



Kingpin

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Category: Erotic, Romance, New Adult, Mc

Description: The protective biker will move heaven and earth to keep his ex-wife safe. But will he get a second chance to rekindle their wedding vows and live happily ever after?

Kingpin

Ever since my divorce thirteen years ago, I've dedicated my life to my club. These MC brothers are my family, and this clubhouse is my home.

My ex-wife, Hattie, wanted normal. She hated this lifestyle that I was so steeped in – biker gangs and bars, tattooed skin and bloodied knuckles.

When a motorcycle accident lands me in the hospital, Hattie shows up as my emergency contact. Her presence unearths all the feelings for her that I thought I'd buried over a decade ago.

Hattie isn't interested in rekindling what we used to have. But when I find out that she's a witness in a local court case against a crew of bank robbers, there's no way I'm letting my ex-wife out of my sight.

Hattie

Thirteen years ago, I signed divorce papers and never looked back. Turns out my mother was right when she warned me that Neil "Kingpin" Gibson, President of the Blackjacks MC, was nothing but heartache.

I'm only in town for a week to visit a friend and give my testimony in court as a principal witness. I'd hoped to keep the whole ordeal quiet, but Neil managed to sniff out trouble. Now he's like a bloodhound on the hunt, determined to ensure I am protected at all costs.

The more time I spend around Neil, the more my resolve weakens. Against my better judgment, I'm falling in love with him all over again. Can Neil and I rebuild the wreckage of our marriage? Or are we better off going our separate ways after all?

This is a steamy romance intended for audiences aged 18+ only. There are no cliffhangers and no cheating. Includes themes of violence, language, and sexual situations intended for mature audiences. Please see the Reader's Notice at the beginning of the book for TWs.

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Chapter one

Kingpin

My entire body ached. The last thing I remembered was the screech of tires on pavement and the blur of chrome as a truck careened into the intersection, blowing through a red light.

I groaned, dragging my eyes open, squinting in the harsh white glare of a hospital room. Glancing down, I spotted an IV embedded in my arm, and a machine standing guard near my shoulder like a sentry, displaying the steady rhythm of my heartbeat with a persistent beeping.

“Looks like your ticker hasn’t given out yet, Prez.”

I turned my head to see my Road Captain, Gideon “Big G” Decker, seated in a chair next to my bed, flipping through a newspaper. He was a classy son of a bitch, with a salt-and-pepper undercut, neatly trimmed beard, tattoo sleeves, and a hint of musky, expensive cologne.

“Don’t jinx it,” I rasped, my throat dry, my tongue slow. “Waking up to your ugly mug should send me into cardiac arrest at any moment.”

Big G chuckled and folded his newspaper, draping it across his knee. In our fifties, we were the oldest members of the Blackjacks MC, earning the right to take the piss out of each other. If anyone else talked to us like this though, there would be hell to pay.

“How are you feeling?” Big G prompted, handing me a cup of water from the bedside table.

I grunted as I shifted, gulping at the tepid liquid. A fresh jolt of pain stabbed me between the ribs. My entire right leg—from hip to knee—felt like it had been stripped raw. I’d probably taken off a few layers of skin during the crash when I collided with the pavement.

“Like I’m getting too old for this shit.”

“I’m sure Spike will be pleased to hear that,” Big G said. “He’s been lusting after your bike for years. She’s a beauty. As soon as you say you’re selling her, he’ll gladly fork over the cash to take her home.”

I shot him a dirty look. He arched an eyebrow in a silent challenge, egging me on.

“I said I’m getting old,” I countered. “I’m not dead yet.”

“Good. Since you’re still a cranky bastard, you’ll be interested to know there was one hell of a cute nurse who came to check on you a minute ago. Looks like getting run over by a big-ass truck has its perks.”

I laughed hoarsely and immediately winced with regret, clutching my sore ribs.

“You fucker. Don’t make me laugh.”

Big G smirked.

“Barely awake for five minutes and you’re already cussing me out. Maybe if I keep poking the bear, your blood pressure will get high enough to bring that cute nurse back in here.”

I huffed with amusement, shaking my head.

“You’re a goddamn menace, Decker. Don’t you have something better to do than sit on your ass all day and watch me sleep?”

“Blackbeard is keeping an eye on the club in your absence,” he said. “Hot Shot took your bike to his auto shop and he’s fixing her up, so she’ll be ready and waiting when you’re back on your feet. Baby Doll and I have been taking turns staying at the hospital. We’ve got everything covered.”

“You mean to tell me that I could have woken up to Baby Doll at my bedside, but I got you instead?”

Big G snorted.

“See? All these pretty ladies flitting around, and you’re too doped up on painkillers to notice.”

Someone cleared their throat. My gaze flicked to the doorway. And my heart lurched.

“Hattie.”

My ex-wife lingered on the threshold, adjusting the strap of her purse on her shoulder, looking like she regretted this decision already. I hadn’t seen her since our divorce thirteen years ago, and she’d made it clear that she wanted nothing to do with me ever again.

“Hi, Neil,” she said softly. Then she nodded in Big G’s direction. “Hey, Big G.”

A beat of shocked silence settled over the room. Hattie and I had been so turbulent, flaring tempers and butting heads. She never missed an opportunity to let me know

how much she didn't approve of my club or the lifestyle I'd chosen. That fight in our blood proved to be a double-edged sword—passionate, fiery, and thrilling, but troublesome and damaging, too.

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It felt strange to hear her speak so quietly now. Like the spirit had slowly leeches out of her.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

Hattie shrugged.

“The hospital called. I was listed as your emergency contact.”

I grimaced.

“Fuck. I—meant to change that.”

“You’ve had over a decade, Neil,” she replied with fatigue in her voice. Fed up with my bullshit. Fed up with telling me no when I’d tried to convince her to stay.

Hattie and I met when I was thirty, freshly elected Sergeant at Arms of the Blackjacks MC, with my eyes set on that Presidential seat one day. Hattie had been twenty-one, a college graduate and a teaching assistant at the local middle school here in Brightwater, Montana.

We couldn’t keep our hands off each other, but it seemed life continued to pull us in different directions, no matter how hard we tried to fight it.

After twelve years of marriage, and thirteen years divorced, here we were again, together and separated at the same time.

Big G rose from his seat and crossed the room, hesitating for a split second before he squeezed Hattie's shoulder and kissed her cheek.

"You look good, Hattie."

She scoffed with an amused glance.

"Don't butter me up. You were always a little scared of me. I see that hasn't changed."

"There's a difference between fear and respect," Big G protested.

"A very narrow one and you walk that fine line like a tightrope."

"Folks call it self-preservation, sweetheart."

Hattie breathed a faint laugh and playfully poked him in the arm.

"Now you're just flirting. I've already learned what a headache it is to marry a biker. I don't need to make that mistake again."

"Who said anything about marriage?" Big G quipped back. "Fooling around is more fun anyway."

Hattie faltered and her gaze slid over to me.

"I've made that mistake, too," she whispered.

A lump formed in my throat. God, I missed her. I fucked it up. I don't know what I could have done differently back then—I was a biker through and through, and that was the part she hated most. The open road was burned into my bones. My club was

the only family I'd ever known. I couldn't be the man that Hattie wanted.

But I wish I could have been. I wish I could have changed into someone completely different if it meant she would finally be happy instead of pained and full of remorse when she looked at me.

"I'd appreciate it if you stopped flirting with my wife right in front of me, Decker," I said.

"Ex-wife," Hattie said, with a hint of that familiar sharpness appearing in her voice. "I'm not yours anymore, Neil. You have no claim on me. I can flirt with anyone I want to."

Sourness burned on my tongue. After thirteen years apart, there was no doubt in my mind that Hattie had been dating other men. Hell, for all I knew, she was probably remarried by now.

My gaze dropped to her left hand, searching for a ring. A small glimmer of dumb, naïve, hope wanted to find my gold band on her finger. But I knew the likelihood of that wasn't realistic, so I braced myself for another man's ring to be there instead.

Her skin was bare. No gold band. No diamond engagement ring. Nothing.

I couldn't decide if that was better or worse. Had she remained single after all these years? She'd always dreamed of a white picket fence life—two kids, a dog, squabbling with the HOA over petty shit.

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It pained me to think Hattie never found someone to give her that happiness she'd longed for.

"I didn't say you couldn't flirt," I replied. "Just not with a member of my club. Especially given how vocal you were about your disdain for the Blackjacks."

Hattie chewed the inside of her cheek, looking like she wanted to argue further, but she knew I had her cornered.

Big G edged out the door.

"I'll leave you two to catch up. Sounds like you have a lot to talk about."

He ducked into the hall and disappeared. The coward.

Hattie and I stared at each other in the ensuing silence. I hated this—the chasm between us, virtually strangers when I had fully expected to live the rest of our lives together. She'd changed so much since I last saw her, thicker thighs, softer in the stomach, with gray at her temples.

But there were other things that hadn't changed, despite the passage of a decade. Like her dark brown hair pinned back with the same blue barrette she always wore. And her favorite little red apple stud earrings that her sister had given to her when she officially became a teacher.

"So," Hattie ventured, gesturing at me. "Who did you piss off this time to end up in the hospital looking like freshly ground hamburger meat?"

I huffed a laugh and broke off with a groan at my aching ribs, gritting my teeth.

“I didn’t piss off anybody. Some prick ran a red light. Clipped my bike. The next thing I know, I’m wearing this flimsy fucking hospital gown instead of my leathers.”

Hattie fully stepped into the room now, setting her purse on Big G’s vacated chair. I noticed she didn’t sit though, choosing to slide her hands in the back pockets of her jeans instead. She clearly had no intention of staying longer than she had to.

“Well, I spoke to the head nurse at the front desk. She said you’re very lucky you didn’t become Mr. Potato Head with parts scattered everywhere. Just two cracked ribs, a concussion, some road rash, and a couple bruises. I could have sworn you ran out of your nine lives ages ago, but it seems you still have one or two spares tucked up your sleeve.”

“I told you before, baby,” I replied. “I’m too stubborn to die.”

She swallowed and a shadow crossed her face. It took a split second before I realized what I just said.

“Don’t call me that, Neil,” she countered. “I’m not your baby. And I hate that damn motorcycle. It’s a death trap. A car would be safer. At least it has airbags.”

Now this felt like the well-worn rut we always fell into—fighting about my club, my bike. The danger I put myself in on a regular basis. Hattie’s fear that she would become a widow before she had a chance to become a mother.

Nearly every damn day, we fought like cats and dogs over one thing or another. And it always resulted in the nastiest, filthiest sex.

Until the divorce. That was the one fight where we didn’t end up in bed together

when it was over.

“I’ll tell you what,” I said. “In my will, I’ll leave the bike in your name. You can sell it for cash. Or you can drop it off at the wrecking yard. Your choice.”

Hattie scowled and crossed her arms.

“Stop being morbid. The nurse said you’re fine. I hopped a flight from Washington, thinking you’d been...”

She trailed off and shook her head, pressing her lips together.

Killed. Hattie thought I’d been killed. And she came anyway. Fuck, I hated putting her through this. The turmoil she must have felt when she got the call, revisiting the hell she’d endured with me for years.

“You’re like a bad penny that keeps coming back, you know that?” Hattie said with her familiar stern tone.

“Careful, Hattie. That almost sounded like a compliment. I’m surprised you didn’t call me a cockroach.”

“Don’t tempt me.” She waved a hand in my direction. “Are you warm enough? Do you need an extra pillow?”

A small smile tugged at the corner of my mouth, listening to her cluck over me like a mother hen.

“Big G was right,” I said. “You do look good.”

The tips of Hattie’s ears turned the slightest shade of pink. It wasn’t easy to fluster

her, let alone make her blush, so when I did manage to pull it off, I savored every second.

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“And you’re full of shit, as usual,” she said. “I’m going gray. I’ve packed on thirty pounds that I can’t lose to save my life. I’m nothing like the twenty-something bride I used to be.”

“Can’t really tell. All those clothes you’re wearing obstructs my view.”

Hattie rolled her eyes and fussed at the sheets, leaning in close to plump my pillow. With her lashes lowered, I couldn’t see her eyes, but at this close proximity, I smelled the same tartly-sweet green apple soap she always used, and a faint hint of her favorite honey blossom perfume I bought for her birthday every year so she didn’t run out.

I reached up and grasped Hattie’s chin, pressing my thumb beneath the swell of her lower lip. She froze and her gaze darted up to meet mine. After so many years had passed, my heart still skipped at the sight of those molten chocolate brown eyes.

I braced myself, waiting for Hattie to swat my hand away. To chastise me for touching her when I had no right to, when that privilege belonged to another man she favored over me.

There were a thousand things I wanted to ask her.

Are you happy?

Do you regret the divorce as much as I do?

Do you think we could have made it work if we tried just a little harder?

In the end, there was only silence between us. We used to shout, argue, flirt, banter, tease. We used to talk late into the night, tangled with each other under the sheets, until we drifted off to sleep.

And now...silence.

I hated that more than anything.

Chapter two

Hattie

It seemed like an eternity passed before I could extricate myself from Neil. After making my excuses, I left the hospital and quickly escaped into the fresh air to clear my head. I exhaled a shaky breath of relief.

Seeing my ex-husband stirred up feelings I thought I would never experience again. Feelings I had worked so hard to bury six feet deep.

And yet, they all came bubbling up to the surface as soon as I had been foolishly close enough to kiss him.

Falling in love with Neil “Kingpin” Gibson had been nothing short of insanity. We were at each other’s throats all the time over something—his club, that goddamn bike, our future, having kids. My mother had warned me repeatedly that he would break my heart, that he was no good for me.

But I didn’t listen. I wanted him.

With Neil, I felt limitless. Ever since I was a little girl, I had a temper that would get me into trouble. My mother told me to rein it in, behave myself, get it under control.

Neil never said anything like that. When my temper flared, he stood strong amid the heat. When I lashed out with my sharp tongue and cutting words, he got this...gleam in his eye. Almost as if he was proud of me.

Neil never shied away.

That's probably why every fight we ever had resulted in sex. Pumped full of adrenaline. Tearing each other's clothes off.

Fuck your frustration out, is what Neil always said, a little smug, daring me to finish what we'd started.

And it worked. Usually.

Except the whole...divorce thing.

No amount of sex could fix that.

I sighed, fishing around in my purse until I found the key to my rental car. That whiskey-rough grit in Neil's voice had deepened even more over the years, if that was possible. Judging by the hot, tight coil in my lower belly, my panties still turned into a damp mess when I was around him.

After my separation with Neil, I moved out of Brightwater within two weeks. I knew I couldn't stay in Montana. It would hurt too much. I needed a blank slate, somewhere that didn't remind me of my ex-husband everywhere I looked.

So I took a job in Seattle—worlds apart from Montana. The sprawling suburbs, endless traffic, and the expensive rent I shelled out for my tiny apartment convinced me that I was making changes, moving on, and leaving Neil behind for good.

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Every once in a while, I would revisit Brightwater to see my sister and her family. Connie was ten years younger than me, with a second baby on the way. I loved to fulfill my role as the overindulgent aunt to my five-year-old nephew, Wylie, and I couldn't wait to meet my new niece when she arrived any day now.

But as soon as I set foot on Montana soil, I felt that familiar ache of longing. To be home. To be near family. To live in the small town I adored since I was a young girl. To live under the big sky of Montana and feel all that room to just breathe, with miles and miles of road and land in every direction you looked.

I missed it here.

And what scared me the most is that I missed Neil. After everything we'd been through. After the fighting, the divorce, and thirteen years separated...a tiny part of me still loved him.

Climbing into my rental car, I pulled out my phone and called Connie. She picked up right away, with the echo of a children's television program brightly rhyming away in the background.

"How did it go at the hospital?" she asked.

I had called her from the airport when I landed, explaining the situation with Neil. She offered to visit him in my stead, but I couldn't ask her to do that. Especially when she was eight and a half months pregnant. The last thing she needed was to deal with my drama.

“Neil will be okay,” I replied. “He’s not at death’s door or anything, which is honestly a miracle. Big G was there looking out for him, so he’s not alone.”

Connie gave a thoughtful hum as she listened.

“And what about you?”

I shrugged, scrubbing at the steering wheel with my thumb.

“I’m...”

I trailed off, too scattered to sum it up neatly.

Relieved that he wasn’t dying.

Frustrated that I still felt something for him after all this time.

Annoyed and a little pissed that I could have avoided seeing him again if he’d just taken my name off his emergency contact information like I told him to a thousand times before.

Pissed with myself for not simply changing my number.

There was no way I’m fine would roll off my tongue, and Connie certainly wouldn’t believe it. Every time I visited Brightwater, I kept my head down, laid low, and didn’t show my face in town if I could help it. All it would take was one Blackjack to see me, and word would get back to Neil that I was here.

I had successfully avoided him for thirteen years. Until now. When I dropped everything in a heartbeat and upended my life to come running when he was in the hospital.

“You should have let me handle it,” Connie said. “I know he’s a big, tough, scary biker, and I’m only five-foot-two, carting around a belly the size of a jumbo beach ball, but I can take him.”

I laughed.

“You’re as docile as a kitten, Connie. And you wouldn’t hurt a fly without bursting into tears.”

“Pregnancy hormones are a nightmare, all right? Last week, Nathan found me sobbing in the kitchen because we didn’t have any cookies and my cravings were driving me up the wall. The poor guy ran to the grocery store in the middle of the night and came back with a dozen packages of cookies. And two pints of ice cream, just to be on the safe side. You’d be surprised at the level of fear a man experiences when he’s faced with a pregnant woman as big as a whale, bawling her eyes out. I could use that to my advantage.”

I smiled ruefully, saying nothing. At forty-six years old, I’d made peace with the fact that the chance to have children of my own had passed me by, bittersweet though it was.

I’d always wanted kids. But Neil was busy with his club. When I brought up the subject, we were never on the same page about it. My greatest fear was getting a call one day, with a baby in my arms, telling me that Neil was dead in a ditch somewhere because of his bike or his club.

I dreamed of being a mother, a wife, and having a family.

Neil dreamed of being President, the backbone of the Blackjacks MC, and a steady rock for his brothers to rely on when they needed support.

I never doubted Neil's love for me. But we were never meant to be together. I didn't have room in my heart, my marriage, or my bed, for that club between us.

I was genuinely, deeply happy for my sister as she experienced motherhood. But it would forever sting a little, that I couldn't have that same experience for myself with the man I married.

"God, I'm talking your ear off," Connie added. "Are you still in Brightwater? Can you drop by for a visit? Do you need to get back to Seattle right away?"

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I tilted my head back against the seat, watching a sparrow hop across the hospital parking lot. Now that Neil knew I was in town, it was risky to stick around. He might come looking for me in the hopes we could talk things out. Again.

But the thought of jumping on a cramped airplane and returning to my lonely apartment didn't hold much appeal either. I craved the comfort of Connie's presence. I needed to be around family after my visit with Neil had unsettled me. I wanted to hug my sister and pepper my nephew's sticky face with kisses until he squirmed in protest.

"Would you mind if I crashed on your couch for a while?" I asked. "I picked up some treats for Wylie in the airport gift shop."

"Hattie, sweetie, of course. You're always welcome here. You know that. And there better be a marginal amount of nutritional value in those treats. Wylie has enough energy as it is. He doesn't need to get loaded with sugar and hit turbo levels of hyper."

I glanced at the gift shop bag in the back seat, bursting with brightly colored candy.

"Hate to break it to you, but I'm not showing up on your doorstep with nothing but carrots for my nephew. I'd be sleeping with one eye open for the rest of my life."

Connie laughed. I smiled to myself as my heart warmed at the sound. Even though my feelings might be a conflicted mess after seeing Neil, visiting my sister and spending time with her family would set me right in no time.

When I pulled up to Connie's cottage-style house, I felt my stress begin to melt away as soon as I parked in the driveway. Her little homestead was nestled at the outskirts of Brightwater, with four acres of land that included fruit trees, a small pond, and a chicken coop. Pink petunias cascaded from her window boxes, and brightly colored toys littered her lawn.

Wylie shoved the front door open and waved exuberantly, wearing his favorite red cowboy hat and dusty little cowboy boots.

I pretended to shield my eyes and squint into the distance as I climbed out of my car.

"Is that my favorite nephew?"

He cheered and raced toward me, flinging his arms around my leg with a grin.

"Hi, Aunt Hattie. Did you bring me any presents?"

"Well, that depends," I replied. "Are you still the fastest cowboy in the West?"

Wylie bounced on his toes, blue eyes gleaming with eagerness to prove himself.

"Get ready," I said.

He crouched into position.

"Get set," I said.

Wylie practically trembled with excitement.

"Go!"

He took off, zooming around the corner of the house and out of sight at top speed. Two minutes later, he came careening around the other side of the house, breathing hard, cheeks flushed.

I caught him around the middle as he flew by me, sweeping him off his feet.

“A new world record!” I declared, spinning him in a circle. When I set him back on the ground again, I retrieved a box of candy from the gift bag and slipped it to him surreptitiously. “Here you go, champ. Enjoy your winning prize. And if your mama asks, I gave you a bag of carrots.”

Wylie tore into the candy, gobbling it up.

“I saw that,” Connie said dryly from the porch. A soft smile touched her lips as she rested one hand on her swollen belly. Her dishwater blonde hair was swept up into a messy bun and her blue eyes sparkled with fond amusement. “Gummy worms are not carrots.”

“I think they’re made with real fruit juice,” I countered, removing Wylie’s hat to ruffle his hair. “That’s healthy, right?”

She chuckled and shook her head.

“Not even close. Is that what you’re teaching kids in the classroom these days?”

“Can you imagine how popular I’d be if I did?” I replied.

Connie held her arms out to me.

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“Get over here. I need a hug.”

My throat tightened. I made my way up to the porch and wrapped my arms around her. She rubbed my back, angling her stomach to one side so she could squeeze me as tightly as possible.

“Wylie helped me clean up the guest bedroom for you,” she said. “The sheets are still in the washing machine, but they’ll be done in about twenty minutes. So you don’t have to sleep on the couch.”

My eyes burned and I blinked back tears of gratitude.

“I’m sorry to spring this on you at the last minute.”

“Nonsense,” Connie said. “You know damn well I’m putting you to work while you’re here. I won’t waste a single opportunity to recruit you for babysitting duty so I can rest my poor feet.”

I tightened my grip on her with a sigh, comforted by her company. After a beat of silence, she spoke again.

“Was he hot?”

I groaned and sagged in her arms.

“Connie. Don’t ask me that.”

“I’m your little sister,” she replied. “It’s my job to poke all those tender spots you’re trying to hide. Besides, I know how much you used to drool over Neil’s tattoos and black leather. Now answer the question.”

I groaned again.

“Fine. Yeah, I hate to say it, but he was hot. I mean, besides the bruises and the hospital gown. But those tattoos still seem to have the power to make my common sense fly out the window.”

Tattoos. Muscles. That slow, sexy little smile. His voice. And the way he looked at me with such blatant desire in his eyes that I couldn’t think straight.

Connie huffed a laugh and pulled back, patting my shoulder.

“Why don’t we go inside? I’ll get you a stiff drink. You could probably use it.”

“I thought you got rid of any alcohol in your house when you found out you were pregnant with baby number two,” I replied.

She shrugged.

“I did, but I can still make a wicked cup of chocolate milk. If you add enough chocolate syrup, it qualifies as a stiff drink.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works,” I said, amused.

“Hey, if you really want to get crazy, we can go with chamomile tea. All that boiling water, dipping the tea bag in the cup. It’s a wild time, I’m telling you.”

I smiled at Connie. Lightening the mood with her sense of humor, cracking lame

jokes to make me feel better. She smiled back and hooked her arm through mine, leading me into the sanctuary of her home.

Chapter three

Kingpin

After two more days in the hospital, and a battery of tests, I was released to go home. Baby Doll and Big G showed up, bringing a fresh change of clothes, and my cut.

“I’m surprised to see you’re still in one piece,” Big G said, with a smug gleam in his eye. “Hattie didn’t feel like chewing you up and spitting out your bones?”

“Very funny,” I replied, dryly. “I’ve never seen a man turn tail and run for the hills as fast as you did.”

“I don’t stand in the way of an ex-wife on the warpath. Besides, I didn’t think you would appreciate it if I stuck around to watch the show. I figured you probably wanted to be humiliated in private.”

I huffed and took my cut from him with a scathing look.

“A little back up would have been nice.”

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“It’s your marriage. You can fight your own battles.”

Baby Doll set the paper bag of clothes on the foot of my bed and began unloading it.

“Fresh jeans, a T-shirt, and I grabbed a light jacket, just in case. Figured you might have some trouble regulating body temperature after the accident. I didn’t find any boxers or briefs at your place though, so I figured you go commando. Which isn’t surprising with you boys. But it was far more information than I ever needed to know.”

I chuckled.

“Thanks, Baby Doll.”

With her thick dark hair, pretty face, and an uncanny ability to read people, she didn’t have to tolerate our bullshit. There were dozens of opportunities available to a woman as brilliant as she was. Hanging out with rejects, misfits, outlaws, and dumbasses like us shouldn’t have even registered on her radar.

But Baby Doll fought like hell to earn her place among the Blackjacks, to prove herself. She was close with my VP, Diego “Blackbeard” Mendez, and he put his neck on the line to vouch for her.

A majority of clubs didn’t generally allow women to be members, and God knows the Blackjacks had been no exception to that rule. It hadn’t been easy to convince my men to give Baby Doll a chance.

In the end, Blackbeard was right. We were better with Baby Doll on our side, putting us back together when we fell apart, slapping sense into us when we needed it the most. As our Treasurer, she presided over the purse strings, which was no easy task when the Blackjacks had operated in the red for years before she tidied up the books and got us back on track with positive cash flow again.

“I didn’t realize Hattie was in town,” Baby Doll said. “Didn’t she move away after...?”

That unspoken word lingered in the air, heavy and silent.

Divorce.

“The hospital called her,” I replied, pushing the sheets aside as I rose from the bed. I could practically feel Baby Doll’s gaze boring into me.

“How is she doing? Big G said she looked good.”

I shrugged, thinking about how close I’d been to kissing Hattie. Thinking about how much she’d changed—the gray in her hair, the softer figure—and how other things had stayed the same, like her perfume and that sassy attitude I still loved so much.

“She wasn’t really in the mood to reminisce about old times when she found out she didn’t need to attend my funeral,” I said. “Except for my bike. She made sure to let me know how much she still hates it.”

A pause settled over the room. Big G and Baby Doll stared at me. I gestured at them with annoyance.

“What?”

“You haven’t seen your ex-wife in thirteen years,” Baby Doll replied. “But you’re acting like it’s just another Tuesday.”

“What did you expect? A nervous breakdown?”

“No,” she admitted. “Not exactly. I was thinking more along the lines of digging up dirt on her new boyfriend. Or husband. Breaking his kneecaps. Making his life a living hell. Something like that.”

It had crossed my mind. More than a few times.

“She didn’t mention anyone. And she wasn’t wearing a ring.”

Baby Doll’s eyebrows shot up with interest.

“Really?”

She exchanged a look with Big G. He released a low breath and shook his head, crossing his arms.

