clean as I watch her body shudder and shake through the aftershocks. Grinning, I lift her up legs until they're flush against my chest. I position my cock at her entrance and slide in. So tight. She lets out a loud groan that goes on for minutes as her body adjusts to my size. When I slide in and out of her, I bury my face in the soles of her feet. Sucking in one big toe, I feel her jerk before I move to the other. Brushing my whiskers against the soles of her feet, she giggles. My girl is ticklish. When I lick the sole of her right foot, she jolts and her eyes flash open. There's my girl.

I lock eyes with her as I pound inter her center, all the while keeping her legs trapped in my arms. I don't drop them, until I need to go deeper. When I pull out, she whimpers.

"On your knees, baby." I order. She scrambles to obey, and as soon as I push her head down on the bed, I slam back inside. She wails as I pound inside her, drawing out just far enough to slam my entire length back in. I feel the familiar tug on my balls as my orgasm builds in my sac. I dig my fingers into her hips as I shift my hips to hit her magic spot. When she explodes, I follow her over with one more jerk of my hips.

"How is that possible?" Brooke asks as I gently pull out of her.

I frown at her question. “How is what possible?” I ask her.

“That the sex keeps getting better.” She mumbles and I laugh. Because she’s right, the more times I have her, the better it gets. I gather her up into my arms and carry her into the bathroom. As I use my hands to rub the soap over her smooth skin, my cock hardens again. I can’t seem to get enough of her. But I control myself long enough to cleanse her body thoroughly, before washing and conditioning her hair. As much as I’m dying to bury myself in her again, I relish the feeling of just being with her. I watch the water cascade over her skin and marvel at how lucky I am to have her back in my life. This time, for good.

I jerk when she uses her hands to return the favor. She stands on her tiptoes to wash my shoulders before sliding her hands down my chest. I turn at her command so she can wash my back and my ass. My dick grows even harder when she slides her fingers through the crack of my ass and plays with the hole. Fuck, she’s killing me. She pushes for me to turn back around and when I do; I see her down on her knees and eye-level with my cock. I brace myself against the tile as she wraps her lips around me and takes me deep.

“Fuck!” I shout as her tongue traces each vein. She uses her teeth to give me just a bite of pain, one that has me hissing. I look into her gorgeous blue eyes and revel in the sight of her lips stretched wide around my girth. I don’t know if her eyes are watering or if it’s the shower, but the wetness makes her eyes sparkle like diamonds. Which reminds me. I pull back, and she releases me with a pop and a pout.

“I was just getting started.” She complains.

“I know, but I thought of something I have to do.” When her mouth drops open in shock, I suppress a chuckle as I pull her out of the shower so I can dry us both. Grinning at the mutinous look on her face, I know she’s thinking the worst. Well, she’ll forgive me once I’m done. I suddenly wonder if I acted too hastily. Maybe she

won't. I shudder at the idea of her being angry with me, but I'll make it up to her.

Once we're back in my room, I lead her over to the bed. "Sit here." I say. She does, but she also crosses her arms and glares at me.

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I release a nervous chuckle because her expression is one of pure anger. It reminds me of the look she had on her face after coming out of the interview with Detective Billings. And here I swore never to give her a reason to look at me like that. I open my top drawer and pull out the small black box. When I turn, I shift it behind me as I step back toward her. Kneeling in front of her, I pry her left hand off of her arm to kiss her knuckles, specifically the space that will hopefully no longer be bare ever again.

“Brooke. You are my life, my everything. I never knew how much I needed you until I lost you. My world is bleak without you in it.” I release her hand to open the box to reveal the engagement ring I had made for her. The center is an emerald cut sapphire the same color as her eyes, surrounded by small square diamonds. Dante found a talented woman to create Tally’s ring, so I went to her, looking for the perfect ring for Brooke. The minute I saw the sapphire, I knew it belonged on her finger. Seeing the tears welling in those eyes tells me I made the right call.

“Oh, Aaron, it’s gorgeous.” Brooke whispers as she caresses the ring.

“Will you marry me?” I ask her, and her eyes snap to mine.

“Of course. I said I would, didn’t I?” she asks.

I chuckle as I slip the ring on her finger. “Yeah, you did.” I say, wrapping my arms around her. “I love you so much, baby. Thank you for saying yes.”

“I love you, too. Thank you for asking me.” She says. “Now, can I finish giving you that blow job?”

I bark out a laugh as I swing her up into my arms. “Only if I get to feast on your pussy.” I tell her.

She rolls her eyes. “If you have to.” She says grinning.

I lay on the bed and pull her pussy onto my face while she sucks my cock into her mouth. This. This is the difference between just sex and making love. The overwhelming joy at just being with someone. The need to give them pleasure that exceeds your need to receive it. But even more, it’s having fun while you pleasure each other.

EPILOGUE: BROOKE

After we’re done feasting on each other, we lay snuggled close in bed. My face rests on his chest, our legs intertwined. He has his left hand possessively on my ass while using his right forefinger to caress my arm. “I can’t believe I almost lost this.” I tell him, snuggling closer, even though there is no space between us.

“We haven’t spoken about your kleptomania.” He says, causing me to flinch. He pulls me close. “Don’t. We can beat this together. You aren’t alone, and I will never judge you. Have you found a therapist or someone to help you?”