“Why do I have a feeling this shit is about to get messy?” he muttered.

“Would you two nosy old biddies leave already?” I demanded. “I’d like to get out of this goddamn hospital gown, and I’d rather not have you staring at my bare ass while I do it.”

Baby Doll shrugged.

“No need to be such a prude, boss. I’m a big girl. I won’t faint dead away if you flash a little cheek. In this club, it isn’t the first time I’ve been subjected to male nudity, and I’m sure it won’t be my last.”

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“Especially with Spike on the loose,” Big G said.

She made a noise of agreement.

“I swear, he loves to show off. That man doesn’t have a shy bone in his body.”

“Can’t blame him though,” Big G countered. “If I looked like he did, with ladies crawling all over me, I’d wear nothing but my birthday suit, too.”

“Oh, come on. Ditch the false humility. You’re packing some heat yourself.”

He sputtered a laugh.

“Is that what you do in your spare time? Junk appraisals?”

“It’s not like any of you are fucking subtle,” Baby Doll said. “You never miss an opportunity to whip out the measuring sticks.”

“Is that jealousy I hear?” Big G’s eyes sparkled with amusement.

She scoffed.

“I believe traumatized is the word you’re looking for. Last week, you spent three days straight in a back room of the clubhouse with that club bunny, Roxie. And everyone knew it. I can still hear her voice echoing in my head, praising your big dick. I’m scarred for life, thank you very much. You owe me therapy.”

He smirked.

“Can’t fault an old guy for blowing off steam.”

“Yeah, well, the whole damn block heard her. Believe me, I would not spare your feelings if she was faking it. She definitely wasn’t.”

“I don’t strut around buck naked like Spike though,” Big G pointed out.

I sighed as Baby Doll and Big G talked amongst themselves, completely ignoring me.

“He does have a very nice ass,” she admitted thoughtfully. “But if you ever tell him I said that, I’ll kill you. His insufferable ego is bad enough as it is.”

Big G chuckled.

“Trust me, I won’t say a word.”

I cleared my throat. They glanced at me.

“Out,” I said. “Now. And I don’t want to hear one more peep about the qualities of Spike’s ass again, is that clear?”

“Someone’s a little sensitive today,” Baby Doll said with a small smile.

“I bet he’s cranky because we weren’t complimenting his ass instead,” Big G said.

“You’re probably right. We could change that if—”

“OUT,” I barked.

As they filed out of the room, Big G closed the door behind them with a wink.

Secretly, I was grateful that they hadn't probed the ex-wife topic too much. I needed more time to process how I felt about seeing Hattie again. I knew it would spread through the Blackjacks like wildfire, and I had to quickly figure out how I would handle it when my brothers eventually brought it up.

After ditching my hospital gown, it felt good to finally slide my cut on again. To resume my role as President, with the weight of the leather across my shoulders, resting against my back.

I managed to dodge the nurse and the wheelchair required by hospital policy. No way in hell I was getting wheeled out of this place. Even though I might be a little roughed up, stiff, and sore, I still had two perfectly good legs.

Baby Doll and Big G were waiting in the parking lot for me with the cage that belonged to the Blackjacks—a standard black utility van, battered and rusted, with an interior that perpetually smelled like nacho cheese and motor oil, despite the lemon-scented air freshener, dangling from the mirror.

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“Hot Shot is almost finished with repairs on your bike,” Big G said, pulling the passenger door open as I approached. “He’ll drop her off at your place when she’s done.”

“You probably shouldn’t be riding a bike yet anyway,” Baby Doll said from the driver’s seat. “Give those painkillers a day or two to wear off first. It’s nice to see you properly clothed and back on your feet again, Prez.”

“All I need now is a drink and I’ll be good as new,” I said.

“Didn’t the doctor tell you to take it easy?” she protested.

I turned to look at her.

“When have I ever followed orders?”

She cocked her head with a half-shrug.

“Good point. I guess that means we’re heading to the clubhouse instead of taking you home where you should be resting.”

Big G climbed into the back of the van, sliding the door shut. He reached over my shoulder and deposited something in my palm with a metallic clink.

I glanced down to see my wedding ring on a silver chain, coiled there in my hand.

“Found it on the pavement after the crash,” he said. “I thought I’d keep it safe until

you were out of the hospital. Didn't want the nurses to lose it."

I traced the slim gold band with one fingertip. Hattie didn't wear hers anymore. But I didn't have the guts to get rid of mine. Couldn't bear how cold and empty I felt without it.

Hooking the chain around my neck again, I tucked the ring into the collar of my shirt. The cool metal settled against my skin, next to my heart. Where Hattie would always belong.

Didn't matter if I signed those fucking divorce papers. Didn't matter that we had been separated for over a decade, and there was no chance of mending what had been broken.

I made a vow all those years ago.

For better or worse.

In sickness and in health.

For rich or for poor.

Until death do us part.

And I didn't take my oaths lightly.

Hattie is my wife. The love of my life. As long as there was breath in my body, that would never change. Paperwork be damned.

I thought about pulling out my phone, calling to see if Hattie was still in town. Had she fled back to Washington as soon as possible? I knew she had family in

Brightwater—her sister, a handful of friends, and her mother, since that stubborn old broad would outlive me purely through spite alone.

Hattie and I could meet up for coffee and chat...

I shook my head, banishing the idea. Desperately grasping at any excuse to see her again would only cause more harm than good.

Ten minutes later, we arrived at the Blackjacks clubhouse. Years ago, it used to be a bustling train station for old-fashioned steam locomotives. Abandoned in the 1950s for anew, modernized train station, it fell into disrepair, neglected, crumbling, and covered in graffiti.

The Blackjacks scraped together nearly every penny we owned to rescue it from demolition. We spent every weekend for two years straight gutting the place, rebuilding it, and transforming it into our safe haven.

Now, we called it our home away from home.

At this hour of the day, just shy of 3pm, I counted six motorcycles in the parking lot, indicating over half the club was present. Seated on the curb was a young man in his twenties, with a buzzed haircut and baggy jeans, tossing pebbles across the pavement.

“What's that kid doing here?” I said.

“I told him we weren’t looking for a new Prospect,” Big G replied. “But he won’t give up.”

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“What’s his name again?”

Big G shrugged.

“Can’t remember. Jimmy, I think? Spike started calling him Crash. I swear the kid could trip over nothing but air. So it stuck.”

When I climbed out of the van, the kid scrambled to his feet.

“Can I talk to you for a minute, Mr. Gibson?” he asked.

“It’s just Kingpin, kid. You should come back another time when I’m in a better mood. Today is not that day.”

“You’ve been saying that for over a month,” Crash replied.

“And yet you don’t seem to be getting the message. We’re full up, kid. Not taking new members right now.”

Crash faltered, rocking back on his heels as he glanced away.

I recognized that look. Desperation. Set adrift with nowhere to go and no one to watch your back. A prickle of sympathy jabbed at me. I knew what that was like. Until my club anchored me, gave me a place to belong and people who cared, I had been alone in the world.

“You’re welcome to hang out though,” I relented. “There’s cold beer, if you’re old

enough to drink. It's not an invitation to join the club, just to be clear."

He perked up and his gaze flicked to Baby Doll, no doubt thinking about wetting his dick to accompany that beer. I frowned.

"Lay a finger on her, and you'll be scattered six ways to Sunday through the mountains for wolf dinner. Got it?"

Crash gulped and ducked his head, cowed.

"Yes, sir."

Baby Doll bit the inside of her cheek, eyes shining with amusement. She could handle this kid herself, no problem, but that wasn't the point. She was a member of my club, and no one would mess with her on my watch.

Big G coughed to hide a laugh. He opened the front door of the clubhouse, gesturing me inside.

"Why didn't you run him off?" I whispered.

"Thought I'd let you do the honors. The kid looks like he's about ready to piss his pants. Admit it, you enjoyed putting the fear of God into him."

Maybe a little, I thought.

As I entered the club, it took a few seconds for my eyes to adjust to the dim interior after being in the bright afternoon sunlight of early June. The lobby of the train station served as the main room of the clubhouse, with a vaulted brick ceiling and the original tiled floor still intact.

Along one wall was the fully loaded bar. Behind it was a door that led to the kitchen, mostly used for storing food instead of cooking. A handful of tables were scattered throughout the room, along with a pool table, dart board, jukebox, and a television set that had seen better days.

A corridor led to four back rooms, furnished sparingly if anyone needed a crash pad for the night. On the East side of the main room was the chapel—a meeting room with no decorations or distractions, empty save for the long table surrounded by chairs where we conducted club business.

“Hey, look who’s back from the dead,” Credence called from the pool table.

“I had to spoil your plans before you voted in a new president to replace me,” I replied.

He grinned and crossed the room, clapping me on the back.

“Big G said you were just as ornery as ever, so we figured we’re probably stuck with you for a while longer.”

“Damn straight,” I said.

Blackbeard lifted his hand in acknowledgement, standing behind the bar.

“I bet you’re starving for something besides shitty hospital food. Tex brought in some Kentucky fried steaks yesterday. Last I checked, there were leftovers in the fridge. Vlad didn’t eat everything this time.”

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From a dark corner of the room, came a rumble of discontentment. Vlad leaned forward into the light, illuminating his hulking figure.

“If you don’t like my appetite,” he growled with a thick Russian accent. “Don’t come crying to me when you need a warrior to fight your battles for you, pirate.”

Blackbeard flashed a charming smile—white teeth, tan skin—bracing his hands on the counter.

“You saypiratelike it’s a bad thing. I’ll win you over one day, you gigantic freak of nature.”

“Not in this lifetime,” Vlad muttered into his beer.

I rolled my eyes as I took a seat at the bar.

“Squabbling like children, as always.”

“I certainly hope you didn’t expect us to be on our best behavior, boss,” Blackbeard said. “I don’t think we’re capable of that. Besides, that would be boring as hell.”

I waved him off.

“Just pour me a whiskey, will you?”

He raised his eyebrows.

“Didn’t you get loaded up with meds during your stay-in-vacation at the hospital? Alcohol and drugs don’t mix well.”

“What’s your point? I’m a free man now, and I want a drink. I’m sure you heard that Hattie stopped by to pay me a visit.”

Might as well get it over with and address the elephant in the room, I thought.

Blackbeard winced.

“I’ll get you that whiskey.”

Baby Doll retrieved a beer from the bar and tossed it to Crash, who lingered by the doorway, looking unsure of himself.

“Don’t be shy,” she said. “Come in. Get settled. Most of us won’t bite.”

“Most of you?” he squeaked.

She chuckled.

“If that has you spooked, you’re hanging with the wrong crowd, buddy. We can do so much worse than a friendly little love-bite around here.”

Crash scanned the room, clutching the beer as if his life depended on it. Leaving him to fend for himself, Baby Doll slid onto the stool next to me. She propped her elbows on the bar, leaning closer like we were sharing a secret.

“So, I’ve been thinking.”

“That usually means bad news for the rest of us,” I said. “Go on.”

“Why don’t I set you up with a lady friend to keep you company? I can think of three names off the top of my head who would be perfect for you. It’s been a while since you dated, right? Might be just what you need to take your mind off Hattie.”

I’m not yours anymore, Neil. You have no claim on me. I can flirt with anyone I want to.

I closed my eyes at the memory of Hattie’s words, inhaling a breath to steady myself. More than enough time had passed. I should have put myself out there again, should have found another woman to soothe the ache of emptiness in my bed.

I just couldn’t do it. Hattie was the only one I wanted. My first long-term relationship. The first woman I hoped to share my life with, instead of spending the night together just to scratch a mutual itch and burn off some adrenaline. I never proposed to anyone else—never dreamed of it, let alone thought about it every waking moment.

I’d entertained the idea of hooking up with someone else after the divorce, of course. And with the President patch on my chest, it wasn’t particularly difficult to catch a woman’s eye.

But I couldn’t take her home. Not to the house I used to share with Hattie. It felt wrong, like a betrayal.

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I tried a motel room. I tried one of the back rooms here in the clubhouse. Didn't matter. As soon as I was on the brink of taking another woman to bed besides my Hattie, I bailed.

"Thanks, but no thanks, Baby Doll," I said.

"It doesn't have to be a date," she offered. "If a serious commitment is giving you cold feet, then some harmless flirtation couldn't hurt."

"I'd rather stick a fork in a light socket."

"This is exactly what I mean." Baby Doll poked me in the chest with one manicured black fingernail. "You're getting bitchy in your old age. Companionship would do you some good."

I opened my mouth to argue, but she beat me to it.

"And I'm not talking about the club," she said. "You might feel responsible to keep these harebrained idiots in line, but that's not the kind of companionship you need."

Blackbeard placed a shot glass before me and started to pour.

"Leave the bottle," I said.

He fixed me with a long look and a heavy, beleaguered sigh.

"If you end up back at the hospital in an hour or two, getting your stomach pumped,

you owe me fifty bucks.”

“Deal.”

I pushed the glass over to Baby Doll. Then I took the bottle and chugged a deep drink that burned my throat like a trail of fire. She shook her head, tossing the shot back.

“You’re a bit of a drama queen when you’re grumpy, Prez,” she said. “Has anyone ever told you that?”

“As a matter of fact, my ex-wife used to say it all the time.”

Baby Doll patted my shoulder with sympathy.

“Pour me another shot. And then I’ll let you beat me at darts.”

I snorted, tipping the bottle until the amber liquid filled her glass. I didn’t protest though as she took my arm, leading me toward the dart board on the other side of the room.

I had ruined everything with Hattie because of my club.

And now, my club was all I had.

Chapter four

Hattie

“Hattie, you don’t have to earn your keep,” Connie said with fond exasperation.

“First you make breakfast, and now you’re doing dishes.”

I sank my hands into the hot, soapy water, grateful for something to do, something to keep myself busy.

“It’s really no trouble,” I replied. “I like being useful.”

“Honey,” Nathan said gently. He reached across the table to take Connie’s hand. “Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth, all right? Let’s enjoy someone else doing the cooking and dishes besides us for a change. God knows I’m not complaining.”

He carved into his stack of syrup-drenched pancakes with his fork, nodding in my direction with gratitude.

A pang settled in my heart to see how much Connie and Nathan loved each other. They were so domestic and sweet, so normal. Holding hands over breakfast in their pajamas. Bickering lightly over cooking and dishes.

Their lives were never tainted by bikers. They didn’t have club business permeating every aspect of their existence.

Wylie jumped down from his chair, carrying his syrupy plate with both hands over to me.

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“Can I have another pancake, Aunt Hattie?”

“Of course you can, cowboy.”

Drying my hands off, I scooped a smiley face pancake off the cooling rack and placed it on Wylie’s plate. The past two days with Connie and her family had been wonderful. Playing with my nephew in the backyard. Helping Connie around the house. And preparing for the arrival of my niece. I barely thought about Neil at all.

“Are you still planning to testify in court about that bank robbery, Hattie?” Nathan asked.

Connie frowned.

“Do we have to talk about this at breakfast? I hate that Hattie is involved at all.”

I returned to the sink, fishing around in the water for the sponge I’d dropped. Four months ago, during a visit with Connie, I stopped by the bank to open a savings account for my niece. I did the same for Wylie when he was born. If I couldn’t have kids of my own, I would make damn sure that my niece and nephew had a tidy nest egg saved up for college one day.

While I waited in line, three bank robbers wearing garish Halloween masks swarmed in, carrying semi-automatics. I should have kept my head down and stayed quiet. Attracting attention would only get me into trouble.

But I saw my chance and I took it, stripping the mask off one robber to get a look at

him.

I was backhanded across the face for my effort, earning me a bruise on my cheekbone that lasted over a week. But I remembered his face, reported it to the police, and now he was on trial.

“I’m not backing down, if that’s what you’re asking,” I replied.

Connie sighed.

“Of course you’re not. You have a spine of steel. I wish you would chicken out for once in your life. I can’t wait for the whole thing to be over.”

She rested her hand on her stomach with a reassuring pat, for herself or the baby, I couldn’t tell.

“I’ll be fine, Connie,” I said. “I’m not worried.”

“I am,” she countered. “You could stay here until your court appearance.”

I sputtered.

“That’s two whole weeks. I’m not sticking around that long. I would drive you crazy. And I have summer school classes to teach.”

Nathan pointed at his pancakes with his fork.

“Two weeks of eating this well? Hell, you can move in and stay for a year.”

“Nathan,” Connie scolded lightly.

He shrugged, shoving a bite of food into his mouth.

“What? It’s a compliment.”

“We are not turning my sister into our personal cook.”

I chuckled.

“I appreciate your hospitality, but I’ll be getting back to Seattle pretty soon. As long as I’m paying rent on an apartment, I should actually spend some time there, instead of freeloading off you. Especially with a baby on the way.”

“Promise you’ll stop by and say hello when you testify,” Connie said. “You can’t come to Brightwater and not see your dearest, sweetest little sister.”

Considering she had kept me sane for the past two days, she had no idea how much I needed her.

I booked a return flight for the following morning. Even though I loved spending time with Connie and her family, I was still intruding. And I needed to get Neil out of my head. Throwing myself into work again would be a welcome distraction.

I sighed as I stared at the ceiling while the clock ticked closer to midnight, memories of our lives together spinning through my mind. Meeting Neil for the first time at a summer festival had been utterly intoxicating. Tattooed biceps straining at his white shirt, dark ink visible through the thin fabric. The blatant appraisal of his gaze as he looked me up and down, licking his lower lip.

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I couldn't take my eyes off him.

After a few frothy cold beers, talking about everything and nothing, Neil curved his hand over my hip and pulled me closer. Grazed his lips against my temple in a kiss that ignited my blood like the fizz of champagne, turning me into a hazy, giddy mess.

I grabbed the back of his neck and pulled him down to me with a kiss that I never recovered from. I was no stranger to flirting, to grasping hands and the flushed, frantic lust that accompanied attraction.

But this magnetism I felt when I looked in Neil's stormy gray eyes was something stronger, more electrifying than anything I'd ever experienced with anyone before. Or since.

Holding my hand up in the faint light from the street lamp outside, I examined my barren ring finger.

Two years after the divorce, I started to date again. Determined to find a man who wasn't Neil. Someone who wanted the same thing I did.

And I found him. More than one, actually.

Men who checked every box on my list—aspiring to be a husband and father, financially stable, with normal homes, normal jobs, and normal cars. Not a single motorcycle in sight.

They were perfect. On paper.

But I felt nothing for any of them.

Not even remotely close to that toe-curling, bone-melting, panty-soaking kiss I'd had with Neil when we first met.

Even though I didn't wear my wedding ring anymore, I still had it. Tucked away in my sock drawer in Seattle, along with my engagement ring—a fat, princess cut diamond that must have cost a small fortune. I never knew how Neil managed to afford it, since the bastard refused to tell me.

I cleared out everything else I owned that belonged to Neil—the shirts I loved to wear because they smelled like him; the lingerie he gifted me for our anniversary; those panties with the motorcycle printed across the ass that said RIDE ME. I packed up our pictures and my wedding dress, keeping them in a storage unit that I hadn't touched since the divorce.

It still jolted me sometimes, to see my finger without Neil's ring. And it took a second or two before I calmed down, reminding myself that I hadn't lost it, hadn't watched it slip down the sink drain or slide off in the pool. I wasn't wearing it on purpose.

For twelve years, that ring felt like a natural part of me. Even though my mother never missed an opportunity to inform me that I was throwing my life away. Even though everyone said we were insane to rush into our marriage after only a few months of knowing each other.

I reached up and traced the empty space where Neil's ring should have been. After the divorce, I hated the tan line that remained there, thin and pale, like a ghost. I went to a tanningsalon to get rid of it, so I didn't have to stare at the reminder that my marriage was over.

The soft creak of my door made me startle. I glanced over to see Wylie on my threshold, his golden curls tousled and sticking up on one side. He rubbed his eye with a fist.

“Aunt Hattie? Mama said she’s not feeling good. She said to stay with you while Papa takes her to the hospital.”

Voices emanated from the kitchen in hushed whispers. I was out of bed in an instant, smoothing down the nightgown I’d borrowed from Connie. I made a beeline for the kitchen to see my sister doubled over, clutching Nathan’s arm.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

“My water broke,” Connie said in a strained voice. “Baby’s coming. Can you watch Wylie? I know your flight—”

“Don’t worry about the flight,” I cut in. “I’ll cancel it. I’ve got Wylie. Go.”

Connie released a breath of relief with a pained smile.

“Thank you. I can't tell you how good it is to have you here.”

A knot formed in my throat as I watched Connie and Nathan make their way to the car. Wylie shuffled up behind me and rested his head against my hip with a yawn.

Even though I wanted to get back to my normal life in Seattle and forget about Neil, Connie needed me here. At least for now. I wasn’t going anywhere.

I scooped up Wylie, smoothing his ruffled hair.

“Time to sleep, champ. You’re going to be a big brother before you know it.”

After putting Wylie back to bed, I couldn't sleep a wink. Nathan kept me updated with texts periodically, until Connie went into labor around 5:30am. Then my phone was silent.

An hour later, I had Wylie dressed, fed, and we were on our way to the hospital. Connie and Nathan were still in the delivery room, so Wylie and I wandered the halls to keep ourselves occupied. Apart from a crossword puzzle book in my purse, I hadn't brought any toys for him, and the celebrity gossip magazines in the waiting room didn't interest him either.

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When Wylie and I went in search of a vending machine for snacks, I found myself in the same corridor where Neil's hospital room had been.

Don't look for him, I thought.

But I counted the room numbers anyway.

This one. This was Neil's room.

The bed was empty. He must have checked himself out.

My stomach twisted with disappointment and relief. Neil wasn't here. I didn't have to see him. I didn't have to fight that irresistible pull I still felt in his presence.

"Aunt Hattie?" Wylie said, peering up at me. "What are you looking at?"

I shook my head, combing my fingers through his unruly cowlick.

"Nothing, cowboy. Nothing at all."

Chapter five

Kingpin

I awoke in one of the back rooms of the clubhouse, sometime around ten in the morning. My tongue felt like it had been coated in fuzzy carpet, and a splitting headache threatened to cleave my skull in half. With a groan, I sat up, rubbing my

pounding temples.

After drinking too much yesterday in an effort to dull the memories of Hattie, I didn't bother asking someone to drive me home. In that house, where we used to live together, where her clothes should have been nestled in the bureau, her absence would only hurt even more.

Staying at the clubhouse meant I wouldn't be alone. Someone was always here—at the bar, in the kitchen, playing pool, or camped out in one of the back rooms doing...whatever. Sex. Sleep. Didn't matter.

Slowly, I rose to my feet, stretching my aching, stiff body. My leg felt tender and sore now that the alcohol and painkillers had faded from my system. I moved with a slight limp, but it wasn't bad enough to keep me confined to the bed all day.

After a quick trip to the communal bathroom, I washed my face, took a leak, and went in search of coffee to chase away my headache. Emerging into the main room of the clubhouse, I spotted Big G seated in front of the television in the corner, ignoring the cheesy soap opera on the screen. Roxie was nestled on his lap—barely twenty-three years old, with electric blue eyeshadow, cut-off denim shorts, and a hot-pink push-up bra visible through her skin-tight white tank top. She giggled as she nuzzled into his neck, not-so-subtly shoving her hand down his pants.

Big G growled and swatted her ass lightly. She squeaked in surprise and wiggled closer, sucking on his earlobe.

“Please tell me one of you started coffee already,” I grumbled, shuffling by, not looking too closely at either of them in case I got an eyeful of skin I didn't want to see.

“Hot and fresh,” Big G said. “Baby Doll should be stopping by with breakfast in a

few minutes.”

“Thank God.” I headed for the kitchen door, then paused when I spotted Crash on the other side of the room. Slumped over a table, head pillowed on his arms, fast asleep. I pointed at him. “Was the kid here all night?”

Big G didn’t answer. Roxie had her tongue down his throat.

“Hey,” I snapped.

He broke away with a noise of frustration. Roxie stuck out her lower lip in a pout.

“What?” he replied, exasperated at being cockblocked.

“The kid wasn’t supposed to spend the night here. I said he could hang out, not move in.”

Big G shrugged.

“No offense, boss, but I wasn’t really paying attention to the kid or what he was doing after a certain point last night. And neither were you, trying to drown yourself in that bottle of whiskey.”

I frowned. Big G focused on Roxie again, cupping her ass with a squeeze. He murmured something too low for me to hear, and she gasped, biting her lower lip. If the club bunnies weren’t plastered all over Spike for his seemingly endless stamina, they usually made their way into Big G’s bed for the thrill of an older man who knew how to wield his experience well. He never entertained the idea of marriage, but he was more than happy to oblige the ladies and take care of their needs.

“Aren’t you too old to be making out like a dumbass, horny teenager?” I barked.

There was no denying the jealousy in my tone, even to my own ears.

Big G tore his gaze from Roxie to look at me, raising his eyebrows.

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“Are you being the world’s biggest asshole because your painkillers wore off, or because of a blistering hangover from hell?”

I huffed and turned away.

“Both.”

“Baby Doll was right, you know,” Big G called after me as I shoved the kitchen door open. “Blue balls are making you bitchy.”

“Fuck off,” I shot back.

He chuckled, unfazed by my barbs.

“She’s going to be so pleased that you keep proving her right every time you open your mouth and that charming personality slips out.”

“Bite me,” I grumbled.

“You’re not my type.” Big G tangled his fingers into Roxie’s bottle-blond hair. “You, on the other hand, are exactly my type. Keep going, sweetheart. You were on a roll. Don’t stop now.”

She shifted in his lap to fully straddle him, unbuckling his belt. When Big G slipped his hand under her shirt, I didn’t need to see any more. I’d been around bikers nearly all my life. They weren’t shy, and I was far from a prude. I didn’t give a shit if they fucked right in front of me.

But I missed having that closeness and raw intimacy with my woman. If I wanted sex, I could find my own club bunny. And if I wanted another relationship, I could start dating again.

None of that would fix the gaping hole in my chest where Hattie used to be though. Sex with anyone else would be empty, simply going through the motions. Like eating cardboard instead of a three course meal.

In the blessed solitude of the kitchen, I sighed and poured a cup of bitter, black coffee. Closing my eyes, I sipped at the piping hot brew and leaned back against the counter. As usual, Big G kept me in line, called out my bullshit. I was being a dick, biting people's heads off.

Seeing Hattie had rattled me more than I wanted to admit. But that was no excuse. As the President of this club, my brothers looked up to me, relied on me to keep my cool, even when everything went sour. I should be able to manage a visit from my ex-wife without going to fucking pieces.

Pulling my phone out of my back pocket, I tapped the screen, navigating to my contacts list. Hattie was still at the top. For over a decade of marriage, and another decade of divorce, that had never changed. Blackbeard, my Vice President, occupied the second slot, which was only natural since he was my second in command.

My thumb hovered over the delete button. My chest hurt at the thought.

I should have done it a long time ago already. When Hattie handed me the divorce papers to sign. When she packed up and shipped out to Seattle. When she stopped returning my calls. When we hadn't talked for years.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. The caffeine wasn't doing much to stave off my headache.

Without giving myself any more time to think about it, I jabbed the delete button and tossed my phone on the counter in disgust. Maybe it was long overdue. But it still made me sick to my stomach.

The rev of a bike echoed outside, signaling someone's arrival. Taking my coffee, I returned to the main room just as Baby Doll wedged the front door open with her foot. She juggled multiple bags of takeout from the Cattle Yard Diner.

"Breakfast has arrived, gentlemen," she said. "Is everyone decent?"

"Depends on your definition," I replied. "Most of us are clothed, at least. Can't speak for Big G and Roxie though. Haven't seen Spike yet either."

As if on cue, Roxie let out a peal of laughter as Big G stripped off her tank top and buried his face between her tits.

Baby Doll deposited the bags of food on the bar and began unpacking them. Most of us couldn't cook anything more than a bowl of cereal or a box of instant macaroni and cheese.

Except for Tex and Blackbeard. Cooking was a time-honored tradition among their big families, passed down with pride from one generation to the next. Cooking for the club was a massive amount of work though, with ten members and any number of club bunnies as guests.

So we resorted to takeout most of the time.

The smell of greasy sausages made my stomach churn. I inhaled a steadying breath and turned my head away.

Baby Doll pulled open a drawer beneath the bar and grabbed a rubber band. She

stretched it taut and sent it zinging across the room, hitting Big G in the back of the head with an audiblethwack.

“What the—?” he hissed, twisting around in his seat.

“Take it somewhere else, you two,” Baby Doll said firmly. “People are trying to eat.”

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“Blue balls must be contagious,” Big G muttered.

He hooked an arm around Roxie’s waist and rose to his feet, picking her up effortlessly. She combed her fingers through his salt-and-pepper undercut, sealing her mouth to his neck and wrapping her legs around his waist. They disappeared down the corridor that led to the back rooms.

“That’s better,” Baby Doll said. “I bet we have about five minutes before she’s screaming his name and ruining our appetites in the process. So, eat fast.”

I circled around the bar, grabbing a bottle of whiskey off the shelf. Baby Doll snatched it out of my grip and shoved a takeout container into my hands, loaded with scrambled eggs, sausages, and two biscuits doused in gravy.

“No whiskey. Protein first.”

I scowled at her.

“You’re not my mother.”

“Thank fuck for that.” Baby Doll dug around in one of the takeout bags and deposited a smaller white paper bag on the bar. “Your prescriptions. I picked them up at the pharmacy on my way here. And since we’ve already established that I’m not your mother, I have no problem prying your mouth open and ramming those pills down your throat, even if you cry and gag like a little bitch.”

She flashed the most endearing smile despite her threat. I breathed a faint laugh.

“Jesus, you’re violent. And mean. You wouldn’t dare raise a hand to your president.”

Baby Doll snorted.

“Pulling the rank card, huh? You must be shaking in your boots.”

Opening the prescription bag, I examined the bottles inside until I found the ibuprofen and popped two dry. I didn’t give her grief for talking trash. She had to develop a thick skin as tough as Kevlar in order to ride with us, and she had more respect for rank than most men I met in my entire life. Spike had accused me of playing favorites on more than one occasion, but he could whine all he wanted.

“I’m surprised to see you coherent this morning, Prez.” Baby Doll opened her own takeout container and stabbed a bite of eggs with her fork. “After all that drinking you did last night, I fully expected to find you worshipping the porcelain throne.”

I shrugged and settled on a bar stool, ignoring breakfast in favor of nursing my coffee.

“There’s still time. I might surprise you.”

Crash jerked awake with a disoriented grunt, scrubbing a hand down his face. He blinked, bleary-eyed, and sniffed the air.

“Do I smell sausages? From the Cattle Yard?”

I pushed my plate over and gestured at it.

“Eat your heart out, kid.”

He practically flew across the room, taking a seat on the stool next to me. Baby Doll

watched as he yanked the plate closer, hunched over it, and began shoveling food into his mouth.

“Do you remember having a metabolism like that in your twenties, boss?” she said.

“A very long time ago. I’m getting heartburn just looking at him.”

“Hey, kid.” Baby Doll rapped her knuckles on the bar to get his attention. Crash glanced up with a lump of food in his cheek. “If you don’t slow down and breathe once in a while, you’re going to choke. And for your information, I don’t do any CPR mouth-to-mouth crap. That’s Blackbeard’s job. He’s the medic around here. If he’s not available, you’re shit out of luck.”

Crash gulped, swallowing his food down. He took a smaller, measured bite of sausage. I could tell Baby Doll was bluffing. She’d picked up some medical expertise over the years, and she certainly wouldn’t stand by while someone suffered if she could do something about it. But Crash didn’t need to know that.

Voices emanated from the corridor to the back rooms. A moment later, Roxie came into view, barefoot and wearing nothing but an oversized flannel shirt.

“I know, baby, but I’m hungry, and that food just smells so good,” she said.

Big G trailed behind her, his hair ruffled, shirt untucked, belt undone. Obviously interrupted.

“You must be losing your touch, old man,” I said. “She ditched your dick in favor of greasy diner food. Would you like some ice to put on your wounded pride?”

He grumbled and waved me off.

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“Trust me, I know better than to compete with breakfast.”

Roxie started opening a container and paused when she spotted Crash.

“Hey, you’re the new kid, right?”

He nodded, swiping the back of his hand across his mouth.

“He’s visiting,” I said. “That’s all.”

“You’re kinda cute.” She reached out and rubbed Crash’s bristly head. “What’s your name, sweetie?”

“Gavin,” he said.

“Gavin?” I repeated, confused. I turned to Big G. “I thought you said his name was Jimmy.”

Big G shrugged.

“It’s close enough.”

“Not really.”

“Does it matter?” he countered. “You just call himkid.”

Roxie continued petting Crash’s head, stroking his shoulders. He inhaled sharply, and

thumped his chest with his fist to dislodge a bite of food from his throat.

“Big G, can I play with him, too?” Roxie asked.

Crash wheezed and the tips of his ears turned pink.

“You can have whatever you want, sweetheart,” Big G said.

She squealed with delight and immediately reached for Crash’s fly.

“Let me take a peek, sweetie.”

“Whoa, hey, wait, I—”

Crash fumbled to grab her wrist and nearly fell off his stool in the process.

“Don’t be shy, sweetie.” Roxie lowered her voice to a loud stage whisper. “It’s okay if you’re still a virgin.”

He let out a nervous laugh of disbelief.

“I amnot—”

“He might eat like a horse, sweetheart,” Big G said. “But I’d wager he won’t last more than fifteen seconds. Thirty, if you’re lucky.”

Crash’s face went red as a tomato.

“That’snottrue.”

Big G arched an eyebrow.

“Are you saying you come in your pants, instead?”

Baby Doll snickered. I shook my head, smothering a smile in my coffee.

Disappointment shadowed Roxie’s features. She pulled back.

“Oh.”

Grabbing her food, she made her way over to Big G and nestled under his arm. He looked smug, victorious. Crash sulked.

“What are you still doing here anyway, kid?” I asked.

He squared his shoulders, fiddling with his fork.

“I want to join the Blackjacks.”

“No shit. I figured out that much for myself already. I told you, we’re not interested. Try another club, another chapter.”

Crash bit the inside of his cheek and stared down at his food.

“My...brother used to be a member.”

Damn it. That complicated things. Made the kid’s mission personal, which meant he would be persistent as fuck about it. I sighed and pushed my coffee away.

“What was his name?”

“Darren. Darren Fowler.”

I glanced at Baby Doll, then Big G, searching for recognition among them. They stared back with nothing but blank faces.

“You called him Digger, I think,” Crash amended.

“Shit.Digger.”

Yeah, I remembered him. He died in a shootout with a rival club—the Forsaken MC—four years ago. It was a damn shame, too. Digger had been a good kid, sharp, resourceful, and fearless.

“Didn’t know he had family,” I said.

Crash lifted one shoulder.

“We used to be close. Lost touch when Digger moved out.”

“You looked up to him?””

Crash nodded, jabbing his fork into his eggs, but he didn’t eat anything more.

“Poor kid,” Roxie whispered.

Guilt slid between my ribs like a knife. Crash wanted to follow in his brother’s footsteps, but that’s exactly why I couldn’t let him join. Because of my club, his brother was dead, and my marriage was destroyed.

Crash was young. He still had plenty of time to make something of himself. Slapping that Prospect patch on his chest would ruin him forever.

“I’m sorry for your loss, kid. But you shouldn’t be here. Get a regular job. Have a regular life. Get married. Have kids. You’ll live longer.”

He frowned and took a breath to fight me on it. But he broke off when the front door

opened, and a cop entered the room.

Everyone went dead silent.

Cops and bikers like us weren't exactly on friendly terms. On rare occasions, we could navigate a gray area that served as a truce, but it didn't happen often, and only after a significant amount of trust had been developed.

The presence of a cop usually meant one of us was getting cuffed and put behind bars.

"Take it easy." He held up his hands in surrender. "I'm not here on duty. I'm looking for—"

Baby Doll stepped forward.

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“Thanks for getting back to me so quickly, Dom. We can talk outside.”

I watched her go, even though my instincts prickled. Baby Doll made it this far because she played hardball when she needed to. That included keeping her fair share of secrets. I would have felt better about the whole ordeal if the cop had been going bald with a gut that suggested he spent most of his time behind a desk with a box of doughnuts.

Instead, he was an attractive bastard. Firm, square jawline. Golden brown wavy hair. A perfectly fitted uniform that practically melted onto every sculpted muscle of his body.

Was she actually fucking a cop?

God, she better not be. Baby Doll was smarter than that.

After several minutes dragged by, the door opened again.

“Thank you for your time, Dom,” she said, stepping into the clubhouse. “I appreciate it.”

Before I could ask what the hell that was about, Zayn “Spike” Gendry waltzed in. Naked as the day he was born. With a bunny on each arm. He tongue-kissed one of them and gestured to a nearby table.

“Make yourselves at home, ladies. I’ll get you coffee in a minute.”

Baby Doll shot him an annoyed look.

“Do you have something against wearing pants?”

Spike gestured at himself—six-foot-four, ripped abs, chiseled features, thick cock on full display. I hated that my gaze involuntarily snagged on the gleam of his Prince Albert piercing. Of course the bastard had jewelry to pretty up his goddamn dick.

It was no surprise that he’d worked gigs unavailable to the rest of us ugly fuckers. Underwear model, porn star, Chippendale dancer. Even though he was just shy of forty by now, he was still in disgustingly good shape.

“Nothing to be ashamed of,” he protested. “Freeballing gets the air circulating. You should try it. We wouldn’t complain if you decided to go tits-out. In fact, we would be very supportive.”

“Spike,” I said with a sigh. “Don’t piss her off when your nuts are exposed like that. She’ll kick them into your throat.”

“No, no, let the man make his own decisions,” Big G said. “I want to see how this plays out. Wish I had some popcorn.”

Baby Doll batted her lashes at Spike.

“You’d love to get a look under my shirt, wouldn’t you, Spike?”

Big G huffed a laugh, shaking his head.

“You’re in danger, brother.”

Spike sidled forward, reaching for the hem of Baby Doll’s black tank top.

“You’ve already seen mine. It’s only fair you show me yours. I promise to treat the girls right.”

She stood dangerously still as he lifted her shirt by one teasing inch. Then she tipped my coffee over, spilling hot liquid across the bar, splashing over the edge.

Spike leaped back, shielding his crotch.

“Shit!Fuck!That’s hot!”

“Oops,” Baby Doll said with faux innocence.

I gazed in dismay at the remains of my coffee, sprawled across the bar. This is what I get for staying at the clubhouse instead of going home, where I could enjoy my coffee in peace without all these theatrics.

Spike examined his dick, then glanced at Baby Doll with a sullen expression.

“Doesn’t look like you did any damage. Which is a fucking miracle.”

“Are you sure?” she cooed, saccharin-sweet and dripping with sarcasm. “Maybe I should take a closer look. Just to double check.”

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When she advanced, Spike scuttled backward, putting distance between them, cupping his dick protectively.

“Absolutely not. Stay the fuck away from me. Sadist.”

She smirked and blew him a kiss.

“Fuckboy.”

Spike scowled again and turned to leave the room. Baby Doll tilted her head, boldly checking him out as he stormed off.

“Why don’t you two just have hate sex already?” I asked.

She scoffed.

“He’s probably loaded with every STD known to man. All that bait and tackle below the belt might be tempting. Until he opens his mouth. Then suddenly, I’m as dry as the Sahara desert.”

I stifled a groan, rubbing my throbbing forehead.

“Too much information.”

Baby Doll continued, unfazed.

“Besides, there are plenty of times where I wanted to ride the dick but not the dude.

And not a single one of you would ever look me in the eyes again if I slept with him anyway. I've worked too damn hard to blow it on a skirt chaser like him. Give me more credit than that, boss."

"Didn't mean any offense," I said.

"None taken."

Crash sat at the bar, mouth hanging open slightly, eyes wide.

"You'll catch flies like that, son," Big G said.

"He's getting one hell of an education right now," I said.

"Did I break his brain?" Baby Doll mused.

"I think so."

"I bet he has a hard-on that could poke a hole through his jeans," Big G said.

Roxie reached over and palmed the front of his pants.

Crash flinched.

"Whoa! Hey, what is wrong with you people? Ever heard of personal space?"

"Stiff as a board," Roxie chirped. "Poor guy. I bet you could use some lovin' to get rid of that tension."

Big G took a seat at the bar, accepting defeat.

“Go ahead, sweetheart. He’s all yours. Make a man out of him.”

Roxie bounced on her toes as she pulled a bewildered Crash off his stool, tugging him toward one of the back rooms.

I fixed my attention on Baby Doll.

“Are you going to tell us why you were so friendly with that cop a minute ago?”

Big G and Baby Doll started mopping up the coffee with a rag, moving containers away from the spill zone.

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“Dom owed me a favor,” she said. “So, I asked for info on Hattie. Strictly off the books and under the table. Just to see if she had a special man in her life.”

My spine straightened. Checking up on my ex-wife without my order defied the chain of command, but in this case, I was grateful that she had her head on straight while I had my head in a bottle.

“What did he say?”

Baby Doll blew out a breath and spread her hands.

“I think she’s in some trouble, boss.”

Fuck. My blood ran cold. That’s the last thing I wanted to hear.

“What kind of trouble?” I prompted as my mind whirled through dozens of possibilities.

“She was caught up in a bank robbery a few months ago. Here, in Brightwater. And now she’s due to testify in court. The problem is that the cops only bagged one guy. The other two are still in the wind. Cops weren’t worried about it since she lived out of state, but with the trial date coming up, it sounds like they’re expecting things to get a little bumpy.”

I swore under my breath. There was no way in hell I would trust the cops to look after my woman. I knew she wouldn’t want my protection, but I didn’t give a shit.

She's my wife. And I would walk through the fires of hell to keep her safe.

Chapter six

Hattie

I bundled my new niece into my arms, utterly spellbound by her tiny pink fists, button nose, and wispy blonde curls. Emma Rose Matthews was perfect in every way.

"She's the spitting image of you," I whispered, glancing at my sister.

Connie managed a contented yet exhausted smile. Nathan sat at her bedside, holding her hand as he smoothed his thumb over her knuckles. Wylie was curled up asleep in Nathan's lap, his head resting on Nathan's shoulder.

"Sorry about messing up your flight plans," Connie said in a tired voice.

I shook my head, brushing my knuckles against Emma's silky soft cheek.

"Are you kidding? I wouldn't have missed this for the world. It's a good thing you like my cooking because you couldn't pry me out of your house with a crowbar right now."

Deep down, it pained me to think about returning to Seattle. I hated that I wasn't here for so many of Wylie's milestones—his first words, learning to walk, his first day at preschool. And I wouldn't be here for many of Emma's milestones as well.

I cradled the back of her downy head in my palm as she yawned, forming a small O with her mouth. My vision turned misty and my chest grew so tight that it was hard to breathe.

I didn't have my own kids. I didn't get to be a mother. I tried my best to be a good aunt, but that was slipping through my fingers too since I didn't visit as often as I should.

Emma squirmed and started to fuss.

"She's probably getting hungry," Connie said.

Nathan helped her to sit up, tucking an extra pillow behind her back for support. Reluctantly, I surrendered Emma back to her mother, aching at the loss of her gentle body heat in my arms.

When I stepped back, it dawned on me what a private family moment this was—husband and wife, welcoming their new baby girl, with their son held close, safe and secure. I slipped out of the room, giving them privacy.

As I navigated the labyrinth of hospital corridors in search of the lobby, my phone rang from the depths of my purse. I fished it out, expecting Connie's name, calling me for something she needed.

Instead, Neil's number flashed on my screen. Damn it.

I really didn't feel like talking to him. All I wanted to do was sit in a corner and process the bittersweet tug-of-war in my chest—the birth of my niece, the ache of longing to have my own baby that I would never satisfy, and the desire to stay here, close to home, where I could watch my niece and nephew grow up.

The phone kept ringing. Standing there in the hospital hallway, a pang of loneliness came over me. My sister had her family. But I was alone. And I didn't want to be. With a sigh, I answered the phone.

"What do you want, Neil?"

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“What’s all this bullshit about you testifying in a court case?”

I sighed. This was the last thing I needed to deal with at the moment.

“How did you even find out—?”

I broke off. I knew the answer to that question already, although I wish I didn’t. He had connections, people who owed him favors, people he could squeeze or threaten or cajole for information. The line between right and wrong, illegal and justified, was an incredibly gray, foggy area with him. I’d learned a long time ago that I shouldn’t look too closely at club business.

“It’s no big deal,” I added. “And it’s none of your concern anyway.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

I clenched my teeth.

“Like I said, it’s none of your concern. You were supposed to lose my number. Don’t make me get a restraining order.”

A beat of silence emanated over the phone. The threat of taking legal action to prevent him from accessing me was an empty threat. I’d never follow through. Neil wasn’t a danger to me—overly protective, yes. But he would never hurt a single hair on my head.

As I rounded a corner, I found myself at the emergency entrance. Two medics pushed

a gurney through the double doors, bearing a teenager in a neck brace, blood coating her right pant leg from knee to ankle.

“Car accident,” one medic announced as a team of nurses rushed to take over. “Young female, sixteen years old. Leg was pinned under the dashboard. Looks like she might have some head trauma as well.”

“Where are you?” Neil’s voice was firm, but there was no mistaking the undeniable edge of apprehension in his tone.

I dragged my attention away from the medical team who raced off to the emergency room.

“I’m fine, Neil.”

“Are you at the hospital?” he pressed, relentless as always. “What’s wrong? Are you hurt?”

I rubbed my forehead, fatigue settling heavily into my bones. I sank into a nearby chair and closed my eyes. I really needed to change my phone number...

“Neil,” I pleaded. “You have to stop. Please. Connie had her baby. That’s all. I’m at the hospital to help her out.”

He went quiet again.

“Didn’t you say she was having a boy?” he asked softly.

I huffed a dry laugh. By the time Connie announced her first pregnancy, Neil and I had already been divorced for several years. Seeing my sister having a baby while I still couldn’t get over the separation with my ex-husband, brought up so much grief

that I cut all contact with Neil entirely.

“Yeah, that was Wylie,” I said. “He’s five years old now.”

Neil blew out a breath, incredulous.

“Has it really been that long?”

I hummed, but didn’t say anything. It felt like a lifetime. We were supposed to spend forever together. Not eternally apart like this.

“Did Connie pull through okay?” Neil asked.

My heart squeezed. My sister was part of my life, not his. He lost the privilege to know anything about me as soon as he signed those divorce papers. I wanted to tell him off, to push him away. But my sister was surrounded by her loving family, and I was drifting through the hallways alone, with the tinny echo of Neil’s voice over the phone to keep me company. Despite my better judgment, I wished selfishly that he could be here with me.

“She’s good,” I whispered. “Both Connie and the baby are healthy and strong. She had a little girl.”

“What’s her name?” Neil said.

I hesitated, scrubbing at the fabric of my jeans with my thumbnail. I shouldn’t tell him, I thought. I’ve said too much already.

“Emma Rose,” I replied. “All ten fingers and toes are intact. Looks like a miniature version of Connie.”

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“So, you’ll be teaching her how to beat the boys off with a stick then?”

I smiled, even though that small voice in the back of my head still warned me to stop talking to Neil, get off the phone, don’t let him in like this.

“I do take my role as the favorite aunt very seriously,” I said.

Neil chuckled—a low, deep sound that slid through my body like molten lava.

This was supposed to be us, I wanted to say. We were supposed to be in that hospital room, welcoming our newborn into the world. I wanted this with you, Neil. Not anyone else. And I hate that after all these years, you’re still the only one I want to raise a family with, when all you can think about is your damn club.

“It must be hard,” Neil said. “Being away from your family. You were always close with your sister. Your mother was a different story.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” I countered. “Screwing around with you didn’t help either.”

As much as I hated to admit it, my mother and I had been two sides of the same coin. We had sharp tongues and scathing attitudes to match. Connie inherited our father’s mild manners and gentle, nurturing demeanor. He died of a heart attack on a construction job when we were teenagers, and the hole he left in our lives only soured my mother’s attitude even worse.

When I fell in love with Neil, she warned me to stay away from him.

That biker will break your heart, Harriet. Mark my words. Don't come crying to me when you need someone to pick up the pieces. You'll find no sympathy on my doorstep.

I was so hellbent on proving her wrong, clinging to Neil even tighter. I loved him, damn it. Why couldn't she see that?

When I filed for divorce, I fully expected my mother would rub it in my face. Instead, she said nothing. Her silence was worse—so much worse—than any insult she could have flung my way.

“Does that stubborn old crone still hate my guts?” Neil asked.

I glanced down at the hospital floor.

“She didn't hate your guts, Neil.”

He snorted.

“Don't sugarcoat the truth now, Hattie. You never bothered to before.”

I sighed and leaned back in my chair.

“Fine. Yes, she hated your guts. You were nearly ten years older than me, covered in tattoos, and you barely passed your GED. But that's not why Mom hated you.”

“Really? Sounds like she had a laundry list of grudges built up already. What else was she holding against me?”

I chewed the inside of my cheek. The truth was that my mother hated Neil precisely because I loved him. She never loved my father that way. Her marriage had been

lukewarm at best, and her prickly demeanor only continued to keep her husband at arm's length.

Her blood curdled over the fact that I was utterly enthralled with Neil after we met, willing to throw away everything I'd worked for because of a biker. He loved me so deeply, so fiercely, but my mother couldn't be happy for me. Instead, she frothed at the mouth with jealousy.

"It doesn't matter," I said.

"No, don't go easy on me. Let's hear it."

I hesitated, brushing an invisible speck of dirt off my jeans.

"She's gone. Mom passed in her sleep a few years ago, right after Wylie was born."

"Shit, Hattie," Neil replied with chagrin. "I'm—I didn't know. I'm so sorry. You should have called me. I could have helped with the funeral."

That's exactly why I didn't tell him. Mom's death would leave me vulnerable. I knew that if I saw Neil after burying my last surviving parent, I would stumble into his arms all over again.

I shook my head, scrubbing a hand over my face as I squared my shoulders.

"Because we're divorced. I'm not your problem now."

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“Don’t,” he hissed, voice low. “Don’t say that.”

I needed to hang up. He was just going to make things worse.

“I want to be there, at the trial,” Neil continued. “When you testify.”

I sputtered with disbelief.

“Are you insane? Absolutely not.”

“Hattie, you’ve already been through enough on your own—”

“You’re not going to that damn trial, Neil. What will the jury think when a biker rolls up to the courthouse, wearing his leathers, while his ex-wife is on the stand? The validity of my statement could be called into question because—”

I snapped my mouth shut, wishing I could bite clean through my tongue for what I was about to say.

“Because you have a history of associating with criminals?” he finished for me.

I clenched my teeth and rubbed my forehead. Neil had been on the wrong side of the law since his childhood. At barely fourteen years old, he was kicked out of the house by his abusive father. Surviving on the streets had required petty crimes left and right. Then he fell into club life, and it was only natural that he gravitated to the 1%—bikers with rap sheets a mile long, and proud of it.

Neil never hid that fact from me when we were together. Within forty-eight hours of that damned first kiss, he made sure I knew exactly what I was getting into with him. He wasn't ashamed of the sins he'd committed, and he would commit a thousand more if need be.

Still, bringing up his criminal record was a low blow. Something my mother used to fling in my face on a regular basis. Even if I was concerned about his appearance at court affecting my testimony, I could have brought it up more tactfully than that.

The silence on the other end of the line was so complete that I wondered, did he hang up on me?

"Neil," I said quietly.

"I'm here, baby," he replied without missing a beat.

I stifled a groan and pinched the bridge of my nose. He really needed to stop calling me that. Every time I heard it, with the delicious rumbling bass of his voice, he chipped away at the walls I'd diligently fortified over the years to keep him out, to guard my heart, to train myself to stop loving him.

"You don't have to worry about me anymore," I whispered.

I knew that would hurt him, too, but not with malicious intent this time. He was so protective of me, going to great lengths to make sure someone was always watching my back if he couldn't be there himself. He wouldn't even wear his wedding ring on his hand, where everyone could see.

Any prick with half a brain cell would take one look at the ring on my finger and make a beeline straight for you, he used to say. I would never forgive myself if something happened to you because of me.

Instead, Neil wore his ring on a silver chain around his neck, tucked under his shirt and close to his heart.

Right where you belong, baby, he said, cupping my chin to kiss me.

“You’ve changed,” Neil rasped in a hoarse, raw voice.

I sucked in a sharp breath of air at the sting of his words.

“Usually, your mother was the one harping about the damage to your reputation,” he added. “You never cared what other people thought before.”

“This is different,” I muttered, prickling at the comparison to my mother.

Neil made a noise of disagreement but he didn’t argue any further.

“Pass along my congratulations to your sister for me, would you?”

Then he ended the call before I could reply.

By the time Connie and Emma were settled at home, the trial was a week and a half away. It seemed silly to head back to Seattle now. I hated imposing on Connie and Nathan any longer than I had to, but they insisted I was welcome to stay. Especially since I was more than willing to lend a hand around the house.

And secretly, I was grateful for every spare second I could soak up with little Emma.

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Until I spotted the biker on the corner.

At first, I didn't think anything about it. People went for joy rides in the warmth of summer all the time.

Two days later, playing with Wylie in the yard, I noticed the same biker, parked beneath the shade of a tree two blocks away. With only a handful of houses on Connie's street, I'd met most of her neighbors, but I'd never seen this guy before.

Thanks to a decade of marriage to Neil, I picked up details about the bike automatically—a sleek, low-riding chopper. Harley-Davidson, probably. The paint job was a gorgeous lush red, dark like claret wine, that faded to an inky black.

My intuition prickled. I didn't recognize this biker from the Blackjacks, but thirteen years was a long time. Any number of members could have changed in Neil's club by now.

The biker was huge, with wiry dark curls, thick tattooed forearms folded across his barrel chest, and biceps as big as my head. Squinting in the sunlight, I noticed the unmistakable shape of a cut. Plenty of bikers wore cuts, I reasoned.