“I talked with Tanya. She’s asked her therapist for suggestions. Athena specializes in assault victims, but she knows other therapists, ones that help those with compulsive disorders like mine.” I tell him.

“If you need my help or ever need to talk.” He offers, and I grin.

“I know where to find you.” I smile up at him. “Thank you. I know therapy will help, but I haven’t ignored the problem. I know the triggers, so I work to avoid them.”

“Like, what triggers?” He asks.

“For me, it’s stress. If I have a bad day at work, I sometimes get the urge. It’s almost like a release valve. But then the consequences are so much worse that it turns into a vicious circle.”

“I know they have group meetings for family and friends of alcoholics. Do they have something similar that I could attend?”

I sit up and look down into the face of the man I love. My hero. I don’t realize I’m crying until he uses his thumb to brush away my tears. “You’d do that?” I ask in a whisper.

“Sweetheart, I’ll do whatever I can to take care of you. To take care of us. I love you, and I want you to be happy.”

I snuggle back into him. “I’ll find out.” I tell him.

“I’ll also look.” He assures me.

Fuck, how did I get so lucky?

I must drift off because the next thing I know, it’s morning. Tanya, Ashlyn and I all ride on the back of the guys’ bikes. I feel like this is going to be a common occurrence for the six of us. I’ve always liked Ashlyn, which is good because she is Flame’s sister and will one day be my sister-in-law. But finding Tanya is a bonus. I know she and Ghost are still feeling their way into a relationship. I hope they work out because she’s fast becoming one of my favorite people.

The dojo owned by Ghost’s uncle is next door to a gym. At this time of day, the gym is not busy. It is too early for those who work out during their lunch break. The guys

park out front of the dojo and Ghost leads us inside. The space is open, so it's airy and bright. A counter sits off to the side with a variety of merchandise for sale behind the counter. A young woman with pretty almond eyes and black hair sits behind the counter. She waves at Ghost as he takes us further inside.

Standing near a wall of mirrors is a man dressed in a white gi watches us enter. Ghost moves forward, clasping his fists together and bows. The man returns the gesture before drawing Ghost into a hug. The two are about the same height, but Ghost has more muscle mass than the leaner man.

"Sensei, these are my friends." Ghost says, introducing each of us to the man. "This is my uncle, Wei Yan."

We all bow to him, and he returns our gesture with a smile.

"I understand from Dailin that you three have all faced foes and defeated them in battle." Wei says with a small bow. "Commendable. You are all warriors. He has asked that I show you some techniques to assist you in any future battles."

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“We’re hoping you can, Sensei.” Tanya says.

Wei turns to his nephew with happiness in his eyes. “You have chosen well.” Without waiting for a reply, he turns back to us. “Let’s begin.”

We spend the next forty-five minutes learning some basic moves that include a ready stance, a palm-heel strike, a hammer fist punch and the women’s go-to weapon against men, the front groin kick.

The guys graciously allow us to practice on them. We all hold back, because none of us wants to injure our men, but with Wei’s encouragement we land a few hits that they’ll be feeling later.

When the six of us are laying on the mats, panting, Wei ends our session.

“You learn quickly. I’m sure your men will help you practice so that in our next lesson, we can move onto more complex moves.” Wei tells us. “If you want to shower and change, there are locker rooms in the back.”

Each of us had brought a change of clothes in with us. We take our bags and enter the women’s locker room. The guys, who hadn’t planned on getting sweaty, had to return to their bikes to grab fresh t-shirts.

I finish first and am dressing when I realize I hear a distant banging. I pull my shirt on and step to the door just as it opens allowing a man to come running in.

“Deion?” Tanya asks from behind me. I turn to look at her and then back at the man

and realize she's right, although I never would have recognized him. A few day's worth of growth covers his normally bald scalp. He also has the start of a thick beard. His eyes are wild and focused on Tanya.

I move into the ready stance, preparing to defend my friend when he speaks.

"I need to get you out of here. Quickly. The place is on fire." He says. "Get dressed. Now. Please. We can go out the back."

Tanya frowns at him but dons her clothes, as does Ashlyn.

"How do I know this isn't a trick?" She asks him, her eyes narrowed.

I rush to the door and feel warmth. Carefully opening the door, I peek around and see that he's right. Flames engulf the front of the dojo.

"He's right. We have to get out of here." I say. "Where are the guys?"

"They're out front. Whoever started the fire locked them out." Deion tells us. "Please, hurry. There's a back entrance. That's how I got in."

"What about Master Yan?" Ashlyn asks.

"He's just outside the door." Deion says. "He's unconscious. I'll carry him, but you need to come now. We have to get out of here before he discovers the back entrance."

I'm desperate to ask him who he's talking about, but I can see smoke billowing into the room. He's right, we need to go. Now.

I run back and grab five towels and run them under the water before following the others out. I hand a washcloth to each of the girls before placing one over Deion's face and hold one over Master Yen's, who is hanging upside down over Deion's

shoulder.

Deion leads us down the hallway and I can see the Exit sign. Ashlyn rushes forward and opens the door, letting us all fall out behind her.

Someone cocks a gun behind us. I turn, but I fall to the ground, with Master Yan landing on top of me. I can't see anything, but I hear an explosion and Tanya's scream.