But I had the nagging feeling that this cut specifically would be familiar if I could get a good look at it. Belonging to a certain club that was the bane of my existence.

“Hey, Wylie,” I said. “Do you feel like taking a popsicle break?”

He whooped with delight and shot to his feet, racing for the house. I didn't follow

him inside. Instead, I marched straight for the biker.

Even though his wraparound shades hid his eyes, I could tell he noticed my approach when he sat there stock still. Like a rabbit, hoping to avoid the fox's attention.

When I was close enough to read the patches on his chest, my suspicions were confirmed.

The first patch read, ENFORCER.

Second patch read, BLACKJACKS MC.

"I'm gonna kill him," I hissed.

I knew Neil would hunt me down as soon as he realized I was still in town. Coming to a stop directly in front of the biker, I crossed my arms.

"Give me your phone," I demanded.

His eyebrows flicked upward slightly, but his expression remained stone cold.

"Is there a problem?" he replied in a clipped, crisp Russian accent.

"Don't play dumb. Call Neil—Kingpin, to you."

The biker fixed me with a long stare, then he retrieved his phone from a pocket of his cut.

"Hey, boss," he said. "Yes, your woman wishes to speak with you—"

I stripped the phone out of the biker's grip without giving him a chance to finish.

“Tell your watchdog to stand down, Neil.”

“Hello to you, too, sweetheart,” he said, voice dripping with sarcastic honey.

It made me want to strangle him even more. I huffed with frustration.

“I’m serious.”

“Oh, I believe you. Trust me, I recognize that tone. Every time I heard it, I ended up sleeping on the couch for a week.”

“You don’t get to do this,” I shot back tartly. “Keeping tabs on me. Assigning one of your men to be my bodyguard.”

“It’s just a precaution.”

“I can handle myself,” I countered.

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“Then think of Vlad as nothing more than part of the scenery. He won’t get in your way.”

I glanced at Vlad and his broad frame. Up close, I noticed the tattoo designs on his forearms—ravens in flight, wings spread wide across a bristling forest. Over the years, I learned there was a very good reason why bikers came to earn their road names. I pressed the phone to my shoulder, muffling it.

“Let me guess,” I said. “Vlad the Impaler?”

“It was self defense,” Vlad rumbled.

“I’m sure the other guy would disagree.”

Vlad shrugged his huge shoulders.

“The dead can’t talk, so we’ll never know.”

I shook my head, bringing the phone up to my ear again.

“He has such a...pleasantpersonality,” I said dryly to Neil.

“Well, he’s not there for chitchat at an ice cream social. Don’t worry about him. You’ll hardly notice he’s there.”

I scoffed.

“It’s impossible to miss a biker the size of a mountain lurking around, looking like he’s scoping out which house he wants to break into. Are you trying to get my sister’s neighborhood swarming with police?”

“Hmm,” Neil mused. “I’ll send Big G instead. He’s not as physically intimidating, and you kind of have a thing for him.”

I rolled my eyes. Did he really have to be so petulantly jealous for no reason?

“I don’t have a thing for him. Back off, Neil. No bikers. At all.”

He huffed.

“Fine. Put Vlad on.”

I passed the phone back. Vlad listened for a second or two, then hung up. He started his bike with a deafening roar. I retreated a few steps, covering my ears.

“I apologize for troubling you today,” he said over the growl of his motorcycle.

Then Vlad sped off down the road, disappearing from view. I knew that wouldn’t be the last of him though.

Neil didn’t give up that easily. Ever. Not when I was involved.

Chapter seven

Kingpin

Hattie was sharp as a tack. She knew I wouldn’t back down, not when she needed help, whether she was willing to admit it or not. Assigning Vlad to look after her was

reassurance that I was simply doing exactly what she expected me to do.

Hopefully, it would take her a little while longer to figure out there were two more of my men tailing her.

I met Vlad in the parking lot of the clubhouse when he rolled up.

“Did my ex-wife take a bite out of you?” I asked.

He shook his head and killed his engine.

“Your woman is strong-willed, but she didn’t want my head on a spike. That honor is reserved for you.”

“Yeah, I figured as much.” I clasped Vlad’s meaty palm in gratitude. “Did you see anything out of the ordinary while you were there?”

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“Quiet as a graveyard. I passed Gatling and Tex on my ride out. They didn’t see anything either.”

That took the edge off my worry, but only slightly. As the trial date drew closer, I expected things to get heated. Those two robbers on the loose were a wild card—they could pressure Hattie to change her statement, or prevent her from testifying altogether.

“Rubs me the wrong way,” I muttered. “If your buddy got caught and locked up, wouldn’t you paint the town red to set him free? Why are these guys sitting around with their thumbs up their asses?”

“Perhaps you overestimate their loyalty, boss,” Vlad replied. “Their friend took the fall. They get away clean with over a million in stolen cash. Some men are cowards. They wouldn’t think twice about leaving a comrade to burn.”

I scrubbed a hand over my mouth. Vlad had a point. I’d met more than a few men like that in my lifetime—my abusive asshole of a father being one of them. I couldn’t fathom how he kicked me to the curb without a second thought. Sold the shitty trailer we lived in a week later, so I didn’t even have a home to go back to. Ten years down the road, I found out he was shackled up with a girlfriend a few towns over in some snobby as fuck gated community.

When I showed up on his doorstep, there was no recognition in his eyes. He didn’t want to remember the son he’d abandoned, or the life he’d left behind.

Still, this whole thing with Hattie and the bank robbery nagged at me.

I hated that she'd been in danger and I wasn't there to protect her. On top of that, her mother had passed, and Hattie was now an aunt twice over. I was supposed to be with her through it all. But her life had continued without me.

The rumble of an engine drew my attention to the road. In the distance, I spotted Nico "Hot Shot" Marconi zipping along on his fluorescent orange Suzuki. Behind him, followed the FullThrottle Auto Repair tow truck, pulling a trailer with my bike strapped to the bed.

Fuck, it felt good to see her again. Gleaming with those decadent shades of plum purple in the summer sunlight. It was a massive beast—a Harley-Davidson Electra Glide touring bike, intended more for lazy Sunday rides in comfort than speed or agility.

I'd had a custom-made pillion seat designed for Hattie, in the hopes she would ride with me. The size of a small armchair, with buttery smooth leather, and a central heating unit, so she wouldn't get cold. I spared no expense, making sure my woman could rest easy.

But she swore she would never go near the damn thing.

Didn't help when she found out that the pillion seat was more affectionately known in the biker world as the bitch seat. She definitely wasn't pleased about that.

Hot Shot came to a stop beside me and pushed the visor of his helmet up with a grin.

"Special delivery, Prez. She's practically good as new."

"Thanks for taking care of her after the crash," I replied.

He shrugged and tossed my key ring to me.

“No offense, but it’s better than visiting your grumpy ass in the hospital. That place gives me the heebie-jeebies. And I’ve never had much of a bedside manner.”

The tow truck slowed and turned into the parking lot. One of his mechanics jumped out. I recognized Morgan from my visits to Hot Shot’s garage—backward baseball cap mashed down over her frizzy bob of brown curls, large round glasses, somewhere in her late twenties. Her greasy blue coveralls were peeled down to her waist due to the heat, sleeves knotted around her midriff. She never seemed to have much to say, choosing to keep her head buried in an engine instead of making small talk.

Not that I blamed her for that. I’d do the same if I had the choice.

Hot Shot removed his helmet, popped the kickstand down into place, and helped Morgan unload my bike. After they wheeled it over to me, I ran my hand across the body work—not even a scratch. Just as smooth and flawless as the first day of her brand new paint job, over thirty-five years ago.

The clubhouse door opened and Blackbeard emerged with a low whistle.

“I thought I heard the obnoxious mosquito whine of a Suzi.”

“That mosquito whine could leave you in the dust any day of the week,” Hot Shot replied, crossing his arms.

None of us rode sporty bikes like he did. Since that marked him as the odd man out, he usually found himself fighting to defend his precious little ride. Most of the time, he seemed to enjoy the ribbing though and took it in stride.

Blackbeard sauntered in a circle around the Suzuki, flicking the practically non-existent back seat with two fingers.

“This is why you can’t get girls. They keep falling off as soon as you hit the gas.”

Hot Shot chuckled, shaking his head at the obvious attempt to bait him.

“At least my bike doesn’t disintegrate on the road.”

Blackbeard arched an eyebrow, amused at the jibe.

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“I lost the exhaust pipe once. That’s hardly disintegrating. I still strongly suspect it had something to do with your dirty mitts.”

Hot Shot clucked his tongue with a condescending pout that would earn him a black eye if he didn’t get out of arm’s reach fast enough.

“Guess we’ll never know since you can’t prove it.”

“Would you two quit your foreplay before I lose my lunch?” I cut in. “Hot Shot, Morgan, go grab a cold beer. You deserve it after the incredible work you’ve done. Bill me for the repairs later.”

“It’s on the house, Prez,” Hot Shot said. “Just glad to see you’re still alive and kicking.”

Morgan hung back though, adjusting her glasses on the bridge of her nose.

“Is that dipshit Spike inside?”

Her tone suggested she wasn’t thrilled at the idea of running into him.

“Last I checked, he was...entertaining some ladies,” I hedged, to put it politely.

It was one thing to act like heathen rabble in the club. But Morgan wasn’t a bunny, wasn’t family, and she wasn’t an Old Lady to any of my brothers. She was a civilian, plain and simple, working as a mechanic at Hot Shot’s garage. And civilians bristled at club life sometimes.

“Morgan stopped by the clubhouse a few months ago for a bite to eat,” Hot Shot put in with a hint of mirth in his voice. “Spike extended an invitation that she felt was...less than savory.”

“My grandmother is still rolling in her grave at the things he said,” Morgan muttered. “I’ll take a rain check on that beer, if you don’t mind, Mr. Gibson. I’d rather head back to the garage and finish up my work for the day.”

I waved her off to indicate no hard feelings. After Morgan returned to the tow truck, and Hot Shot disappeared into the clubhouse, Blackbeard and I were left alone in the parking lot. I climbed onto my bike, testing my grip on the handlebars. Now that a few days had passed since my stay in the hospital, I was less stiff and sore, but my range of motion wasn’t back to full capacity yet.

“Thought you should know that Baby Doll assigned Crash to clean the kitchen,” Blackbeard said. “Seems like she’s having fun ordering him around.”

I released a long, heavy breath. Why couldn’t this business with Crash and the Blackjacks wait until after Hattie’s trial?

“She has fun ordering all of us around,” I pointed out.

Blackbeard shrugged, tilting his head in agreement as if to say, can’t argue with that.

“We’re not taking him,” I added, knowing where this conversation was headed already.

I kept my gaze focused on my bike, testing to ensure that everything worked. Hot Shot and his mechanics would have already looked it over, probably more than once. But I needed the familiarity of my bike to ground me. I needed to feel the tight squeeze of the clutch, the rumbling purr of the engine as it kicked over and growled

to life.

Blackbeard might be a sarcastic shit, but he could spot a sensitive subject from a mile away. He locked in like a homing missile.

“Well, it seems like he’s willing to learn. We could use a youngster to scrub the toilets and fetch beer. Since Hot Shot isn’t a Prospect anymore, I can’t bully him as much as I used to and I’m getting bored.”

“Sounds to me like you were bullying him just fine a minute ago.”

“That’s different,” he protested. “It gets tricky when Hot Shot fights back. I liked it better when all he could do was grind his teeth, and mumbleyes, sir. If you ask me, he learned how to mouth off too quickly when he got his big boy patch and officially became a brother.”

“You could try not baiting him,” I countered.

“Don’t spoil my fun, boss.”

I said nothing, examining the stitching on my seat.

“Why don’t we give Crash a trial run?” Blackbeard offered, never losing sight of the reason he brought up this subject in the first place. “If he wipes out, no harm, no foul.”

“I said no,” I repeated.

A beat of silence hung in the air.

“Is it because he looks like you?” Blackbeard said.

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All humor and lightness had evaporated from his tone, replaced by a low timbre that suggested he knew his words would hit the bull's-eye. Dead center.

I clenched my teeth and flicked a glance in his direction. Blackbeard propped one shoulder against the brick wall of the clubhouse, his gaze unwavering despite the nuclear bomb he'd dropped by opening that can of worms.

"The kid doesn't look like me," I protested.

"Mirror image actually," he replied. "When you were about, oh, eighteen, nineteen. A gangly Prospect, eager to cut your teeth on a club and make a name for yourself, carve out a place to belong, even if you had to break bones to do it. Admittedly, Crash doesn't seem to be as violent as you were, but the buzz cut, those baggy jeans...and the dogged determination..."

The thought had occurred to me, unfortunately. And it sat there, silent as a stone, staring me in the face, while I refused to look directly at it. Distracting myself with everything else.

I didn't need Blackbeard digging up the history books and airing out the moth-eaten, musty skeletons in my closet though. He wasn't even around when I was a Prospect—it would be several more years before he was patched in for the first time on the Texas-Mexico border with the Chupacabras MC. He was simply a nosy bastard who loved to gossip with elders who let too much lore slip out over a few beers.

"Digger was his brother," I said.

A shadow crossed Blackbeard's features.

"Shit."

I climbed off my bike, brushing a few specks of dust off the seat.

"Exactly. Crash wants to join for all the wrong reasons. I can't have his head muddled up with memories of his brother. It will get him killed, and I already have the blood of one dead kid on my hands. I'd rather not be responsible for two dead kids. Just because he looks like me..."

I trailed off, shaking my head. That part didn't matter. Sure, it spooked me, looking at a younger version of myself—before I joined the club, before I met Hattie. Getting patched in as a Prospect had altered the course of my life forever.

"Baby Doll will have pity on him," I said. "And it won't take long before he's following her around like a puppy."

"She does have that effect on people," Blackbeard admitted. "No matter how tough she acts."

"It's not up for debate. Crash will never be a Blackjack."

Blackbeard nodded.

"Agreed."

I took my bike for a test ride, savoring the way she hugged every curve of the road. My head whirled with thoughts of Hattie, the upcoming trial, Crash, the club...

Even after the sun slipped below the horizon, and the shadows stretched long and

dark across the pavement, I kept riding. Following the road, wherever it would take me in an attempt to clear my mind.

Eventually, I turned around and headed for home. After spending that one night at the clubhouse, I had no interest in repeating my mistake again. As much as I appreciated the company of my brothers, their bickering could wear on my nerves, especially when I was preoccupied with thoughts of my ex-wife.

And I simply wasn't in the mood to endure more of Spike's naked ass. He spent so much time at the clubhouse these days, I was beginning to wonder if he'd stopped paying rent on his apartment.

I felt my phone vibrate with a call in my cut pocket. I pulled over right away, glancing at the screen.

Credence. Not Hattie.

"Hey, boss," Credence said. "I dug up some dirt on those bank robbers the cops are looking for."

After I heard about Hattie's trial, I called Credence. For two days, he had set up shop at a table in the clubhouse, with dual laptops and multiple tabs running through various databases.

With his background as a bounty hunter, he had a knack for tracking down people who didn't want to be found. I didn't have a clue how he did it, and most of his explanations flew over my head anyway, but as long as he got results, I didn't give a shit about his methods.

"What can you tell me?" I prompted.

“The bank robber Hattie identified is Rudy Welch,” Credence said. “He was the main suspect in a string of robberies up and down the California coast five years ago—elderly folks who lived alone, mostly. Easy targets. Beat the shit out of one little old lady who was too terrified to give her statement.

"Two of his buddies—Ted Cooley and Anderson Barber—were suspected accomplices, but the cops didn't have any solid evidence, so they walked. They've been arrested more than once on battery charges. Got out on bail every time. Seems like they're not squeamish about playing rough.”

“Do you have an address where we could drop by and pay these guys a visit?”

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Credence made a noise of hesitation, punctuated by the clacking of his laptop keys as he typed.

“Working on it. Looks like they’re paying in cash, avoiding cameras, and using fake names at motels, so they’re covering their tracks on purpose. Last time they were seen in public was at a gas station outside of Bozeman a month ago.”

“Which means they won’t like it that Hattie blew their cover,” I said.

“Seems like they know what they’re doing, Prez,” Credence replied. “If they feel the noose closing around their necks, they won’t hesitate to drop bodies if it means saving their own asses.”

I sighed, tilting my head up to stare at the twilight sky. I wish I had been wrong. I wish my gut instincts had been worried over nothing and this trial would pass by without even a hiccup of disturbance.

But that wasn’t going to be the case.

The only thing that brought me some measure of comfort was the fact that Gatling and Tex were still keeping an eye on Hattie, and they hadn’t reported anything unusual.

“Good work,” I said. “Keep me posted. Text the club with info on these guys, so we know who we’re looking for.”

“Will do.”

By the time I got home, it was nearly 11pm. As I stepped into the house Hattie and I used to share, I didn't bother turning on the lights. I knew every corridor, every turn by heart. Sometimes, in the dark, I could have sworn I smelled a hint of her perfume, lingering in the air.

It wasn't the prettiest house on the block—more functional than aesthetically pleasing—but Hattie spruced it up. Painting the shutters robin's-egg-blue for a pop of color. Creating a makeshift library in a corner of the living room, stuffing those shelves with more books than she could read in her lifetime.

I knew she had hoped for a cute cottage, or one of those expensive, cookie cutter homes in the suburbs, but our lives had tangled here, twining together. I would have lived in a hole in the ground for all I cared as long as Hattie was with me.

Making my way to our bedroom, I sank onto the edge of the mattress. I still slept on the right side, closest to the door to protect Hattie. I reached out and passed my hand over the cold sheets where she used to sleep.

Five years after the divorce, Big G suggested I should sell the place. It was bogging me down, preventing me from moving on.

But that was the problem. I had no intention of moving on from Hattie. Not now, not ever.

Until death do us part.

This had been our home. We bought it together, moved in, and made it our own. We spent our wedding night in this bed. We had breakfast every morning in the kitchen, even if we were still seething from a fight and could barely look at each other.

Unlacing my boots, I kicked them off and heaved a tired sigh as I eased myself down

into the pillows. After the unrelenting chaos of the clubhouse, it was eerily quiet here. Hattie should have been breathing beside me.

I didn't remember dozing off, but the harsh ringing of my phone jarred me back to consciousness. I grumbled and squinted at the clock on my nightstand.

The red numbers showed 2:44am.

Fuck, that's not good.

Retrieving my phone from my pocket, I didn't even bother to check the screen to see who was calling me.

"What's going on?" I demanded.

"It's Hattie," Gatling replied, and I knew it meant trouble when his Appalachian twang came through thick as molasses. "They tried to take her out, Prez."

I lurched to my feet and grabbed my boots.

Just wait until I get my hands on those goddamn motherfuckers...

Chapter eight

Hattie

For the rest of the day, I continued to check the street for signs of Blackjacks in the area. But I didn't see anything.

If Neil had even the slightest reason to believe I might be in danger, there was no way he would leave me unprotected. Even if we'd been divorced for over a decade. Even

if I'd made cutting remarks to hurt him.

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Just because I couldn't see any Blackjacks didn't mean a damn thing. They were still here. Somewhere.

"Looking for someone?"

I snapped out of my thoughts and jerked away from the window. Connie raised her eyebrows with amusement, swaying with a sleepy Emma in her arms.

"No," I replied, sounding defensive even to my own ears.

"You wouldn't be hoping that a certain biker might drop by for a visit then?"

I sighed, clearing Wylie's toy cars off the couch so I could take a seat. At this hour, late in the afternoon, Nathan was home from working at the local factory, tossing a baseball around in the yard with Wylie.

"I was actually thinking about the trial," I said.

Connie's amusement evaporated in an instant, dropping her gaze to study Emma's features.

"You know how I feel about that subject."

"I've been in Brightwater for nearly a week," I replied. "And I haven't told the police. I was supposed to inform them when I came back to town, so they could assign an officer to keep an eye on me."

She fiddled with Emma's blankets, shaking her head.

"But you've been laying low here. Or at the hospital. It's not like you've been parading around town. Do you think it's necessary to get the police involved?"

Guilt gnawed at my conscience. I didn't want to put even more worries on Connie's shoulders. She had enough on her plate with the new baby.

I wasn't afraid to give my testimony, wasn't afraid of the threat that this robber's accomplices—who were still unaccounted for so far—might try to intimidate me into silence. The police had been very clear to make sure I understood what kind of position I was getting myself into.

It was one thing to face this trial on my own. I didn't need to drag Connie and her family into it by association.

"Maybe it would be better if I got a hotel room until the trial," I suggested.

Connie frowned.

"Do you...are you not feeling safe? Is that the problem?"

I thought about Vlad, seated on that motorcycle in the shade. How massive he was, like a mountain. The Enforcer patch on his chest.

Neil could have been the one watching me. Instead, he sent his muscle—the biggest, burliest, beast of a man.

I hadn't been concerned before. Hadn't even given the trial much thought. But now...

Even though I'd experienced Neil's over protectiveness throughout the course of our

marriage, and the ensuing divorce, he had a very good reason to be. From the abuse and abandonment of his childhood, to clawing his way into the 1% ranks, Neil had come face to face with the worst that humanity had to offer.

Bottom feeders and shit dwellers, he called them.

If Neil was appointing the toughest member of his crew to watch my back, that meant he was worried.

It's just a precaution, he'd told me.

Neil had proverbially brought out his biggest gun and set it on the table, declaring to anyone who might be watching that there would be hell to pay if they touched a single hair on my head.

"Whether you're here or not," Connie said. "Everyone in Brightwater knows we're related. If someone wanted to hurt you, it wouldn't take much effort to figure out they could go through us."

Nausea clogged the back of my throat. What I hated even more was the fact that my sister had to be the one to point out that fact. If I went to a hotel, it would spread protection resources thin. Staying at Connie's house was the best option, whether I wanted to admit it or not.

"I guess I'm just eager to put this whole thing behind me and get it over with," I said with a small smile that I hoped was comforting.

Connie kissed Emma's forehead.

“I couldn’t agree more.”

Another wail emanated from the nursery. I sighed and rolled over, glancing at the clock. 2:39am..

Since sleeping all afternoon, Emma started to fuss sometime around 10pm. She’d been restless ever since. Nathan and Connie were practically dead on their feet with exhaustion, so I volunteered for baby duty.

I tried everything—rocking her in my arms as I paced through the house, singing to her, bottle feeding. Nothing worked for long. She quieted down for twenty minutes or so. Then she would be back to squirming and whimpering, until she worked herself up into crying with the full force of her lungs.

I recognized that oncoming wail now. In less than two minutes, she would be sounding off. I pushed the sheets aside, scrubbing my gritty eyes with my palm. I wasn’t sleeping anyway, my mind too preoccupied with thoughts of Neil.

Shuffling out of the guest room, I made my way down the corridor to the kitchen. Might as well warm up a bottle before—

My heart froze.

Standing in the kitchen was a man, dressed all in black and nearly invisible among the shadows. Except for the Halloween mask he wore—the same ghoulish, pale-faced mask the thieves wore at that bank robbery. The side door that led to the backyard was open, but I knew it had been locked when I went to bed. I checked. Twice.

Almost three times.

Just as I took a breath to scream for help, the intruder lunged.

He slammed me against the wall, bracing his forearm across my throat. I wheezed for air, black spots dancing across my vision.

“Don’t say afucking word,” he hissed in my face.

Hot breath on my skin. Venom seething with every word. Spittle flecking my cheek.

Then the metallic snick of a switchblade sliced through the tension. A flash of gleaming metal caught my eye. The bite of a knife's edge pressed to the thin skin of my throat.

This guy wasn’t here to stop me from testifying. He was here to hurt me. Probably my sister, too.

Anger incinerated my initial shock. And I rammed my knee into his groin.

He doubled over, loosening his grip on me.

“Youbitch—” he croaked.

I took advantage of his momentary distraction and darted to the stove. Snatched up one of Connie’s heavy cast iron skillets. There was no way I could get to the knives in time, barricaded by a child-proof lock in a drawer.

I cocked the skillet back, prepared to swing.

A blur of movement flew through the open door. A second man hurtled into the

kitchen—no mask, his face exposed, barely visible in the dim half-moon light.

He collided with the first intruder, sending them both sprawling to the floor.

That's when I glimpsed the cut on the second man's back and the familiar patches that identified him as a biker. Blackjacks arched across his shoulders in grungy white letters.

The two men struggled for a moment or two. Then the biker managed to get the upper hand, pinning the robber face down with a knee in his back.

Emma let out a piercing, blood-curdling shriek.

Then the light flicked on. I squinted as the kitchen flooded with illumination.

“What the hell is going on here?”

Nathan. Looking utterly horrified and bewildered, with a baseball bat in hand.

The biker's icy blue gaze flicked to me with an assessing look. As far as the Blackjacks were concerned, I was still Kingpin's Old Lady and their primary focus. A divorce didn't hold much weight in the face of club code.

“You all right?” he asked.

I nodded, my tongue seemingly glued to the roof of my mouth. Something seemed familiar about him—the hint of a down-to-earth accent, his lithe cat-like movements, his muscular frame flexing so effortlessly as the intruder struggled beneath him to escape.

“Wait...” I said. “I remember you.”

“Evenin’, Hattie,” he said. “It’s been a few years.”

A glimmer of recognition flashed like a minnow in a shadowy corner of my mind. I latched onto it.

“Gatling,” I replied in disbelief.

He’d been about my age when Neil and I got married—a quiet, solemn man from West Virginia with a cold stare that could turn anyone to stone. He always seemed to linger at the fringes of the Blackjacks, as if he didn’t quite fit among them. Or anyone, for that matter.

While his brothers took up space, loud and proud, cracking jokes, pestering each other, Gatling would slip outside and remove himself from it all. I never really got to know him, and it didn’t help that he barely spoke two words together.

Neil had informed me that Gatling was fresh out of the military when he joined the Blackjacks, with numerous medals of honor to his name that he never wanted to talk about.

And he wasn’t Vlad. Which meant my suspicions had been right. There was more than one biker keeping an eye on me.

“Would someone please explain why there is a wrestling match on my goddamn kitchen floor?” Nathan demanded, exasperated and harried.

I went to his side, placing a hand on his shoulder for comfort.

“It’s okay, Nathan. He’s with Neil.”

“Neil, as in...your ex? The biker?” he replied, with an undeniable edge of stress in his tone. “No offense, Hattie, but that’s not reassuring.”

Emma let out another scream. I winced. This is exactly the kind of problem I did not want to dump on my sister’s family.

“I’ll get this guy out of your hair,” Gatling said, yanking the intruder to his feet. “Call the cops. Let them know about the break-in.”

He disappeared into the night as silently as a ghost, taking the intruder with him.

Nathan let out a tired breath, scrubbing a hand over his face. I moved to the door, pushing it closed. The lock had clearly been jimmied open, completely destroyed in the process. I made a mental note to get it fixed tomorrow before Nathan or Connie noticed.

“Papa?” Wylie mumbled sleepily as he wandered into view, his hair sticking up in every direction like a hedgehog. “What’s all the noise?”

My throat tightened as Nathan scooped Wylie into his arms.

“Nothing, kiddo. Sorry for waking you up. It’s taken care of now, okay?”

Wylie yawned and snuggled into Nathan's neck.

They were better off without me here, I thought.

As long as I'd remained in Seattle, these thieves didn't bother with me. But now that I was back in Brightwater, close to the scene of the crime, they were targeting my family.

Nathan glanced at me, rubbing Wylie's back. I suddenly realized I was still holding Connie's cast iron skillet, and it felt like it weighed a ton. I heaved it onto the stove with a thunk.

"I'll deal with the police," I said. "Go check on Connie and Emma."

It was the least I could do—cleaning up the mess after putting my sister's family through all this.

After Nathan left the room, I grabbed the phone from the counter and sank into a chair at the kitchen table. My fingers trembled as the high of adrenaline wore off. I should have known this would happen. I should have been more careful.

When I reported the break-in, the police said they would send an officer to take a look, document the damage, and post an officer on watch.

My ex-husband has that part covered already, I thought.

But I kept my mouth shut. The cops would want to know why a crew of bikers were watching my sister's house. I wouldn't bring heat down on Neil's head like that.

I'm strong enough to handle the hot seat, honey, he would have told me.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:38 am

I'd been a biker's wife for over ten years. I knew it was better to provide minimal details to the police when my husband was involved. It seemed old habits die hard.

After a few minutes, Emma finally fell asleep again, and a blanket of blessed silence descended over the house. I sat alone at the kitchen table, waiting for the police to arrive. I couldn't stop shaking. My jaw ached from clenching my teeth, shoulders tense at the thought of what that man might have done—to me, to my sister, to her family—if Gatling hadn't stopped him.

Ten minutes later, the rumble of an engine approached on the street. I'd learned long ago how to recognize the difference between the sound of a motorcycle engine compared to a car engine.

And that was definitely a motorcycle.

With my heart in my throat, I stumbled out of my chair, heading for the front door. When I opened it, there was Neil, turning into the driveway.

A sob of relief lodged in my chest.

As soon as he parked and shut off his bike, I hurried down the sidewalk. The next thing I knew, Neil gathered me into his arms, pressing his lips to the top of my head. I breathed in the well-worn leather of his cut, accompanied by the sharp scent of that awful pitch black coffee he loved.

"Gatling told me what happened," he said.

I closed my eyes, burying my face in his shoulder.

Don't do this, you're making a big mistake, a voice whispered in the back of my mind, like an alarm that warned of impending destruction. Seeking comfort from Neil while I was vulnerable would blur the lines between us even further. Things were already getting too fuzzy, ever since that damn visit at the hospital.

As if reading my thoughts, Neil squeezed me tighter. He cradled the back of my head in his palm, his lips at my temple.

"I've got you, baby," he murmured.

A rush of air punched out of me. It felt so fucking good to hear him say that. I dug my fingers into his back a little deeper, not wanting to let go.

I felt safe with him. I always did. No matter what. He was my anchor, my rock, my lighthouse amid the storm.

And I never realized how much I'd missed him since our separation. Until now. This moment, with his arms locked so tightly around me that I couldn't breathe.

I wish I could stay like this forever, I thought.

Although I knew that wasn't possible—a terrible idea that threatened to reignite feelings I'd tried so hard to bury.

In the distance, the echo of police sirens drowned out the faint buzz of crickets.

"Hattie," Neil said softly.

I shook my head, throat tight, eyes burning.

No. Don't say it. Just a few more seconds.

"Hattie," he repeated against my hair. "I can't be here when the cops arrive."

I squeezed my eyes shut, burrowing into his chest a little further. Neil gently pried my arms away from him. He pressed a kiss into each of my palms, curling my fingers closed as if to hold onto the phantom heat of his lips against my skin.

Then he cupped my chin, with his thumb nestled beneath my lower lip, his rough, callused knuckles grazing my throat.

He always did that right before he kissed me.

I held my breath, hating myself for wanting that kiss, knowing it would ruin me. Craving it so badly that I tipped forward on my toes, leaning a little closer.

In the shadows, with only the wan moonlight overhead, I couldn't see those stormy eyes I'd fallen in love with. I couldn't read his expression.

But I felt the desire emanating from him, the heat of his body only an inch away from mine. He didn't hide that desire when it came to me, wearing it boldly for everyone to see. This man loved me with every part of his soul. It bruised him. It nestled in the marrow of his bones. It hummed in his blood and filled his lungs with every breath...

Three months of dating, twelve years of marriage, a divorce, and thirteen years of separation...and that had never changed.

After what felt like a lifetime of waiting and hoping and silently pleading kiss me kiss me kiss me...Neil turned away, climbed onto his bike, and rode off as the red-and-blue lights of the cop car rounded the corner onto Connie's street.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:38 am

I pressed my palms to my heart, staring down the dark road, willing him to come back.

Chapter nine

Kingpin

It killed me to tear myself away from Hattie like that. I wanted to stay there and hold her until she stopped trembling. I wanted to be by her side until she calmed down enough to fall asleep, safe in the knowledge that I would protect her.

Instead, I had to leave her standing there in the dark.

The memory of her nestling deeper into my arms shattered my heart into a thousand pieces. That's where she belonged. Not fucking Seattle. Not with another man.

I headed to Hot Shot's garage, turning into the empty parking lot sometime after three in the morning. Guiding my bike around to the back, I found three motorcycles stowed away in the shadows. If a cop happened to pass on patrol, he wouldn't be able to see any of us from the street.

The office was dark, but a faint glow emanated from the garage windows. The side door opened and a familiar silhouette appeared. Blackbeard let out a low whistle to let me know the coast was clear.

Under normal circumstances, I preferred to keep business relegated to the clubhouse. It served as a base of operations and a sanctuary, rolled into one. When my brothers

crossed the threshold of our clubhouse, they knew they were in territory they could trust. It was our turf, and we would defend it to our dying day.

On select occasions though, a secondary location was the wiser choice, especially when the cops might come sniffing around, asking questions. In this case, it would only complicate matters if the boys in blue knocked on our door, accusing us of playing vigilante. I'd rather handle this without interruption.

When I stepped into the garage, toolboxes, spare auto parts, and workbenches had been pushed aside to clear a space at the center of the room. Gatling, Blackbeard, and Big G surrounded a kneeling man, cuffed on the cement floor. A ghostly mask covered his face. My palms itched to wrap my hands around his throat and squeeze for scaring Hattie like that.

“Did she get a look at him?” I asked, gesturing at the intruder.

Gatling shook his head.

“Saved the unveiling for you, Prez. Figured Hattie had enough surprises for one night already.”

“You can't keep me here,” the intruder declared, with more confidence than he had any right to, given the position he was in. “You have to turn me over to the cops—”

He broke off when Gatling gripped the back of his neck and leaned in close.

“Does it look like we give a shit about playing by the rules?”

The intruder gulped, his Adam's apple bobbing. Gatling glanced in my direction, silently seeking permission. I crossed my arms and nodded.

He stripped the intruder's mask off, tossing it aside. The flimsy plastic scraped against the cement. Ted Cooley stared back at me, a perfect match to the mugshot Credence had sent to our phones earlier—white-blond lanky hair, yellow teeth, and sallow skin.

“I was told you laid hands on my wife,” I said.

Cooley scoffed.

“Ex-wife, isn't she?”

A muscle twitched in my jaw. He smirked, pleased at his own jibe. But he was too stupid to quit while he was ahead.

“I read up about her—your divorce years ago, how she's been living in Seattle for the last ten years or so. I called a buddy of mine over there and he's been trying to get into her pants—”

Cooley broke off with a gasp as Blackbeard stepped up behind him and wrapped his tattooed fingers around Cooley's throat. Then Blackbeard plucked a knife from his belt and dug the tip into Cooley's back, right where his kidney would be.

“Keep running your mouth,” Blackbeard said, quiet and controlled. “And I'll start carving out body parts until you learn to show some respect.”

“I—I just paid her a visit to scare her,” Cooley babbled. “Didn't mean any harm.”

Gatling clucked his tongue and shook his head.

“I smell a big fat lying rat.”

From the pocket of his cut, he withdrew a battered switchblade with a cracked bone handle. When he passed it to me, I tested the weight of it in my grip, thinking about that sharp metal edge biting into my wife's delicate skin.

Fury boiled in my chest.

Gatling told me everything while I was tugging on my boots over the phone—the intruder watching the house, the break in, the switchblade, Hattie defending herself...

If I had been with her all this time, I could have protected her. Could have prevented those bastards from getting anywhere near her in the first place, let alone close enough to pull a damn knife on her.

“String him up,” I said in a cold, hard voice.

Gatling, Blackbeard, and Big G moved like cogs in a well-oiled machine. While Cooley screeched in protest and struggled, Gatling held him down. Big G peeled off Cooley’s shirt. Blackbeard grabbed the chain attached to the hoist in the ceiling, wrapping it around Cooley’s cuffed wrists.

Within seconds, Cooley was suspended with his arms above his head, ribs heaving, breathing fast and shallow like a frightened rabbit.

“Soak him,” I said.

Gatling stepped outside and returned with a five gallon bucket of water, ice cubes sloshing over the sides. He splashed it in Cooley’s face, making him sputter.

“What the—what the fuck are you doing!?” Cooley shrieked. “Let me go. I’ll cooperate. I’ll do whatever you want.”

I tossed the switchblade in my palm.

“It’s too late to negotiate,” I said. “Now it’s time for the consequences of your actions.”

Cooley sucked in a sharp breath, teeth chattering, drenched, and eyes wild with fear. Blackbeard brandished his knife, trailing the tip through the spaces between Cooley’s ribs, down his abdomen. He hooked the blade into the waistband of Cooley’s pants and released it with a snap. Cooley flinched, nostrils flared, fighting back a whimper.

“Where's your friend, Barber?" Blackbeard said.

Cooley shifted his gaze up to the ceiling, shivering.

“I don’t know.”

Blackbeard applied just enough pressure with the blade’s tip above Cooley’s stomach that his skin bowed inward, but didn’t break.

“Not the right answer."

Big G spoke up, leaning back against a tool bench, legs crossed at the ankles as he examined a hammer.

“You should know Blackbeard has a few years of medical training. Give him a scalpel and he can cut you open from stem to stern like hot butter on a summer’s day.”

Cooley swore under his breath and thrashed like a worm on a hook.

Big G tapped the hammer’s head in his palm.

“I prefer a more direct route. Break your kneecaps and you’ll squeal like a pig. Works every time.”

Cooley spat a colorful flood of obscenities.

I waved them off. Blackbeard and Gatling retreated, leaving Cooley exposed for me. I stepped forward, gazing at him with disdain. Revulsion grew cloying in my throat at the thought of this fucker anywhere near my Hattie, let alone threatening her.

“I will say this only once,” I said in a level tone. “Tell me where Barber is.”

Cooley grunted as he strained against the chains.

“Look, I swear, I don’t know. We’ve been holed up in this motel on Dakota Drive for the past week or so. Really charming place with fucking mushrooms growing in the bathroom. Before that, Barber and I split up to cover our tracks, in case the cops were tailing us. I was supposed to handle the woman, he was supposed to take care of food, cash, and gear so we could get the hell out of this town. We were only waiting around for the trial. If Rudy was found not guilty, we were going to grab him and go. If he went to jail...well...he was on his own and he knew that.”

“Your buddy could rat you out for leaving him behind,” I said.

Cooley huffed a dry laugh.

“Wouldn’t doubt it. We’re not besties or anything. It’s every man for himself. He knows that. We all do.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:38 am

Silence descended on the garage. I edged even closer, gripping Cooley's jaw so tightly that my fingers dug into his cheeks.

"You touched my wife," I growled. "You put this switchblade against her skin—"

I pressed the knife's edge to Cooley's jugular. He winced.

"No, no, wait—come on, man. You need me to find Barber. If I don't check in soon, he'll know something is wrong and he'll disappear for good. You'll never see him again."

I paused, weighing his words.

"Better not be bluffing," I moved away, pocketing the switchblade. "Not that it matters. Blackbeard, Gatling—dump his body at the police station."

Cooley swore until he was red in the face, kicking and fighting for his life as I walked out of the garage and into the night.

I didn't bother going back home, let alone attempt to sleep. It would be useless anyway. I twirled Cooley's knife on the bar, gouging a perfect circle into the wooden countertop with the blade's tip. To think this knife had touched Hattie still made me sick to my stomach.

By sunrise, Big G joined me in the clubhouse, rummaging around in the kitchen until the scent of coffee filled the air. Crash stumbled into the room half an hour later, squinting sleepily and rubbing a hand over his stubbly hair. He yawned as he plopped

down onto the stool next to mine.

“Didn’t I tell you to go home, kid?” I said.

He shrugged, propping his elbows on the counter.

“I did. For a while. But my roommate is getting married, and I can’t afford rent anymore, so I have to find somewhere else to live.”

A pause of expectation lingered in the air.

“Well, you’re not living here,” I said.

“The broom closet is pretty comfy, actually,” Crash replied. “It’s clean and dry. You wouldn’t know I was there. I’m a light sleeper, so I don’t make any noise. And I can earn my keep.”

I turned to look at him with a suspicious squint.

“You never left, did you?”

Crash pressed his lips together with chagrin at getting caught and shook his head.

“So you’ve been sleeping in the broom closet all this time?” I added.

He shrugged.

I sighed. Big G emerged from the kitchen and placed a steaming cup of black coffee in front of me. I grunted a wordless noise of appreciation. He flicked a glance in Crash’s direction before he spoke.

“The package was delivered to the police station, as requested, boss,” Big G said.

“Good,” I grumbled into my coffee.

It wouldn't take long before word began to spread. Rudy Welch would hear about his partner in crime—tortured, bloodied, and very dead. Anderson Barber would find out that he was flying solo now, with some very pissed off people hunting him down to do the same thing to him.

I wasn't concerned about losing Barber. Credence was a damn good bounty hunter. He'd find Barber eventually, and we'd finish the job. If Welch walked free for any reason—found not guilty at the trial, or got out on bail—we would extend the same treatment to him.

Big G tossed a wad of cash onto the bar in front of Crash.

“Hey, kid,” he said. “Why don't you make yourself useful and fetch breakfast for everyone? Hit up the Riverstone Cafe. Order the whole menu.”

Crash's eyes widened. Before I could protest, he snatched the money and bolted out the door. I shot Big G a look.

“He's not our Prospect. Why are you assigning him errands?”

“Because the kid hasn't said no yet,” Big G replied. “As long as he's willing to be a pushover, I'll happily keep him busy. I don't turn down free labor.”

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My phone buzzed with a text. I pulled it from my pocket and glanced at the screen to see Hot Shot's name.

You left blood on my garage floor. Again.

I typed back a response.

At least I didn't stash a body at your place this time.

Hot Shot simply sent an annoyed emoji.

"Any word from Tex or Vlad?" Big G asked.

I shook my head.

"Not a peep. I figure it will take a while before Barber notices Cooley has gone radio silent and makes his move. Time is on our side."

"Was Hattie okay last night?" he prompted.

I scrubbed a hand over my mouth, hesitating. No, Hattie wasn't okay. She was scared. And I couldn't be there, which was eating me alive. Thank God she had her sister so at least she wasn't alone.

"She's rattled, but holding strong," I replied.

"Yeah, well, she had to have an iron will to tolerate your bullshit for all those years.

So, I'd say she'll be fine."

"What about you?" I countered. "When will you tie the knot?"

Big G snorted.

"Not anytime soon, I can guarantee that. There's a reason I've never married after all these years. I like my freedom."

"Chicken shit," I mumbled, glancing at him over the rim of my mug.

Big G raised his eyebrows.

"Someone's feisty this morning. A sleepless night with a dash of violence and bloodshed perks you right up and puts you in a good mood. That's disturbing."

"You're not getting any younger," I pointed out, determined to stay on track despite his attempt to derail me.

Big G sighed and braced his hands on the bar.

"This life is rough, Prez. I don't have to tell you that."

I nodded, letting him continue when he was ready. Some brothers flaunted their love lives, like Spike did. Others kept it quiet and private, playing things close to the vest, which was more Big G's style. I knew he had one or two serious relationships in his early days with the Blackjacks, but they fell through because of the club. Ever since then, he seemed to stick with bunnies, and nothing more than that.

"Can't say that I'm eager to bring someone into the line of fire with me," Big G continued.

I made a noise of agreement.

“And I don’t blame you, brother.”

Sometimes, I wish I’d never brought Hattie into this life alongside me. She would have been happier with someone else who could have given her the life she wanted in the first place, without the heartbreak of divorce.

An hour later, Crash returned with breakfast, and the bar was loaded with a spread of food. Like a hungry vulture, Spike emerged from a back room, shirtless except for his cut, but at least he was wearing pants, so that was better than nothing. Credence moved one of his laptops to the bar, never pausing his search for Barber as he grabbed a breakfast sandwich.

Blackbeard and Gatling shuffled into the clubhouse, stifling yawns after being awake all night. Big G pressed coffee into their hands.

When I heard the door open, I turned, expecting to see Baby Doll. Instead, Hattie stepped in.

No one else noticed for several seconds except me. Spike snatched a sausage off Crash’s plate. Crash jabbed his fork at him.

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Then Big G glanced up and saw Hattie standing on the threshold.

“Mama Bear is in the house,” he announced.

He grabbed Crash by the scruff of his neck and yanked him off the stool next to mine, despite Crash’s squawk of protest. “Hattie, come take a seat. Behave yourselves, boys. Sit up straight and no dirty jokes. Spike, keep it in your pants.”

Spike spread his hands with a lump of the stolen sausage in his cheek, mid-chew.

“Hey, I can be a perfect gentleman around the ladies. Ask anyone.”

Gatling aimed a kick at him.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full. Didn’t your mother ever teach you that?”

“Says the antisocial hermit raised by wolves in the backcountry,” Spike retorted.

“I wouldn’t say every lady is enthralled with you,” Blackbeard said. “That little slip of a thing at Hot Shot’s garage would walk through the fires of hell barefoot if it meant she didn’t have to deal with your bullshit.”

Spike huffed and swallowed his food, waving his fork in the air.

“Look. That was a misunderstanding. After I explain everything to Morgan, we’ll be best friends again.”

“She can’t stand you,” Blackbeard said in a flat voice.

Spike grinned.

“I’ll change that one day. Mark my words.”

I sighed and rose to my feet, crossing the room to Hattie’s side. Cupping her elbow, I took her aside, away from my bickering brothers.

“Is everything okay? If I had known you were stopping by, I would have cleaned up a bit...”

I trailed off, scrubbing my unshaven jaw. Tex should have reached out to let me know that Hattie was on the move. Had she given him the slip?

“I figured your clubhouse was the safest place to be right now,” Hattie replied. “As soon as I left Connie and the kids, Vlad started following me after two blocks. I assumed you have at least one man—probably more—still watching the house. So, you can stop fretting.”

“Is that why you came over at seven-thirty in the morning to scold me?” I replied.

“Do you want me to scold you?” she countered, arching an eyebrow.

I lifted one shoulder in a half-shrug.

“I always thought it was hot when you ripped me a new one.”

She huffed a laugh and shook her head, but I noticed the pleased pink color rising to her cheeks.

“Which is exactly why our marriage wasn’t normal. Why couldn’t you get turned on by something sweet, like a candle light dinner? Or a romantic weekend in the Bahamas?”

“If I recall correctly, it wasn’t a candle light dinner that made you do this.”

I lifted the sleeve of my T-shirt to reveal my bicep where Hattie sank her teeth into me during sex, the first week after we met. The next morning, I had those vicious red marks tattooed, wearing it like a badge of pride.

Hattie hissed and swatted my shoulder.

"Neil! I told you to have that removed ages ago."

I smoothed my sleeve back down into place.

“And I told you, that’s never gonna happen. I earned that bite mark. I should have had those welts you left on my back tattooed as well.”

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Hattie grumbled with frustration, pressing her lips into that characteristic thin line of disapproval.

“I didn’t come here to talk about sex.”

“Plans change sometimes, sweetheart,” I replied. “Learn to roll with the punches and enjoy it.”

She crossed her arms, fixing me with a stern look.

“A body showed up at the police station this morning. Turns out, he’s related to the case I’ll be testifying in next week.”

I kept my expression neutral, giving nothing away. The less she knew, the better. Lying to Hattie was usually a necessary evil to ensure she stayed safe. But she rarely let me get away with it.

“What a coincidence,” I replied.

“I couldn’t pry any more details out of the officer I spoke to, but something tells me this might have to do with the intruder who broke into Connie’s house. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

I shook my head.

“Not really.”

Hattie gave a skeptical hum and gestured at the breakfast layout.

“For the record, I don’t believe you. But I’d hate to think I made the trip here for nothing. Why don’t you invite me to stay for a bite to eat?”

She didn't have to tell me twice. I'd jump at the chance to spend more time with my wife.

“Big G,” I said. “Get my woman whatever she wants.”

Chapter ten

Hattie

While Neil put together a plate of food for me, he introduced everyone in the room. Big G and Gatling were the only faces I recognized. I marveled at how the club had changed and grown since I’d left for Seattle. So many new people had entered Neil’s life. He’d moved up the ranks and earned that President patch, like he’d always wanted to.

Big G emerged from the kitchen, bearing a tray loaded with a steaming mug of coffee, a little pot of cream, and a bowl of sugar, just the way I liked it.

“You boys always rolled out the red carpet treatment every time I showed my face at the clubhouse,” I said with amusement.

“And you deserve nothing less,” he replied.

“I’m just a civilian now though. I’m not Neil’s Old Lady anymore.”

He propped a hip against the counter and took my hand, making an exaggerated show

of examining my bare ring finger.

“I don’t see you wearing another man’s ring. According to club law, Kingpin’s claim on his woman still stands.”

I shook my head.

“Sexist, archaic cavemen—all of you.”

“That’s part of the appeal, sweetheart,” Spike chimed in from the other end of the bar with a wink.

Neil growled and shot him a dark look.

“It’s bad enough when Big G flirts with my wife. I won’t fucking tolerate it from you.”

Spike held up his hands in surrender.

“Cool your jets, boss. Your woman still has her clothes on, doesn’t she? If I was flirting, that would be a very different story.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:38 am

“You’re a handful, aren’t you?” I said.

Spike flashed a charming grin.

“In more ways than one, darling.”

Neil grumbled under his breath like a thunder cloud. He settled on the stool next to mine, elbows braced on the counter, physically blocking me from Spike’s line of sight with his body. I’d seen that possessive gesture on more than one occasion. I curved my hand over his bicep to soothe him out of habit, stroking my thumb along that damn tattoo of my bite bark. I couldn’t believe he still had it...

Then again, it was Neil. I shouldn’t have been surprised. He still acted like we were married, for Christ’s sake.

Neil’s irritation visibly deflated at my touch. He flicked a sideways glance in my direction.

I gulped at that look—dark pupils, raw desire, blatant lust. I snatched my hand back and grabbed my fork, digging into my breakfast.

My mother would have been furious to see me sitting down with these men for a meal, knowing full well that the tortured, mangled body in the morgue at the police station was because of him. Because of Neil.

But my mother wasn’t here. She’d been gone for several years by now. There were no more scathing remarks about what a mistake my marriage was. No more passive

aggressive comments about using my common sense to pick a husband who was actually good for me, instead of that man. She wouldn't even say Neil's name after the divorce, acting as if the last twelve years of my marriage never happened and my ex-husband didn't exist.

After last night, I had no desire to be anywhere else except seated here, beside Neil.

"So," I ventured, poking at my scrambled. "What have you been up to for the past decade?"

He gestured around the room.

"This."

The club. Of course. I knew that already.

"I never would have guessed," I replied dryly. "Are you dating again? Did you remarry? I overheard you and Big G talking in the hospital. Plenty of young ladies flocking around you like bees to honey."

A smirk tugged at the corner of Neil's mouth.

"You're so cute when you're jealous."

I jabbed him in the ribs with my elbow. He exhaled with a laugh, rubbing his side.

"I'm not jealous," I protested. "It's an honest question."

Neil shook his head.

"No, never bothered with anyone else. Too busy with the club. Didn't think it was

fair to rope someone into my life when I had other priorities. You?”

My heart squeezed with selfish, bittersweet relief. I’d always imagined that he would rebound with a woman half my age. I studied his profile, resisting the urge to comb my fingers through his hair, cropped shorter than before. He used to have the softest chestnut waves. When did he go so gray?

“Almost got engaged once actually,” I said.

Then I bailed and ran for the hills. But I kept that part to myself.

Neil stiffened beside me, his grip tightening on his coffee mug.

“Let me guess,” he replied. “You finally managed to find some rich prick of a doctor or lawyer. Your mother would be so proud.”

I poked him in the arm with my fork.

“Now who’s jealous?”

“There’s a very big difference between your jealousy and mine, baby,” Neil countered.

For the second time, I didn’t correct him when he called me that. The bass rumble in Neil’s voice, calling me baby, never failed to make me melt into a puddle, like ice on a hot stove.

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“Your jealousy would get you fucked into the mattress,” he added. “And my jealousy would put someone in the hospital. Or buried in a shallow grave. Then you’d still get fucked into the mattress,” he muttered into his coffee.

A shiver rippled down my spine as memories flashed through my mind. Neil didn’t allow his possessiveness to smother me—he knew I valued and needed my independence. But when he caught someone else looking at me, I would inevitably find myself deliciously wrung out beneath him until I saw stars. And he still kept going, pulling yet another orgasm out of me somehow, even when I didn’t think it was possible—just one more, baby.

I wasn’t a thing to be owned in Neil’s eyes.

I was his woman, to be protected, to be worshiped with his hands, his tongue, his cock. His damned pride made me shine as bright as a diamond with the pleasure he poured over me, like a beacon to other men, announcing, this one is taken, and she’s so loved that she glows with it.

I gulped at my own coffee, scalding my throat in the process. Thinking about those nights together, when he tasted my body. When he clasped my chin as I shattered, pinned by those gray eyes and stuffed full of his cock.

Ain’t nobody else on this motherfucking planet will ever make you feel this way, honey, Neil would growl. Don’t you ever forget that. And if you need a reminder, you come and tell me, all right?

I pushed those thoughts aside, fighting to bury the longing that burned through my

body like a wildfire.

“For the record,” I said, gathering my wits again. “My ex-boyfriend was not a doctor or a lawyer. He was a financial analyst.”

Neil grimaced.

“So, he never made you come, and you snored your way through sex. Good to know.”

I sputtered a laugh.

“That’s none of your business.”

Neil tilted his head with a challenging look.

“Am I wrong?”

I faltered for a split second. My ex hadn’t been a bad or selfish lover, but...I wasn’t attracted to him as much as I wanted to be. He was the opposite of Neil in every way, which I told myself is what I’d been looking for. My body didn’t get the memo though.

“I can fix that,” Spike piped up.

“And you’d be a eunuch in two seconds flat, guaranteed,” Big G replied. “Didn’t you already put your dick in danger once this week with Baby Doll?”

Spike frowned.

“That woman should be on a terrorist watch list.”

“She seems nice enough to me,” Crash said. “Just don’t get on her bad side.”

My gaze shifted to him, crouched over his plate like a hungry, wild animal. No cut, just an oversized T-shirt. The way he shoveled food into his mouth and wolfed it down reminded me of...

“Don’t say it,” Neil said, his voice low for my ears alone.

“Don’t say what?” I countered.

He gestured at Crash.

“The kid doesn’t look like me.”

I scoffed.

“You’re practically twins. Maybe you don’t remember the many hours I spent listening to your former President, Bomber—may he rest in peace. But I do. He told me all the stories and showed me all the pictures when you were nineteen. Strutting around with that brand new Prospect patch on your chest.”

“The old wind bag talked too much,” Neil grunted.

“He said you were like a mangy stray dog with fleas who tried to bite anyone who came within reach. But when you were patched in, girls finally thought you were cool. A true outlaw biker at last. A real, genuine bad boy.”

Neil narrowed his eyes. I pressed my lips together to hide my amusement.

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“As soon as you earned your colors,” I continued. “Rumor has it that you lost your virginity by the end of the day.”

He snorted.

“That ship sailed when I was fifteen. Like I said, Bomber didn’t know what he was talking about. Making up shit to be entertaining. He loved a captive audience for his tall tales, especially if he could impress a pretty woman. You were like catnip to him.”

I reached for my purse that I’d placed on the bar when I sat down. Rummaging around inside, I found my phone and tapped at the screen.

“Didn’t he put all those pictures into an online photo album for safekeeping before he passed? I might still have a link somewhere around here—”

Neil plucked the phone out of my hand and shoved it into his cut pocket.

“No pictures.”

“Hey,” I protested.

“Eat your breakfast. It’s getting cold.”

“You can’t just take my phone like that. Give it back.”

Neil leveled a cool gaze at me, with a look as if to say, what are you gonna do about

it? I jutted my chin out in defiance. He didn't even blink, unswayed by my attitude, as usual.

"Is Crash your new Prospect?" I prodded.

Neil dropped his gaze to his coffee and shook his head.

"Not if I have anything to say about it."

"Why?"

He considered for a moment, then lifted his gaze to meet mine.

"Trying to prevent him from making the same mistakes I did. He's young—he can still choose a better life. Find a girl. Fall in love. Get the hell away from this club, so he doesn't lose her."

I blew out a breath at the magnitude of his confession. I pushed my plate away, my appetite gone. We were having fun, keeping it light, and then he had to ruin the mood by getting serious.

"Jesus Christ, Neil," I said.

"It's the truth."

"Well..."

I couldn't argue with that. He had a point. I wanted to resent him for prioritizing the club as often as he did, even when I begged him not to. But I also knew that the Blackjacks had been there for him when the rest of the world had turned its back and shut him out.

“You should let him join,” I said softly.

Neil studied me silently, waiting for me to continue.

“If Crash is anything like you,” I said. “This club will save his life. Give him a home and a family. Give him a place to belong. He deserves that.”

Neil hummed thoughtfully.

“I’m surprised. I expected you would agree, tell me I was doing the right thing by turning the kid away. Setting him on the straight and narrow.”

I shrugged, tucking a lock of hair behind my ear.

“Did we ever really agree on anything? I thought we argued just for the hell of it.”

“We didn’t argue about sleeping in on Saturdays.”

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“Because you were determined to get three rounds of sex in before noon,” I said. “We weren’t exactly sleeping.”

He rumbled a soft laugh.

“Is that a complaint?”

“Absolutely not.”

A beat of silence settled between us. Then Neil reached over and took my hand. I didn’t say a word of protest, despite knowing it was a dangerous move. Instead, I threaded my fingers with his. My throat went dry when he pressed his warm lips to my knuckles in a kiss.

I knew we shouldn’t be doing this...but I leaned closer anyway, kissing his shoulder lightly. Breathing in that familiar scent of black coffee and leather I knew so well.

Why couldn’t things be simple between us? Why couldn’t love be enough to conquer all? I knew the Blackjacks were important to Neil. That would never change. I didn’t dare set an ultimatum that he had to choose between me or the club. It would be an impossible decision. Like splitting his heart in two.

Neil turned his head, brushing his lips against my temple.

“What are you doing here, Hattie?” he whispered. “You could have just called.”

I said nothing for several seconds. Could I admit the truth to myself? Could I admit it

out loud, to Neil? Thirteen years apart should have obliterated any love between us. But when I was scared last night, I wanted him. Neil was the one I ran to for comfort, security, and protection. Neil was the one I trusted with my life.

Fuck.

I still had feelings for my ex-husband.

With my heart in my throat, I tilted my chin up to look at Neil. He must have seen it written all over my face. His gaze dropped to my mouth, and he wet his lower lip with the tip of his tongue.

God, I needed to make up my damn mind. This club would be the death of him one day. Although I couldn't deny that sometimes, there was a forbidden thrill to the danger and violence. Knowing Neil wouldn't hesitate to break bones if anyone dared to lift a finger against me.

I wanted him to be safe. I wanted him to live a normal life.

But that wasn't Neil. That wasn't the man I fell in love with. And it never would be.

I should have known that intruder wouldn't make it to the police as soon as the Blackjacks picked him up. I should have known he would never see the light of day again when Neil got his hands on him.

How could I possibly move on from Neil? I didn't stand a chance of falling in love with anyone else, not when this man was willing to set the world on fire in the blink of an eye if anything happened to me.

Wordlessly, Neil rose from his bar stool while the Blackjacks continued talking amongst themselves. I trailed after him as we made our way down the corridor that led

to the back rooms. He pushed open the door at the end of the hall, leading me inside.

We used to sneak off to these rooms all the time. They hadn't changed in over a decade, still sparsely furnished with the bare necessities—a nightstand, lamp, bed, a chair, and maybe a small table, if you were lucky.

As soon as the door closed behind us, Neil crowded me against the wall, arms braced on either side of me. Over six feet tall, broad chest, tattoo ink mapping the corded muscles of his forearms...caged by a man who could snap me in half, yet never touched me with anything more than the utmost tenderness.

“I thought you didn't come here to talk about sex,” he said, gruffly.

“Plans change, remember?”

I reached up and curled my fingers around the back of his neck, pulling him down to me. Neil's mouth crashed against mine with a devouring kiss. His hands fell to my hips with a bruising grip.

This will be a mistake, I thought. A mistake bigger than signing those damn divorce papers.

I tugged Neil's shirt free from his belt and slipped my hands under the hem, questing over hot skin. He fisted his fingers in my hair, angling my head back to meet his gaze.

“How many?” he demanded.

I blinked at him, confused.

“How many men have you fucked since you stopped wearing my ring?” he clarified.

Oh. I chewed my lower lip, debating whether or not I could get away with a lie. I didn't want to talk about those men right now, didn't even want to think about them.

“Doesn’t matter,” I said.

“Tell me anyway.”

I stifled a noise of frustration. The throb between my thighs was quickly becoming torturous. Neil tugged on my hair just enough to make my scalp sting with the sweetest pain. Arousal zinged through every nerve in my body, nipples hard, skin aching to be touched.

“Three,” I said quietly.

We weren’t married anymore so there was nothing shameful about it. When I started dating again, I went in with a clear head and remained laser-focused on my goal of finding a man who would be the father of my children some day. No rebounds. No one-night-stands to get my mind off Neil. It was all perfectly normal.

I still felt a little guilty though, knowing Neil hadn’t been with anyone else.

He searched my face now, pinning me with those stormy eyes that saw right through me and never looked away.

“Did they make you come so hard that your legs trembled, like I did?” he said.

I shook my head, tongue glued to the roof of my mouth.

“Did they eat you out until you couldn’t remember your own name?” he added.

I shook my head again, biting the inside of my cheek as the throb between my thighs bordered on painful. Holding Neil's gaze, I slid his cut off his shoulders, draping it over a nearby chair. I knew it could never touch the floor, even in the heat of the moment. That would be disrespectful, a sin that the President's woman would never dare to commit.

When Neil stripped off his shirt, I couldn't keep my hands to myself. Touching the tattoos on his chest, some faded with familiarity, others crisp and new.

There was my name, still inked over his heart. I had warned him not to do it.

What if you change your mind? What if you get sick of me ten years down the road and you don't love me anymore?

Within an hour of saying our vows, Neil got the tattoo anyway. No hesitation. No doubts. He didn't even wait for his red, inflamed skin to heal before he had my skirt up around my hips, panties pulled to the side, coaxing me down on his cock.

He took me by the wrist now and pressed my hand to the bulge of his jeans, half hard already from just one kiss.

"This is yours, sweetheart," he said. "Always has been, always will be. And you're long overdue for a ride."

I exhaled, butterflies filling my stomach with anticipation. Hooking my fingers into his belt, I unclipped the buckle, dragging the zipper of his fly down.

"Fuuuck,baby," he hissed, soft and low, as I wrapped my fingers around his cock.

He had more girth than any man I'd ever been with—before or since. My body must have remembered that wicked stretch, judging by the surge of need that jolted

through my core, begging to be filled.

Neil wasted no time sliding his hands under my shirt to cup my breasts. I whined, pressing into his palms. There were too many layers of clothing between us. If he didn't touch my bare skin everywhere in the next thirty seconds, I would lose my mind.

Reluctantly, I broke away. Shedding my shirt and shoes as fast as possible, I tried not to worry about what his reaction would be when he witnessed the changes to my body now that I was in my mid-forties. The last time he saw me naked, perimenopause and the stress of teaching hadn't affected my figure yet. I didn't have that flat, washboard stomach anymore that I'd taken for granted in my twenties. My breasts had lost their perkiness, too, and my thighs were dimpled with cellulite.

To make matters worse, I was wearing the most unflattering beige bra I owned.

But Neil's pupils dilated full black anyway. Just like they always did when he saw me half-naked in my bra and jeans.

Some things never change, I thought.

Neil dipped his head, sucking a hot, open-mouthed kiss to the top of one breast, then the other. I fumbled at the clasp of my bra, desperate to get it off. He set to work on my jeans, peeling them down my legs along with my panties.

I gasped as he slid two thick, callused fingers between my thighs, curling upward.

"Goddamn, sweetheart," he rasped. "Why are you so tight? Have you been fucking dudes with grass blades for dicks?"

"Fishing for compliments?" I shot back.

He arched an eyebrow and twisted his fingers deeper. My body bowed, muscles tense, pleasure rushing all the way down to my toes. I clutched his bicep for support, digging my nails into his skin.

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Grabbing me by the hips, Neil dropped onto the mattress, with his back propped against the wall. He coaxed me up to straddle him, manhandling me into place. The thick curve of his cock sat heavy on his stomach as he leaned back. I finally managed to get my bra unhooked, shrugging it off and tossing it aside.

In an instant, Neil sucked one of my nipples into his mouth. The weight of his rough palms settled on my ass with a squeeze. I closed my eyes, cradling his head against my chest. Wishing this moment could last for eternity.

The slick heat of Neil's tongue traced my nipple and I stopped thinking entirely.

"Condom," he mumbled into my cleavage. "In the nightstand."

"Don't care," I said. "I tested clean last month. I'm still on the pill, too."

And I don't want a damn thing between us right now.

Neil pulled back to look up at me, searching my face. In response, I grasped the base of his cock and guided the blunt head to my entrance. With his jeans barely down to mid-thigh, the stiff denim scratched against my legs. He flattened his palm against my lower back, pushing me down onto his cock.

I closed my eyes with a sigh. He was right—it was a tight fit. I had to pause after an inch or two, adjusting to his size. But he was finally inside me again. And dear God, it felt fucking incredible.

When I anchored my hands on his chest, a glint of gold caught my attention.

His wedding ring, with the silver chain pooled in his collar bones. I hadn't noticed it before, distracted by his chest and tattoos.

Neil circled his fingers around my wrist and brought my hand up to his mouth, kissing my palm. His stubble scraped my skin—a stark contrast to the heavenly glide of his cock.

This tough, tattooed biker with the stormy eyes and the grumpy demeanor still loved me. And he always would.

Chapter eleven

Kingpin

My fingers sank into the plush flesh of Hattie's hips.

This didn't mean she was coming back to me. It wouldn't last, even if she wasn't willing to see that yet. Hattie needed something normal right now in the midst of this trial breathing down her neck. She needed a few precious minutes where she didn't have to be the strong one in her family.

She only surrendered that kind of control when she was with me.

Hattie twisted her fingers into the silver chain around my neck, stroking the golden curve of my wedding ring with her thumb.

“Come on, sweetheart,” I said. “Ride me like you fucking mean it.”

She rolled her hips faster, grinding on my cock. I couldn't stop touching her, mapping every inch of her body with my palms. Her tits filled my hands just as perfectly as they used to years ago. And she still looked damn good on top of me like this.

Hattie tilted her head back, neck arched as she chased that high of pleasure. Her walls clenched my shaft in a soul-sucking grip, and it took every ounce of self control I possessed to make sure I didn't blow my load in two seconds flat.

I trailed my palm down Hattie's body, between her breasts, over her stomach, until I reached her clit. Stroking that desperately stiff peak with my thumb to match her rhythm.

"Neil," she gasped, nearly a whimper. Her muscles contracted, trembling at the edge of the release she craved.

I fisted my hand in her hair, pulling her down to me. With her bare curves pressed against my chest, I sealed my mouth to hers. It felt so fucking good to taste her again.

Locking an arm around Hattie's waist, I held her in place as I thrust upward, hard and deep.

She broke the kiss with a moan. I licked a stripe up her exposed neck as my cock surged with pride. The slick sound of her pussy mingled with the breathless little noises she made every time I sank balls-deep inside her.

"Oh, baby, you're fucking dripping down my cock," I said through my teeth.

I could feel it—her cream coating my length, turning her thighs into a sticky mess.

Hattie gazed down at me, her eyes hazy with bliss.

Good.

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My woman deserved a pounding that turned her brain off. I didn't want her thinking about anything or anyone else. Not that damn trial. Not Seattle.

And definitely not her search to find another man.

I wanted her to feel it all—stretched around my cock, taking every inch, her nipples scraping my chest. She writhed against me, seeking even more friction. I pressed my face into the curve of her neck, pinching at her jawline with my teeth.

“Brace yourself, baby,” I said. “You’re gonna need it.”

Hattie bit her lower lip with anticipation, propping her hands on the wall behind my head. I sucked at her nipples, biting the heavy curve of her breasts.

Then I gripped the meat of her thighs and set a punishing pace, jackhammering into her needy pussy. My ribs hurt like hell, but I pushed it to the back of my mind. I wouldn't stop now, not after waiting so long to feel Hattie wrapped around me like this again.

Within seconds, Hattie's arms began to shake. She bowed her head, breathing shallow and fast. Her pussy clenched around my length with her impending orgasm.

“That's it, honey,” I murmured. “Come all over my cock. Milk me dry.”

I slipped one hand between our bodies, pressing hard against her clit. Hattie shattered, swearing like a sailor as she came, muffled in my shoulder. I couldn't last much longer, and I managed a few sloppy pumps through her orgasm, fighting the ruthless

squeeze of her walls.

After one final stroke, I thrust deep, spilling into her with a groan. Hattie gave a satisfied hum and wiggled her hips slowly. She snuggled into my chest, staying firmly seated on my cock.

Sheathed in her silky heat was nothing short of heaven.

I cupped my palm to Hattie's cheek and tilted her head up just far enough to look at me. Her chocolate brown eyes were soft and clear, but I could see the conflicting emotions already beginning to brew. It was only a matter of time before she made her excuses and put distance between us again.

I said nothing.

Didn't try to change her mind. Didn't attempt to convince her to stay. All I did was kiss her, tangling my tongue with hers in a hot, wet glide, until she went boneless in my embrace.

Her ex-husband's cock had stretched her open again with the proper fucking that she'd been missing for all these years. And now, my taste would linger in her mouth, long after she'd left the clubhouse.

All too soon for my liking, Hattie began to stir. My ribs felt like they were on fire, but I didn't regret a single second of it. Not when her legs were tangled with mine, and our bodies were slotted together.

"Five more minutes," I said, tightening my arm around her waist.

Hattie laughed softly, her breath warm and faint against the side of my neck.

“You said that twice already.”

“And I’ll probably say it again.”

“Then that would add up to fifteen minutes,” Hattie pointed out. “We need to work on your math skills.”

I grumbled at her school teacher attitude, sweeping my knuckles down the slope of her bare spine.

“Last I checked, I can count your orgasms just fine. Do you need proof?”

Without giving her a chance to respond, I twisted, pressing her back against the mattress. I smoothed my palms down her inner thighs, coaxing her legs apart. My mouth watered at the sight of her pink pussy on display.

Hattie pushed at my head with a friendly shove, laughing.

“God, Neil, you’re relentless. I really need to get cleaned up. I’ve already been gone too long as it is. Connie will be worried about me.”

Begrudgingly, I moved aside as she sat up, wrapping the sheets around herself.

“Then call her,” I said. “Why do you have to put your clothes back on for that?”

Hattie shot me a look over her shoulder.

“You can’t hold me hostage in bed all day. Besides, don’t you have club business to take care of?”

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That includes you, sweetheart,I thought.You are my business. And you always will be.

I didn't pick that fight this time. For now. Tugging my jeans up again, I moved to the door, checking the hallway.

“All clear,” I said.

Hattie gathered her clothes, bundling them into her arms.

“You don’t have to stand guard when the bathroom is just down the hall,” she said, stepping past me. “Your brothers see a parade of naked women on a regular basis. My presence won’t shock them.”

“Not the point,” I replied. “You’re my wife. You deserve privacy.”

“Ex-wife, Neil,” Hattie admonished. “I’m your ex-wife. I think it has more to do with Spike hitting on me earlier. I could tell you hated that.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you’re trying to make me jealous on purpose.”

She beamed. Standing there barefoot, wearing nothing but the damn sheet, it was certainly a gutsy move to tease me like this. She rose up on tiptoe, delivering a quick peck to my lips. I aimed a swat at her ass, but she skirted out of reach and slipped into the corridor with a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

That's the Hattie I knew and loved—sassy, playful, and flirty.

I watched her go until she disappeared into the ladies restroom, then I fetched my shirt and cut to finish getting dressed. Club rules dictated that no one laid a finger on his brother's woman. For some men, rules didn't mean jack shit. You had to watch what belonged to you like a hawk.

I didn't have that concern among the Blackjacks though. Even with Spike roaming around like an elk during the rutting season. He might run his mouth, but he didn't cross his brothers.

I kept an eye on Hattie because I made a promise to her, I swore an oath. Just because I put my name on the dotted line of those divorce papers, didn't mean I would break my vows.

When Hattie emerged twenty minutes later, she was dressed, and her hair was pulled back into a ponytail. As she approached, she scrubbed her palms on her jeans, preparing herself for the talk I didn't want to have.

"I know, baby," I said.

Hattie blinked in surprise.

"I didn't say anything."

I shrugged.

"Didn't have to. There's enough on your mind already, with this trial coming up, and your new niece to think about. Getting back with your ex-husband would complicate things even more."

She frowned as I looped an arm around her shoulder, pulling her into my side with a kiss to her forehead.

“I thought you would fight me to stay,” she said.

I wanted to. The primal instincts in my bones were more than ready to claw her back into my arms and never let her go. But this was Hattie—my Hattie, the woman I pledged my life to. If she was happy somewhere else, married to another man, I couldn’t keep her here.

“Maybe I’m mellowing out in my old age,” I replied.

Hattie scoffed.

“Not likely. I expected we would have this big, blow up fight, and I’d storm out, telling you to fuck off. It would be easier to leave after that.”

I hummed, moving to block her path. I slid my arms around her waist, slotting my hands in the back pockets of her jeans. Fuck, she felt so good pressed up against me like this. The swell of her ass in my palms. The curve of her tits pressed to my chest.

“So, you’re saying you’ll stick around if I’m on my best behavior?” I countered.

She snorted.

“Did your best behavior put that body in the morgue at the police station?”

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Someone cleared their throat. I stifled a noise of frustration at the interruption and turned to see Blackbeard, leaning against the wall, arms crossed, head cocked to the side.

“Would you believe me if I said that’s not the weirdest foreplay I’ve ever heard?”

“Is there a reason you’re standing there watching us like a perv?” I shot back.

Blackbeard jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

“Cop is at the door. He’s looking for the man in charge.”

I swore under my breath, reluctantly pulling away from Hattie.

“Stay out of sight,” I said. “Just to be safe.”

If the cops had warned Hattie to avoid associating with me, or my club, it wouldn’t be a good look if she was found here, a few days before her trial. And if I was getting arrested for manslaughter, then I really didn’t want her involved.

Although the presence of one cop usually didn’t mean trouble. If the police suspected me, they would have arrived with back up, instead of sending one man alone into the lion’s den.

When Blackbeard and I returned to the main room of the clubhouse, everyone at the bar had their hackles up. Quiet and watchful, on edge. A cop lingered at the door, assessing the room, obviously outnumbered. I recognized him—this was Baby Doll’s

cop.

“You wanted to speak to me?” I said.

The cop stepped forward and grasped my hand with a firm shake.

“I’m Officer Shepard. I understand you’re Neil Gibson, also known as Kingpin.”

“Any cop worth his salt should know who I am. The boys in blue generally don’t like to see me coming.”

“I moved here a few years ago, and your name does pop up on a surprisingly regular basis,” Shepard admitted. “Could you tell me where you were last night? From around midnight to two or three o’clock in the morning.”

I shrugged and spread my hands.

“Went for a ride to clear my head. My bike has been in the garage for repairs. I wanted to take her for a spin, get her tires on the road again. Then I came home and fell asleep.”

Not a lie. I just left out the part where I visited Hattie. And ordered my brothers to torture a wanted criminal.

Officer Shepard studied my face for a moment.

“Can anyone verify that?”

“Nope. In case you haven’t noticed, the roads are empty in the middle of the night. My brothers can back me up when I say I haven’t entertained another woman’s company since my divorce over a decade ago. What’s this about anyway?”

“It’s a small town, Mr. Gibson,” Shepard replied. “Word spreads fast. I’m sure you’ve heard that your ex-wife is involved in a court case later this week.”

“I have,” I admitted.

Shepard scrubbed a hand over his mouth, deliberating his next move.

“And you’ve put me in one hell of a tough place here—”

“I didn’t ask for a damn thing from you. That squeeze you’re feeling right now is Baby Doll’s doing, not mine.”

He heaved a sigh of exasperation.

“Look, the end result is the same, regardless of how it happened. I dug up information on your ex-wife. The next thing I know, there’s a body at the police station, tied to her case. Doesn’t take a coroner to see he’d been roughed up before he’d been killed. You’re the type of man to do that. It seems you have a long history of bodies turning up in your wake around Brightwater.”

Blackbeard spoke up from the bar, stifling a yawn.

“The only thing I’m hearing out of your mouth is conjecture, Officer,” he said. “Are you making an arrest or not? And on what charges?”

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Shepard hesitated just long enough to tell me everything I needed to know. The police were grasping at straws. They suspected I had something to do with it because I was an outlaw, a biker with a criminal record. Because my ex-wife was involved. But they couldn't prove it.

After a long, tense pause, Shepard spoke again.

"Is she here?"

No one said a word.

"Come on," he probed. "I heard the report about the break-in last night. I know Ms. Fields is in town now. But when I showed up at her sister's house this morning, she wasn't there. Her sister wouldn't tell me where she was, and I can't imagine you'd be sitting here with scrambled eggs and bacon if she was missing so..."

More silence. I could keep playing dumb all day long. Just because Baby Doll trusted Shepard didn't mean I felt the same way about him.

"It's okay, Neil," Hattie said, emerging from the corridor. She cast an apologetic smile at Shepard.

"Damn it," he hissed softly, shaking his head. "I told you to keep your distance. And you didn't notify the police that you were in town."

"I didn't think I would be here long," she replied. Her gaze flicked to me. "I had a family emergency, and then things...got out of hand."

Shepard sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. What kind of dirt did Baby Doll have on this guy to put him in this position? Walking the minefield between local cops and outlaw bikers was tricky and stressful. One wrong move would cost his career.

“Well, an officer has been posted on duty outside your sister’s house as a precaution,” Shepard said. “I will personally escort you to the courthouse on the day of the trial. We’re not expecting any trouble. It’s merely a precaution.”

“Thank you,” Hattie replied, flicking a glance in my direction. Knowing it didn’t matter if the cops surrounded her. My men would still be there to keep her safe.

Chapter twelve

Hattie

For the next two days, I kept getting distracted by memories of Neil’s hands on my body. The idea of returning to Seattle when all this was over should have been a welcome reprieve—to clear my head, to put distance between us.

Instead, it simply made me ache, empty and alone.

I closed my eyes and rubbed my temples as I met my gaze in the bathroom mirror. There was no denying that my feelings for Neil were just as strong as they used to be.

But did that change anything?

The Blackjacks still consumed so much of his life. Now that he held the Presidential seat, he was even more deeply entrenched with club life than before. Which would bring an entirely new set of challenges for me to navigate as his Old Lady.

During our marriage, he'd been promoted from Sergeant-at-Arms to Vice President. Adapting to the additional responsibilities placed on his shoulders back then had been difficult enough. It seemed as if bikers had been practically living in our home alongside us.

He would often get called away in the middle of the night, for God knows what. I gave up asking after a while when he wouldn't tell me a damn thing.

Although I would never forget that day when Neil returned at three o'clock in the morning, with his arms coated up to the elbow in blood.

"It's not mine, baby," he said immediately, registering the horror on my face.

Neil never came home bloodied like that again. But I wasn't stupid enough to believe it stopped happening. He just learned to hide it better, which made me feel even worse.

Emma whimpered from somewhere in the house. Connie sang softly, soothing her.

I braced my hands on the sink counter and blew out a breath. My biological clock was ticking, and the countdown was nearly over. The chances of getting pregnant at this age were growing slimmer by the day. I could always adopt, but I didn't want to be a single mom. The dream of having my own family was gradually slipping through my fingers. At this rate, I wouldn't even have a husband to settle down with either.

I glanced at my left hand, tracing the smooth skin where Neil's ring used to be. I could go back to him. He would welcome me with open arms.

Was I ready for that though? Was I willing to live on the edge of fear every waking minute, wondering if my husband would come back to me? And being with Neil

meant burying my hope of having a family. He had no desire to be a father, and I couldn't imagine he would welcome that idea now at fifty-five years old.

The alarm on my phone went off, signaling I had to get ready for the trial. It started in less than an hour.

Emerging from the bathroom, I found Connie in the kitchen, swaying Emma in her arms. Dark circles shadowed Connie's eyes with exhaustion, and her ponytail was a ratty mess.

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“I’m so sorry, Hattie,” she said. “Emma has been fussy all night. And I think Wylie is coming down with an ear infection. I fully intended to be there for you at the trial for emotional support, but...”

She trailed off, shaking her head.

“Oh, Connie, don’t worry about that.” I coaxed her to take a seat at the kitchen table. “Officer Shepard is coming to pick me up and take me to the courthouse. I won’t be alone. I’ll have police protection the whole time.”

I worked her ponytail band free, finger-combing the tangles out of her hair. Connie closed her eyes, leaning back into my touch.

“Are you sure? I feel so bad.”

“That’s because you’re tired and you need sleep.” I twisted her hair up into a messy bun. “Where’s Nathan?”

Connie stifled a yawn.

“He left for work an hour ago, but he’s been texting me, asking about the kids non-stop already. He’s talking about taking the day off and coming back home to help me.”

“Good,” I replied, kissing the top of her head. “Then you can get some rest.”

“What about Neil?” Connie prompted.

I hesitated, grateful to be standing behind her so she couldn't see my face. I patted her shoulder and turned away, fiddling with the coffee maker. Neil wanted to be there, but I warned him to stay away. Now, I was beginning to regret that decision.

“With his criminal record, he probably shouldn't risk being anywhere near a courthouse.”

“I guess that's true,” Connie mused.

A firm knock echoed at the front door. Probably Officer Shepard.

“I'll get it,” I said, gesturing at my sister to stay seated.

Moving to the front door, I peered through the peephole first, to be on the safe side. Standing on the porch was Vlad's hulking figure.

“Shit,” I hissed, yanking the door open. “What the hell are you doing here in broad daylight? There are cops watching the house.”

Vlad gestured to himself.

“I am the babysitter.”

My eyebrows shot up.

“Beg your pardon?”

“Your husband said the little ones should have extra protection today while you are at the trial,” Vlad replied.

Before I could say, he's not my husband, Connie spoke.

“Hattie, who are you talking to—oh.”

She appeared in the entryway and froze, staring at Vlad’s massive silhouette on her threshold, blocking out the morning sunlight. He was so big that he had to duck his head to get through the doorway.

“Oh my God,” she whispered.

Damn it, this wasn’t supposed to happen. Connie didn’t need a biker invading her private home while she had a sick kid and a fussy baby to take care of. It was bad enough that she had to live with an unmarked cop car parked on the road around the clock now.

“Vlad, I thought—”

I broke off, staring up at him.

I thought you were supposed to stay out of sight.

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I thought this was supposed to be subtle.

“I am very good with babies,” Vlad said, holding his arms out to Connie.

She clutched Emma tighter and took a step back.

“No, thank you. That—that won’t be necessary. I’ll take your word for it.”

Connie shot me a bewildered look. I grimaced. I tried so hard to build a life like what Connie had. But I was still tied to the Blackjacks. Neil and his club had been such a big part of my life for so long, that I didn’t flinch around these men, tattooed, untamed, and rough.

“I will wait then,” Vlad said in that crisp, no-nonsense Russian accent. “Until I am needed.”

Before anyone could protest, he moved into the living room and lowered his bulk onto the couch. The cushions bowed under his weight, and the springs groaned. He looked like he was living in a dollhouse too small for him.

“Mama?” Wylie shuffled out with a sleepy squint, wearing his pajamas with the cowboy hat print. He rubbed the side of his head. “My ear hurts.”

He stopped mid-step and stared at Vlad, eyes widening.

“Hello, little man,” Vlad said with a nod.

Wylie blinked, silent, reaching out to grip the skirt of Connie's nightgown for reassurance.

Vlad retrieved two of the toy cars on the floor. He raced them over the landscape of the couch cushions, making zooming noises and screeching tires. Then the toy cars crashed in a dramatic collision, complete with sound effects.

Wylie grinned and ran over to Vlad, grabbing a car from the floor to play along.

Connie came to stand beside me, lowering her voice.

"If I had known I would be entertaining company, I would have put on a bra, at least."

"Hey, look, don't blame me. I'm just as surprised as you are."

She squinted, suspicious.

"You're not, actually. I didn't spend a decade married to a biker, Hattie. I'm not used to this, but you are. There is a freakishly giant tattooed man in my living room at eight o'clock in the morning, with no warning or explanation. That might be just another Tuesday for you, but it's new to me."

I hesitated, running my hands through my hair.

"Neil is just looking out for all of us," I said at last.

"Are you back together?"

I sputtered.

“No. Definitely not.”

Because I can't figure out that part yet.

I wanted to be together. The logistics of it were a different matter though.

Wylie climbed up onto the couch and nestled into Vlad's lap, still rubbing his ear.

“I'm tired,” he said. “And I don't feel good. I don't want to play anymore.”

“Then you should close your eyes and sleep, little man,” Vlad replied. “I will watch over you.”

My heart clenched. Maybe I'd been chasing a pipe dream for all these years. Wrapped up in visions of a white picket fence neighborhood and a husband who spent his time playing catch in the backyard with his kid. Instead of coming home soaked in someone else's blood.

What if this was it for me? Connie was the stay at home wife and mother, with the warm, saintly maternal instincts. Not me. I fell in love with a man full of sharp edges and bared teeth. I fell in love with a man who killed for me, and wouldn't hesitate to do it again and again.

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Maybe Neil and I were supposed to burn hot and bright instead, like a shooting star. Hurtling through space at a million miles an hour. Destructive and explosive, but my God, we were glorious, breathtakingly passionate.

Despite my misgivings and resistance about club life, the Blackjacks ensured there was a seat at their table for me. These men had protected me at Neil's word. Looked after me and respected me, like Big G did.

Vlad, seated on my sister's couch, could probably crush a human skull with his bare hands. Instead, he tucked my dozing nephew's delicate body into the crook of his arm, smoothing his big palm over Wylie's tousled hair.

I'd been so focused on my dreams for a better future, that I never realized I was already surrounded by family. It wasn't the sweet, idyllic family I'd envisioned for myself, the one I craved. It wouldn't be a neat and tidy life with Neil either.

But it would be our life, our family—one we built together.

“Hey, honey,” Nathan said as he stepped into the house, a paper bag in one hand, a large bouquet of sunflowers in the other. “I stopped at the drug store on my way home. Picked up some pain relievers for Wylie, and some flowers for you—”

He broke off mid-sentence at the sight of Vlad seated on the couch.

“What the—?”

I took him by the elbow and steered him toward the kitchen.

“I have a lot of explaining to do,” I said, apologetically.

Twenty minutes later, Officer Shepard turned into the driveway. I waited for him on the porch, hoping to prevent him from having any reason to enter the house.

I hadn’t told Connie and Nathan everything—skipping details like the dead intruder and sex with Neil—but they knew enough to understand the necessity of Vlad’s presence now. Even though that didn’t put them at ease.

Officer Shepard climbed out of his car and opened the passenger door for me.

“Ready to get this over with?”

“You have no idea,” I replied.

“Have you had any trouble this morning?” He asked. “Threatening notes, phone calls...”

I thought of Vlad’s figure darkening Connie’s doorstep.

“No, nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Really?” Officer Shepard circled around to the driver’s side and turned the car onto the road. “The officer on duty reported a very large man knocked on your sister’s door about half an hour ago.”

I cleared my throat, brushing an invisible speck of dirt off the skirt I’d borrowed from Connie.

“Just a neighbor stopping by for coffee.”

A beat of silence filled the car.

“If there’s anything you’d like to tell me off the record, now is the time to do it,” Officer Shepard said.

“Like I said, there’s nothing to report, Officer.”

He sighed and shook his head.

“I could have your sister’s house searched,” he countered.

“On what grounds?”

“Suspicious activity. It’s a vague enough excuse to keep my options open.”

If he had any intention of doing that, he wouldn’t be tiptoeing around the subject now. Officer Shepard was purposefully not probing too deeply for fear of seeing something he’d have to cover up.

Neil had warned me many times before that bikers and cops weren’t friends. But on rare occasions, loopholes were developed, where paperwork disappeared and damning evidence went missing without a trace.

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I didn't know what kind of dynamic my ex-husband had with Officer Shepard. I knew where my loyalties resided though. So I stayed silent.

"Shit," Officer Shepard muttered.

Up ahead, the courthouse came into view. Lined along the curb were bikers, seven in all, wearing the Blackjack colors. I pressed my lips together to hide a smile. Neil was at the front, leaned up against his bike, legs crossed at the ankles, dark shades shielding his eyes.

"I warned him to stay the fuck away," Officer Shepard grumbled.

"Neil doesn't really like being told what to do," I replied.

"I can see that."

Officer Shepard stayed practically glued to my side as he led me into the courthouse. Neil watched my every step until I was safely inside. Five minutes before the trial was about to start, the heavy tread of footsteps made me twist around in my seat.

The Blackjacks filed into the courtroom, boots shuffling, chairs scraping.

"Dear God, they're like a herd of wild animals," Officer Shepard said under his breath.

Neil and his crew claimed the second row of seats behind me in the courtroom. I recognized some of them—Gatling, Spike, Blackbeard, Big G, and Credence. But

there were other faces I hadn't met at the clubhouse the other day, especially the sole woman among them. I knew Vlad was at my sister's house.

How many more men did Neil have waiting in the wings?

It was impossible to miss the club, looking out of place in their leathers and tattoos amid the stuffy, rigid courtroom with wood paneling and polished benches. They weren't even trying to blend in either. Their appearance was a big fuck you.

They weren't afraid to show that they were loud and proud, unwanted misfits of this proper society that had rejected them.

And they were here to back me up.

Chapter thirteen

Kingpin

There was no way in hell I would stand by and let my wife walk into this trial alone. The security guards on duty weren't thrilled at our appearance, but I didn't give a shit. As long as we weren't acting up, or causing any trouble, they didn't have a reason to kick us out. It was a free country. We had every right to be here.

I could have worn plain clothes, slipping into the back row, unnoticed. I could have left the club on standby, waiting for my signal if I needed them.

But the time for subtlety was over. As soon as Cooley went after Hattie, the gloves came off.

A moment later, Welch entered the room, handcuffed, wearing a plain gray button up shirt and jeans. He shot a scathing look at Hattie, seated next to Officer Shepard.

Then his gaze slid over us, claiming the entire second row of seats. His eyes darkened and a muscle clenched in his jaw.

The fucker was angry. Good.

I kept my expression neutral, giving nothing away. He wouldn't know who I was, or the fact that I gave the order to have Cooley killed. But gossip had a tendency to spread like wildfire behind bars. I'd used that to my advantage.

Even if the cops didn't have any evidence to pin Cooley's death on us, the rumor that we did it was more than enough. One look at our Blackjack colors, and Welch had recognized our name.

Barber was still in the wind. If Welch managed to plead not guilty, and he got off scot-free, there was no doubt in my mind they would want revenge for their dead friend.

And they would start with Hattie.

"All rise," the bailiff declared.

Then the trial began.

When Hattie was called to the stand to testify, I inhaled a deep breath. I was proud of her for doing this, but I didn't like seeing her exposed. All I wanted to do was get her out of here and take her home. Not the clubhouse. Not her sister's place. Home—our home, where she belonged.

"Miss Harriet Fields," the judge said. "Could you relay to the jury, in your own words, how you came to be caught up in this bank robbery? I understand you're a schoolteacher from Seattle."

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As Hattie spoke, I crossed my arms and clenched my teeth so tightly that my jaw ached. I hated this. Hated that she had been put in danger and I didn't hear a word about it. Hated that she was still in danger, months later.

Then she faltered in her account and her gaze darted to me.

"Is there a problem, Miss Fields?" the judge asked.

"No," she said slowly, dropping her gaze. Clearing her throat, she shifted in her seat, partially turning away from me. "One of the robbers screamed at us to get down on the ground. The other two robbers were preoccupied with shoving as much money into their duffle bags as they could. So, I saw the opportunity and I took it."

A pause of anticipation descended over the courtroom.

"I ripped the robber's mask off." Hattie pointed at Welch. "I saw that man's face."

The judge gestured to a bailiff who wheeled in a television on a cart.

"I understand we have security camera footage to corroborate your story."

You could hear a pin drop in that damn courtroom as the grainy footage flickered on the television screen. Hattie tugged at her earlobe, making a concerted effort to avoid looking in my direction.

Then Welch backhanded Hattie so hard that her head whipped to the side and she crumpled from the force of his blow.

“Motherfucker,” Blackbeard hissed under his breath next to me.

Big G growled. Baby Doll and Hot Shot shifted uncomfortably. The only one who remained still as a stone was Gatling, but the murder in his eyes was unmistakable.

I couldn’t look away from the security footage. Hattie remained huddled there on the floor, clutching her cheek, while Welch brandished his gun at her.

Then Welch’s attorney rose to his feet for cross-examination. I didn’t trust lawyers on a good day, but this guy had the disarming smile of a snake oil salesman.

“Miss Fields, it seems you have a colorful history in Brightwater.”

“I used to live here, yes,” she replied.

The attorney turned and gestured at me with a smug look.

“And could you inform the jury whether or not that man seated in the second row is your husband?”

Hattie hesitated.

“Miss Fields,” the attorney pressed. “A simple yes or no will suffice.”

Leave her alone, asshole, I thought.

“He’s my ex-husband,” Hattie admitted. “We separated, thirteen years ago.”

“Regardless of your marital status, the police suspect this man tortured and murdered the comrade of my client. Can we really place any trust in this woman’s statement when she has known ties to a criminal herself?”

“Oh, fuck off,” Baby Doll said. “That’s a load of bullshit.”

The judge frowned.

“I will have order in my courtroom. Anyone causing disruptions will be removed.”

Baby Doll huffed and slouched in her chair.

“Let’s stay on track here, Mr. Trevello,” the judge admonished. “We don’t need to concern ourselves with who the police are investigating in another case.”

“I know what I saw,” Hattie said, chin held high, shoulders squared. Unwavering in her certainty. “You have security tape footage to prove it.”

“Technically, that footage only shows your face, Miss Fields,” Trevello pointed out. “My client cannot be identified from this video.”

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He turned to the jury and spread his hands.

“It’s still a question worthy of consideration. Aside from this woman’s statement, there’s no evidence to confirm or deny whether my client participated in that bank robbery. Are you willing to hang a man’s fate on the word of a woman whomarried a biker with a known violent history and a criminal record?”

Big G heaved a sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“This prick is raising my blood pressure with every word out of his mouth,” he muttered.

When Hattie was finished testifying, she returned to her seat by Shepard’s side. Twisting her fingers into her skirt while she chewed her lower lip. I wished I could be the one next to her, so I could envelop her fidgeting hands in mine to calm her down.

I didn’t pay any attention to the rest of the trial. Guilt gnawed at my stomach. She should have come to me. She should have let me handle it. Then we wouldn’t have to be here, dealing with Welch and his smarmy lawyer.

But I understood why she kept it all from me.

Hattie wanted a normal husband. Someone who believed in the justice system. Someone who relied on the cops for protection.

What felt like a lifetime later, court was adjourned for the day. I watched Hattie lean toward Officer Shepard and whisper something. He nodded, taking her by the elbow

as she stood. My gaze followed her from the room until she disappeared from view.

Then my phone buzzed with a text. I pulled it from my pocket and glanced at the screen.

Ditched the cop for 5 min. Hurry up.

I was out of my seat in a heartbeat, striding from the room. I scanned the corridor, searching for Hattie. She gestured at me from the opposite end of the hallway, near the door that led to the stairwell. I headed straight for her.

When I was within reach, Hattie grabbed my wrist and pulled me into the stairwell. Her fingertips were light and warm against my pulse. Honey blossom perfume filled my lungs. She peeked around my shoulder and pulled the door shut behind us.

“Officer Shepard is waiting in the lobby. I said I needed to make a pit stop at the ladies room before he takes me back to Connie’s. I don’t think he believed me though.”

“That asshole hurt you,” I said, gruffly.

Hattie’s gaze flicked up to me. I cupped her chin with a firm grasp, searching her face for any signs that Welch had left a scar after he backhanded her like that. All I could see were freckles and the faint lines of crow’s feet fanning out around her eyes. Her pupils darkened, and her throat worked as she swallowed.

“It was months ago, Neil,” she said, barely above a whisper. “I’m fine now.”

“I don’t give a flyingfuck, Hattie.” I traced my thumb over her lower lip. “I wasn’t there when you needed me. That’s unacceptable.”

She sighed.

“I know you can’t get this through your thick skull, but we split up. I wasn’t going to call you out of the blue, over a decade later.”

“Why not?”

She made a noise of frustration.

“Because of what we’re doing right now,” she hissed. “We’re like two goddamn magnets. Every time we’re in the same room, we’re drawn to each other.”

I raised an eyebrow. Was my Hattie thinking about coming back to me after all?

“Stop looking at me like that,” she grumbled.

“Like what?” I prompted.

“Like you’re going to kiss me. I need to keep a clear head. For the trial.”

The trial. Right.

My gaze panned down her body. White blouse, a little snug across her tits. Tight pencil skirt hugging her thick thighs and plump ass.

“Would it be such a bad thing if I kissed my wife?” I countered.

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Hattie huffed and pushed at my chest, trying to move past me.

“You really have to stop pretending we’re not divorced. I need to get back—”

Before she could pull away, I caught her wrist and turned her hand over. Stroking my thumb in her palm, with deep, slow pressure. It didn’t take much effort to pull her close against my chest.

I trailed my knuckles down her arm, curved my palm around the dip of her waist. Then I slid my palm a few inches lower to squeeze her hip. I leaned in, brushing my lips against her ear as I spoke.

“And you have to stop pretending that you’re not begging me to fuck you every time you look at me with those pretty eyes, sweetheart.”

Hattie’s breath hitched.

With less than five minutes to work with, I couldn’t do much. But I could give her a taste.

Backing her against the wall, I grabbed her skirt and yanked it up around her hips.

“Neil,” she whispered urgently, twisting her fingers into my cut. “This is a public stairwell. Anyone could walk in on us.”

“Let them,” I growled into the curve of her neck.

I cupped her pussy through the black lace of her panties, grinding the heel of my palm against her clit. Hattie sucked in a shaky gasp. I scraped my teeth over her skin, then smoothed the flat of my tongue over the red welt I'd left behind.

"Oh, God," Hattie whimpered, pushing deeper into my palm, rolling her hips. "Officer Shepard will start wondering where I went—"

I peeled her panties to the side, teasing my fingers along her slit. With my free hand, I bracketed her throat ever-so-lightly, with no pressure. Just enough to get her attention, to make her eyes lock with mine.

"The next time some prick lays a finger on you," I said, low and hoarse. "You call me. Doesn't matter where you are in the world. Doesn't matter if you've been married to an uptight, rich dickwad for years. You. Call. Me. Is that clear?"

Hattie took a breath to answer, thighs trembling. I thumbed at her clit, making her flinch with a needy whine. Then I slipped two fingers inside her.

"It's only been two days since we last fucked, baby," I murmured with satisfaction as Hattie's eyes rolled back in her head. "And your pussy is sucking my fingers deep like she's starving to death, poor thing."

A door slammed from somewhere in the stairwell above us. Hattie's walls clenched around my fingers. She gripped my wrist, fingernails clawing into my skin.

I crowded closer, bracing one elbow on the wall, next to her head. Footsteps echoed on the stairs. But Hattie didn't pull away. Neither did I.

She shifted, biting the inside of her cheek. I cupped the back of her neck and tucked her face into my chest to muffle her.

My fingers sank further into her pussy, knuckles-deep. I curled and twisted and stroked her fluttering walls as she panted and squirmed against me.

Another door opened and closed. The footsteps were gone. Silence returned to the stairwell again.

As soon as we were alone, I tilted Hattie's head back to kiss her. Swallowing her moans as I hammered against her G-spot.

Her phone went off, ringing in her purse. Probably Shepard, trying to track her down. We had definitely blown past our allotted five minutes.

Hattie ignored it anyway, frantically rolling her hips, so close to her orgasm, throwing caution to the wind for her pleasure. My cock was hard as steel, seeing her desperate like this. I could have sworn the zipper of my fly was imprinted on my skin.

Fuck, I had to be inside her. I needed to feel her scorching heat wrapped around my cock. I needed to watch her taking every inch and fall apart for me.

The phone stopped ringing for about thirty seconds. Then it started up again.

We were out of time.

I pulled back, leaving Hattie empty. Her cream coated my fingers, dripping down into my palm.

"Neil," she rasped in a voice tight with sexual frustration. "You can't just—"

I dropped to my knees in front of her. My woman. My queen. Palming her thighs, I guided her close and kissed her sensitive, throbbing clit.

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Hattie arched, nails scrabbling at my scalp for purchase. I licked a hot, wet stripe over the stiff peak of her clit. Breathing in the scent of her arousal. She tasted like the sweetest heaven, so desperately fucking herself on my tongue.

I pinched her clit between my teeth until she was writhing. My name fell from her lips, over and over, head thrown back.

At last, I closed my mouth around her clit and sucked.

“Fuck,” Hattie moaned.

She came with a full-body shudder. Thighs quivering, body arched in exquisite bliss.

Her phone kept ringing and ringing. She shoved her purse off her shoulder with frustration.

Hattie gazed down at me, eyes dark with lust, smoothing her hands through my hair. I could feel the aftershocks that rippled through her, and I knew she wasn't done. She needed another. And another.

I reached around, filling my palms with her plush ass. Kneading her soft flesh. Wishing more than anything that I could take her home and fill her with my cock properly.

Instead, I rose to my feet and adjusted her panties, sliding her skirt down. Hattie gripped my shoulder for support as she tested to see if her wobbly legs would hold her weight.

“That...that was not why I wanted to talk to you,” she said.

“Really?”

Hattie glanced away, but not fast enough to hide the twitch of a smile at the corner of her mouth. She touched her hair, twisted up off her neck, checking to make sure I hadn't messed it up too much.

“What did you want then, Hattie?” I asked.

She didn't answer right away. Her phone rang. Again. I sighed and took a step back. Hattie retrieved her purse and checked her phone.

“It's Officer Shepard. I've been gone too long...”

She trailed off, stowing her phone back in her purse. She fidgeted with her clothes, attempting to smooth the wrinkles out of her skirt to no avail.

I reached out and cradled her chin, tilting her head up.

“Talk to me, baby. Tell me what you wanted.”

Because I'll give you the world, I thought. You should know that by now.

Her lips parted as she took a breath to speak. Hattie hooked two fingers in the silver chain around my neck, tugging it free from the collar of my shirt. She toyed with my wedding ring for a moment.

“I'm glad you were here,” she whispered.

A small, tender smile flickered across her lips. Then she tucked my wedding ring

back under my shirt and patted my chest, before she slipped out the door.

I blew out a breath and sagged back against the wall, willing the bulge in my jeans to be a little less noticeable before I left the privacy of the stairwell.

Chapter fourteen

Hattie

Officer Shepard dropped me off at Connie's house well into the afternoon. The moment I walked in the door, Wylie came careening into the entryway.

"Aunt Hattie! Look at my tattoos!"

He flexed his little arms, covered with blurry tattoos of motorcycles. I ruffled his hair and crouched down to his level.

"You must be feeling better, cowboy," I said.

Wylie shook his head.

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“I’m not a cowboy anymore. I’m gonna be a biker, like Uncle Vlad.”

My eyebrows shot up. A moment later, Vlad emerged, huge and broad and utterly terrifying if it wasn’t for the tiny bundle of Emma, fast asleep with her cheek resting in his palm.

“Uncle Vlad, huh?” I replied. “Those tattoos better be temporary.”

Vlad shrugged.

“You are the boss’s woman, yes? That makes little man part of the family.”

I took a breath to protest, but no words came. In technical terms, Neil and I were separated. But that was paperwork, and it clearly never meant anything to him. Our divorce was in name only, according to him. Besides, my body certainly still thought I was married to him.

“I’m sure my sister will not be thrilled to hear any of this,” I said with a sigh.

Gathering Wylie into my arms, I gave him a big squeeze. Now that I was entertaining the idea that Neil and I might be getting back together, I didn’t know how that would affect my relationship with my sister. Could I return to Brightwater and watch my niece and nephew grow up? Or would Connie keep me at arm’s length to protect her family?

“Are you sure you don’t want to be a cowboy anymore?” I asked, sweeping Wylie’s tangled curls back from his forehead.

He shook his head.

“Uncle Vlad said he’ll teach me how to ride a motorcycle and go super fast!”

“Jesus,” I muttered under my breath. “Another man in my life who gives me gray hair.”

Wylie went racing off into the living room, playing with his toy cars on the floor. I couldn’t help noticing that a toy motorcycle had magically and mysteriously appeared. Rising to my feet, I fixed Vlad with a stern look.

“I left my nephew in your care for only a few hours. You were supposed to babysit him, not convert him into a biker. And how did you convince my sister to surrender her newborn?”

Vlad shrugged again, rubbing Emma’s back with his massive palm. She looked like a doll in his hands.

“I told you. I am good with babies.”

That didn’t explain how he managed to pry Emma away from Connie. I glanced around the living room, then checked the kitchen. Empty.

“Where is my sister, anyway?”

“Backyard,” Vlad replied simply.

I moved to the back door and peered through the screen. Connie and Nathan were seated on a bench, tucked under the sprawling oak tree in a corner of their backyard. She had her feet in his lap, while he stroked his fingers in idle circles over her calves. Their heads were tipped close together, and when Nathan spoke, Connie’s eyes lit up

with a smile.

Relief washed over me. I had expected to find my sister frazzled, exhausted, stressed. I had expected Nathan to be irritated that bikers were invading his peaceful home. This ordeal with the trial, and Neil, and the Blackjacks, had upended their lives.

It felt good to see her relaxed like this. In love. Enjoying a slice of regular life amid the chaos.

Now that I had given my testimony in court, I was free to return to Seattle. I could get back to my own normal life.

Why did that feel so lonely? Apart from my job, my cramped little apartment, and a handful of acquaintances, no one would miss me in Seattle. But I had family here in Montana—my sister, my brother-in-law, my niece and nephew. I had Neil. My heart never left Brightwater.

As I quietly retreated back into the house, Connie glanced my way.

“Hattie,” she called, waving me over. “How did the trial go?”

Reluctantly, I emerged from the house. I didn’t want to talk about the trial anymore. I was sick of it hanging over my head, shadowing the lives of my sister and her family who didn’t need this kind of trouble when they had two little kids to take care of.

“No verdict yet,” I replied. “But I testified, and that was the important part. Now that it’s out of the way, I can catch a flight to Washington. Officer Shepard will continue to patrol your neighborhood himself until the trial is over, just to be on the safe side. You look...happy,” I added. “Really happy.”

Connie kissed Nathan’s cheek and rose from the bench to join me.

“Vlad has been a godsend. Emma fell asleep in his arms in five seconds. Five seconds! And Wylie is glued to him like a little shadow. He’s so gentle, it’s incredible. Nathan and I got the best nap we’ve had in years and—”

She broke off, looking me up and down.

“Why are you glowing?”

I scoffed, even though my cheeks grew warm with tattletale heat.

“I’m not glowing. It’s probably just sweat. It’s summer.”

Connie eyed me warily and shook her head.

“No, I’ve seen you like this before. A long, long time ago.”

I turned away.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Understanding dawned on her face and she gasped.

“You slept with Neil!”

My gaze flicked past her shoulder to where Nathan was still seated on the bench.

“Keep your voice down,” I hissed.

Connie waved me off.

“Oh, don’t be shy. We’re all adults here.”

Nathan spoke up.

“Hattie, I would appreciate it if you don’t convince my wife to leave me in favor of nasty, sweaty biker sex.”

“You’re the father of my children,” Connie protested. “I would never leave you.”

Nathan arched an eyebrow.

“There is a hulking, muscled, tattooed biker in my living room, who is really great with kids. That’s like crack to women.”

“Well, I’m very happily married,” Connie said. “And besides, nasty, sweaty biker sex is more Hattie’s department than mine.”

I dragged a hand down my face.

“I don’t understand how this conversation got started, but I’m literally begging to change the subject.”

“Not a chance.” Connie scooped her arm through my elbow and led me back into the house. “You talk. I’ll make tea.”

She listened attentively, without interruption, while I told her about Neil and my conflicted feelings regarding Seattle.

“If you still love him, I don’t see the issue,” Connie said, dipping her tea bag in her steaming mug.

“Because we loved each other before and it wasn’t enough to cover the problems in our marriage,” I countered.

She propped her chin in her hand, fixing me with a long look.

“But you said it yourself. You’ve been chasing this dream, this idyllic fantasy. When you met Neil, you fell for him as easily as breathing.”

I snorted.

“Probably due to my raging hormones. I was twenty-one. He was older than me by almost ten years, my mother hated him, and he had a motorcycle. It's like winning the lethal combo lottery. I didn't know any better.”

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“You do now though,” Connie countered. “And that doesn’t change how you feel about him.”

I studied my tea, wishing I could find a concrete answer to my future in the depths of the golden brown liquid.

Connie was quiet for a moment. Then she reached across the table and clasped my hand.

“Did you ever think that this fantasy you’re chasing might have been part of Mom’s dream for you?”

I blinked, stunned.

“What? No. No, I...”

I trailed off. Maybe she had a point. My mother had constantly pressured me to be more lady-like, to soften my sharp tongue, to marry a man with wealth and social influence.

“Mom was always harder on you than she was on me,” Connie continued. “I got away with murder sometimes. For a while, I just assumed it was because you were older, so she put greater expectations on your shoulders.”

I smoothed my thumb along the rim of my mug. Connie really was sweeter than I could ever be, more feminine, more motherly. But I didn't hold that against her.

“It’s because you looked like Dad,” I said. “She missed even, though she wouldn’t admit it.”

“But you look like Mom,” Connie replied. “You have her nose, her eyes, her hair. I think she blamed herself for the lack of love in her marriage, and she took it out on you. She kept a wall around her heart, and she just couldn’t let it down. No matter how hard Dad tried to reach her.”

A lump formed in my throat.

“My theory is,” Connie added. “Neil loved you entirely, completely, and wholly as you are. And your heart responded to that. You blossomed around him, Hattie.”

I managed a wet laugh of disbelief, tears stinging my eyes.

“We fought all the time though. About everything.”

“Because he gave you room to do that. He was strong enough to take your heat and not get burned. Mom tried to clip your wings, to make you smaller, to crush you into someone you were not. But Neil gave you the sky so you could soar.” Connie smirked. “Honestly, I think that’s what he liked most—your fire.”

God, she was right. Neil never held me back, never told me that my dreams were wrong in any way. He let me go to pursue what I wanted—or what I thought I wanted—as long as it made me happy.

I swiped my hands over my eyes and released a shaky breath. The club still worried me. Losing Neil would destroy me. But I would use the most of the time we had together and count my lucky stars that he loved me as long as he did.

“If I do this,” I said. “If I get back together with Neil, there will be bikers traipsing

through your house on a regular basis.”

Connie didn’t even flinch.

“Are you kidding? A lifetime supply of free babysitters? Where do I sign up?”

I laughed and squeezed her hand.

“If you develop a crush on Vlad, Nathan might get jealous.”

She scoffed.

“He won’t have time to be jealous when I drag him to bed for a nap.”

“You’re taking this surprisingly well,” I admitted.

Connie lifted one shoulder in a nonchalant shrug.

“My sister deserves to live happily ever after with the man she loves. You certainly didn’t glow when you were dating that financial analyst.”

I winced and waved her off, embarrassed.

“Don’t remind me.”

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“Hattie, sweetie, you came this close to spending the rest of your life married to a man who bored you to death. It’s my job to remind you that the smoking hot, sexy biker with the tattoos and the bad attitude dropped to his knees and worshiped you today. Don’t let that man slip through your fingers.”

I bit the inside of my cheek, but I failed to hide the smile that spread across my face and the pleased blush that warmed my cheeks at the memory.

“Now,” Connie went on. “Please tell me this means you’re staying in Brightwater forever, because it breaks my heart every time I have to take you back to the airport.”

I sighed.

“I need to talk to Neil first. And I have to pack up my things, take care of the lease on my apartment...”

It was strange how fast my life had turned upside down. Two weeks ago, visiting Neil in the hospital, I never dreamed I would be moving back here. But it felt good. It felt right.

I couldn’t wait to come home.

Chapter fifteen

Kingpin

Emerging from the courthouse into the bright afternoon sunlight, I met Big G on the

stairs. He fell into step beside me as we headed for our bikes.

“Credence took off about a minute ago,” he said. “Got a lead on Barber’s location. Blackbeard and Gatling went with him. Hot Shot and Spike are on call, in case they need back up. Tex had a family emergency—nothing serious—so Spike is taking his place.”

I nodded.

“Good. Give Vlad a heads up, just in case. Barber might go ape shit once he realizes we’re hunting him down.”

Big G pulled his phone out and started texting. I retrieved my helmet from my bike and strapped it on, thinking about Hattie’s fading taste on my tongue.

Now that she’d given her testimony in court, she didn’t need to stay in Brightwater any longer. She might stick around until the trial was over, just to see what the verdict was.

On the other hand, she might be eager to get back to Seattle. Put this whole thing behind her...

I’m glad you were here.

No, Hattie wasn’t leaving me again. Not this time. I could feel it.

Big G and I made our way back to the clubhouse. This late in the afternoon, activity had picked up, with customers lining the bar. Nearly every table was taken. Crash was behind the bar, slinging drinks as fast as he could. Since we were in between bartenders at the moment, we shared the responsibility of serving drinks among the club.

That didn't mean Crash was one of us. Like Big G said, the kid didn't say no.

For the most part, the clubhouse was primarily for Blackjack use. But opening up the bar to the public brought in money, and we could always use some extra cash in our pocket.

"Get me a whiskey, would you?" I said to Big G. "I'm taking a leak."

"Sure." He rapped his knuckles on the bar to get Crash's attention. "Hey, kid. Two shots of whiskey."

"Get it yourself, I'm busy," Crash shot back.

I glanced at Big G, raising my eyebrows. He let out a low whistle as he slid behind the bar.

"Sounds like someone is developing an attitude. A Prospect doesn't talk to his superiors like that."

"But I'm not your Prospect. You're just jerking me around for shits and giggles."

"As I recall, you're the one who keeps hoping you'll get a different answer if you're obnoxious enough about it," Big G pointed out.

"Fine," Crash grumbled. "I'm gone."

He stormed out of the bar, shoved the door open, and vanished into the bright sunlight.

Good riddance, I thought.

As I made my way down the corridor and into the men's room, I couldn't help feeling bad for the poor kid though. Hattie had told me to give him a chance, let him join.

I shook my head as I stepped into the men's room. I'd think about that later.

The cold muzzle of a pistol pressed against the base of my skull.

"Say one fucking word and I'll blow your head off."

My gaze flicked to the line of mirrors above the sinks. I caught the reflection of a man standing next to me, dressed head to toe in black—hoodie, jeans, boots, and baseball cap pulled low over his face. A slim build, wiry with muscle, like a long-distance runner. But I didn't need to identify him to figure out who I was talking to.

"You must be Anderson Barber," I said.

"And you must be the asshole who killed Cooley," Barber replied.

He lifted my cut and yanked out the pistol I kept tucked into the back of my jeans. He tossed it in a nearby toilet.

"His first mistake was putting hands on my wife. His second mistake was getting caught."

Barber bared his teeth with a hiss, digging the pistol deeper into my skin. I stifled a

growl.

“Do you know what happens when you fuck up a man’s brain stem? He turns into a drooling vegetable. Pisses himself. Sucks his meals out of a goddamn tube. Can’t fight back. Can’t screw his pretty wife either.”

I went rigid, envisioning beating Barber’s head against the tile wall until he stopped moving, stopped running his mouth.

He leaned in, bringing a cloud of sour breath and cigarette smoke with him.

“A big, tough guy like you would hate it. Reduced to nothing but a useless sack of shit in a hospital bed. Meanwhile, I’ll torture your wife right in front of your eyes, the way you tortured Cooley. Hell, just for the fun of it, I might do even more than that while you watch—”

I rammed my elbow into his nose. Barber yelped as blood cascaded down his mouth and chin. The gun went off—a deafening explosion in the enclosed space. The bullet bit into the plaster wall inches above my right shoulder.

I couldn’t hear a damn thing through the ringing in my ears. But I lunged at Barber anyway.

He drove his fist into my ribs. Pain lanced up my torso, seizing the air from my lungs. I grabbed for the gun, slamming Barber’s hand against the wall—once, twice.

The gun hit the floor and skidded across the tile.

A moment later, the door burst open. Big G took a step forward, prepared to jump in.

“He’s mine,” I gritted out.

I pinned Barber to the floor, cocked my fist back. A flash of fear crossed his face.

“Wait—wait!”

“Your first mistake was threatening me on my turf,” I said. “Your second mistake was threatening my wife.”

I hit him. Again and again. The crunch of bone and the sickening sound of colliding flesh filled the room. Blood splattered the tiles. A broken tooth pinged against the floor.

“That’s enough.”

Big G’s voice cut through the red haze that filled my mind. He hooked his hands under my arms and hauled me to my feet.

Chest heaving, ribs still aching, I surveyed the pulpy mess of Barber’s face.

“No one fucking touches my wife,” I rasped.

I turned away to the sink, blood coating my hand up to my wrist. Bits of flesh and hair stuck to my knuckles. I flexed my fingers open and closed.

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As long as I lived, I would never forget the look of horror on Hattie's face when I came home bloodied. It wasn't the first time. But I'd managed to pull it off in the middle of the night before, scrubbing myself down, getting rid of my clothes before she saw anything.

She wanted a loving, doting, gentle husband. She wanted a home in the suburbs. She wanted kids, for Christ's sake.

How could I give that kind of a life to her when this was all I knew? Broken bones. Bloodshed. Bruises. Violence. I loved her the only way I knew how—by killing to protect her. And I was terrified that would never be enough when she deserved so much more.

As I bent over the sink and turned the faucet on, my phone rang. I ignored it, watching the water swirl from clear to red as I washed the blood off my hands.

Then Big G's phone rang.

"Hey, Hattie. Yeah, he's right here."

He passed his phone to me. I took it, blood and water dripping down my wrist.

"Is everything okay, baby?"

"It's fine. I was just...um...could we talk? I want to come back to Brightwater."

I closed my eyes as relief flooded through me. Thirteen years of waiting was finally

over.

“I’ll be there in ten minutes, sweetheart.”

Hattie stood on Connie’s porch and crossed her arms. She’d changed out of her blouse and skirt, for a regular T-shirt and jeans.

“You know I hate that thing.”

I chuckled and patted the pillion seat.

“Come on, baby. Try it just once. You might like it.”

She frowned, but I could see the gleam of interest in her eyes as she looked over the bike. Reluctantly, she marched down the driveway and came to stand beside me. I curved my hand over her hip, pulling her closer. My knuckles were bruised a vicious purple, scraped raw from beating Barber’s face in.

“I will never understand what you have against a regular car with seat belts and airbags,” she retorted.

“It’s boring,” I replied. “I know for a fact boring men do not make that pretty pussy of yours a sopping mess.”

She swatted my shoulder.

“Don’t be crude. And what happened to your hand?”

I looped my arm around Hattie’s waist, tugging her against me.

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

She pressed her lips together with disapproval, but she didn't push.

"We need to talk," she said firmly. "Like, really talk. No sex."

"Whatever you want, baby. We can go for a ride, grab an early dinner."

Removing my helmet, I settled it on her head, clipping the straps under her chin.

"What about you?" she said.

"Left my spare at home," I replied. "We won't go too far. I'll be careful."

She snorted.

"You've never been careful in your life."

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Then Hattie sighed and cast a dubious glance at the back seat of my bike.

“Can’t believe I’m doing this,” she muttered.

Gripping my shoulder for stability, she climbed on and straddled my bike. I tugged her arms around my middle until she was pressed against my back. Slowly, I rolled out of the driveway and onto the road. I avoided the highway—too busy, too fast and noisy—choosing quieter back roads with a scenic view.

Hattie clutched me tight, burying her face between my shoulder blades. After a few minutes, I felt the tension ease out of her. She slotted her chin over my shoulder, and a smile teased at her lips.

That’s my girl.

She tapped my arm and pointed to the sign for Riverstone Café, indicating where she wanted to stop for food. I sailed right by it without slowing.

“Are you kidnapping me?” she yelled over the wind and the engine.

I laughed and shook my head. Five minutes later, I pulled to a stop and parked in the driveway of our home. Hattie’s gaze roamed over it, taking in every detail.

“You didn’t sell the house?” she whispered, incredulous.

I unclipped her helmet, guiding her off the bike.

“Couldn’t bring myself to part with it,” I replied. “Sometimes, I swear I can still smell your perfume in there. Come on, I’ll make you something to eat.”

Hattie slipped her hand in mine as we headed up the sidewalk.

“Don’t tell me you learned how to cook while I was gone.”

“Fuck no,” I said. “I still burn my toast every morning. My club doesn’t let me go hungry though. Someone is usually stuffing food into my refrigerator when I’m not looking.”

I flicked on the lights as we entered the house, making our way to the kitchen. Pulling out a chair at the table, I gestured for Hattie to take a seat. She skimmed her palm over the table’s surface with a fond gesture.

“God, it’s like I never left.”

I smiled to myself, seeing her back home again. Rummaging around in the refrigerator, I came up with a Tupperware of black bean and lime taquitos that Tex had dropped off, and two beers. Grabbing a pair of forks from the silverware drawer, I sat across from Hattie at the table.

“Why the change of heart?” I asked, opening the container lid. The pungent scent of citrus made my mouth water. “I thought you liked Seattle.”

“It’s hard to be away from Connie,” Hattie admitted. “Wylie is growing up so fast, too. I feel like I’ve missed a lot already. And Emma is a darling, precious little girl.”

I nodded, heart squeezing in my chest. Waiting. Hoping. Living close to her sister was an understandable reason to return to Brightwater. But did that mean she was coming back to me? Or would I have to stand by and watch her fall in love with

another man, right before my eyes?

I popped the top off one beer and slid it over to her.

“There’s a place for you here,” I offered. “And we could try for that baby you always wanted.”

Hattie blew out a breath and blinked in surprise.

“You can’t be serious, Neil. I’m forty-six.”

“So?” I shrugged. “You’re still taking birth control. There’s a chance you could get pregnant, right?”

She hesitated, staring at me like I’d grown a second head.

“An extremely slim one.”

I pushed the container of food aside and pulled Hattie into my lap. Fuck, it was going to be difficult to stay focused with her soft curves pressed against me.

“I don’t know how to be a dad, sweetheart,” I said. “But I’ll try my damndest if that will make you happy. I can’t—can’t quit the club. And if—”

“Neil,” Hattie whispered. “I realize I pushed for the divorce...”

I shook my head and tightened my grip on her.

“Forget about the divorce, honey. It’s just a piece of paper. Doesn’t mean shit.”

She huffed a laugh.

“Yes, you had no problem ignoring it for a decade.”

Reaching into the collar of my shirt, she took out my ring and slid it onto her finger. It was far too big on her, but that didn’t matter. I wrapped my hand around hers.

“I don’t have to spell it out for you this time around,” I said. “You know what you’re getting into with me, Hattie.”

She nodded.

“I do. And for the record, it still scares the shit out of me.”

“Fair enough,” I replied.

“But...” She placed her hands on my chest, sliding up to loop her arms around my neck. “The only future I want is with you. Whatever form that takes. Maybe we have kids. But maybe we don’t. I like this little home we have here. It’s not perfect, but it’s ours. And your club is growing on me. It turns out that Vlad is really good with kids, and you’re going to have a hard time prying him away from Connie.”

I laughed softly, pressing my face into the curve of her neck. God, she smelled so

fucking good. She shivered when I kissed her jaw, nuzzling into the hollow beneath her ear.

“I think Spike and I will get along really well,” she added, with a smile in her voice. The little minx.

“No,” I said in a flat voice. “You better not.”

“He seemed very charming. Handsome, too.”

I lifted my head to look at her.

“I know what you’re doing.”

She grinned and wiggled against my dick. I sucked in a sharp breath, digging my fingers into her hips.

“You fucking tease. You said no sex.”

“And you said you were willing to try for a baby,” she said. “Shouldn’t we practice?”

Before she’d finished speaking, I was on my feet, hoisting her into my arms. Hattie squeaked in surprise and locked her legs around my waist. My ribs screamed in protest, and my leg ached a bit, but I gritted my teeth and carried her to the bedroom.

Hattie’s lips tipped up in a smile as she kissed my neck. Nibbling at my ear. My cock surged. I tossed her on the bed, grabbing her ankle to pry her shoe off. She wiggled out of her shirt and bra, leaning back against the pillows topless.

I tugged her other shoe off, tossing it aside. Then I yanked her to the edge of the mattress, peeling her jeans off. No panties this time. Nothing but bare pussy for me.

Hooking her legs over my shoulder, I buried my face between her thighs. Hattie sighed, squeezing her legs around my head. I don't know how I managed to survive for so long without tasting her like this.

Now that she came back to me, I intended to wake her up like this every morning if she would let me. I had to make up for thirteen years apart, and I wouldn't stop until my woman, my wife, was screaming my name.

"Neil, I need—" Hattie gasped, clawing at my shoulder.

I lapped and swirled and sucked at her clit until she was shaking. I kept going, even when she came with a shout, I didn't stop.

Finally, she gave my head a weak shove.

"Inside me. Please."

I pulled back, wiping her slick off my chin, rising to my feet.

"On your hands and knees, baby," I said.

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With wobbly legs, Hattie obeyed. I tugged her hips to the edge of the bed and unbuckled my belt. The metallic clank and the gritty rasp of my zipper was the only sound in the room.

I slid my hand down the slope of Hattie's spine, fisting my hand into her hair. Pressing her face down into the mattress, plump ass up. My bruised knuckles contrasted with her silky smooth skin—a reminder of what I was capable of when it came to my wife.

My cock throbbed, just from looking at her. Naked. Vulnerable. All mine.

I dragged my cock up and down her slit, gathering the cream of her arousal on my tip. Coating my length with it.

“You're so fucking gorgeous, sweetheart.”

Just as Hattie took a deep breath of anticipation, I thrust in—long, deep, and slow. Making sure she felt every inch. Her fingers curled into the sheets.

“Holy shit, yes,” she exhaled.

“When I put my ring on your finger again,” I said. “You're never taking it off. Understood?”

Before she could reply, I pulled out and drove in for a second time. Harder. Burying my cock and grinding until her back arched.

“Yes,” she whimpered, voice thick with pleasure. “I understand. I’ll never take it off.”

My fingertips indented into Hattie’s hips, wiping all coherent thought from my brain. She came back to me. That was the only thing that mattered. She was here, in our bed, wrapped around my cock, where she was always meant to be.

I snapped my hips into her, again and again. Hattie stretched her arms out like a cat, tilting her head back with a whine.

“Touch your clit for me, sweetheart,” I said through gritted teeth. Fighting to hold on.

Quick as a flash, Hattie tucked her hand between her legs. I felt her fingers graze my length, pumping like a piston in and out of her. As soon as she started circling her clit, her walls seized my cock and a strangled noise of pleasure tore from her throat.

I pulled out just before her orgasm hit. Pushing Hattie onto her back, I smoothed the sweat-damp tendrils of hair away from her face, sliding my hand down her body. When I fingered her pussy to test how sensitive she was, she clamped her thighs around my wrist with a moan.

I kicked off my boots, and draped my cut on the foot of the bed. Peeling off my clothes, I climbed over Hattie and slotted my cock at her entrance again. Hattie’s gaze settled on my silver chain, wedding ring swinging freely.

“Look at me,” I murmured.

Hattie’s gaze flicked up to my face. I pressed in, deeper, deeper, until I was fully sheathed inside her. My chest against her chest. My wedding ring trapped between our bodies.

“You’re mine,” I said. “Say it.”

“I’m yours,” she whispered, brushing my lips as she spoke.

Less than an hour ago, I beat a man to death for threatening my woman. My love. My wife. And now, this perfect creature was beneath me, whispering, I’m yours, like a prayer.

I guided her legs up around my waist, driving even deeper at a fresh angle that made Hattie dig her nails into my back.

“Fuck, Neil, don’t stop, don’t stop,” she babbled into my shoulder.

I locked my arms around her, thinking of nothing else except her. The scent of her skin. The clutch of her pussy. The sweet taste of her, still lingering on my tongue. It was sloppy and messy, but it was us. Together. After years without her, I never wanted to be that fucking empty again.

Hattie crested the swell of her orgasm and I toppled after her. Gripping her thighs hard enough to bruise. Sinking so deep into her pussy, as if I could fuse our bodies together by sheer willpower.

At last, I sagged against her. Kissed her jaw, the corner of her mouth. Hattie fought to catch her breath, with a little smile of contentment gracing her lips as she hummed.

“Marry me,” I murmured.

She breathed a tired laugh.

“Haven’t you been saying all this time that we never divorced in the first place?”

“Marry me again anyway. Just because we can.”

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Hattie studied me for a moment, searching my face.

“Only if we do it at the clubhouse. I strong-armed you into a regular wedding the first time around, and you hated that damn tux. You looked so miserable.”

I groaned at the memory.

“The fucking thing felt like it was strangling me.”

Hattie pressed a light kiss to my lips.

“If I’m marrying a biker, I should have a biker wedding.”

I brushed my knuckles over her cheek, down the curve of her throat. No words could describe how much I loved this woman. If she wanted a biker wedding at the clubhouse, that’s what she would get.

The harsh ringing of a phone made me jolt awake. Hattie was curled into my side, arm draped over my middle, leg hitched over my hips. She groaned and burrowed into my chest.

Swearing under my breath, I patted around blindly on the nightstand for my phone. But it wasn’t there.

Damn it. I’d probably left it in the pocket of my cut.

Reluctantly tearing myself away from Hattie, I crossed the room and rummaged

around in the pockets of my cut until I found my phone.

“What?” I grumbled.

“Whoa, you clearly haven't had your coffee yet,” Baby Doll chirped. “Shepard called from the courthouse a minute ago. Thought you’d like to know that the jury reached a verdict in Hattie’s trial.”

The cobwebs of sleep quickly vanished from my mind. I glanced at Hattie, sheets barely covering her tits, exposing a bare hip. I scrubbed a hand down my face, fighting the knot in the pit of my stomach.

“I’m listening.”

“Not guilty,” Baby Doll said. “If you can believe it. Welch’s damn attorney planted just enough doubt regarding Hattie's statement that the jury didn't feel it carried weight.”

“Fuck,” I hissed.

If I’d kept my distance, like Officer Shepard suggested, maybe this wouldn’t have happened.

On the other hand, if I’d stayed close to Hattie, she wouldn’t have endured any of this in the first place.

“You’re telling me Welch walks away clean,” I said.

“Afraid so,” Baby Doll admitted. “Now that his partners in crime have been taken out of the game, I can’t imagine Welch will be happy about that.”

“No. He won’t.”

After hanging up, I heard the sheets rustle. When I turned around, I found Hattie sitting up in bed, sheets clutched to her chest.

“The trial?” she whispered.

I nodded, sliding back into bed. I kissed her temple.

“The jury decided Welch is innocent.”

Hattie’s face fell. My heart clenched to see the disappointment, worry, and fear in her eyes.

“I’ll take care of it, baby,” I said softly. “Just focus on planning that biker wedding, all right?”

Chapter sixteen

Hattie

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I fiddled with the skirts of my wedding dress, attempting to quell the nerves boiling in my stomach. The hum of activity in the clubhouse was muted in the sanctuary of the ladies room. But I couldn't hide out here forever. My hair and makeup were done. Now it was time to get married. Again.

I paused as I looked in the mirror. Then my gaze fell to my stomach. I turned to the side, smoothing my hand down my middle. Trying to imagine what it would look like to be pregnant, especially at this age.

I'd been thinking about it more and more during the last two weeks, preparing for the wedding. Even though Connie was right—Mom had pushed her dreams on me—I still caught a little tug in my chest. That desire to have children. It was faded now, but every time I looked at Neil, that tug was there.

I shook my head. It didn't matter. I was marrying Neil—and staying married this time. That's all I cared about.

A knock echoed at the door.

“Hattie? Can I come in?” Connie called.

“It's open.”

My sister breezed in, wearing a flowing lemon-yellow maxi dress. Emma was bundled in her arms, swaddled in pink and fast asleep.

“Just thought I'd pop in to check up on you. Do you need anything? God, you look

stunning...”

I gave her a twirl, then lifted my skirts to reveal the biker boots underneath.

“Oh, Neil really is turning out to be a bad influence on you!” she said with delight. “I bet those boots are a thousand times more comfortable than heels though.”

“It’s easier to chase my nephew around, I’ll say that much.”

A pause settled between us. Connie reached out and clasped my hand.

“You’re ready for this, aren’t you?”

I nodded. Welch had completely disappeared, which put Neil on edge. He barely slept, and I often caught him having hushed conversations on the phone in the middle of the night with one of his club members.

I knew what I was getting into. And I wasn’t shying away.

Connie hooked her arm in mine as we left the ladies room and headed for the main room of the clubhouse. Streamers and lights had been put up. A buffet of food covered the bar. Gifts were mounded on a table in the corner.

It wasn’t a picturesque wedding. But I had already spent too much of my life chasing a perfect life that never existed. The family I wanted had been here all along, waiting for me.

Spike wolf whistled. Big G came forward and greeted me with a kiss on the cheek.

“He’s a very lucky bastard.”

Neil was near the door, in conversation with Blackbeard and Hot Shot. Then he turned and his gaze swept over me from head to toe. I probably should have felt ridiculous, wearing this wedding dress with the fluffy, gauzy skirts, while Neil and the rest of his club wore their customary cuts and jeans.

That was the perfect example of our worlds colliding and coming together though. I was the small town girl, the school teacher, the civilian. Neil was the biker and the leader of his club.

Despite the differences in our lives, our backgrounds, we were joined by an unbreakable bond of love for each other that remained unshaken.

The door burst open and Credence entered, dragging a thrashing Welch along with him. Neil squared his shoulders, pushing me behind him.

“Guess who was lurking around the dumpsters out back.” Credence tossed a pistol with a silencer onto the bar. “And he came prepared to do some damage.”

I shifted closer to Neil, threading our fingers together.

“Fucking bitch deserves what she gets for trying to get me locked up,” Welch snapped. He spat at my feet, narrowly missing my dress by an inch.

Neil lashed out, grabbing Welch by his shirt and shoving him against the bar.

“That is my wife and you will speak to her with respect.”

“Neil,” I said, my voice ringing sharp and clear through the room.

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He glanced back at me. I gestured to Connie and Nathan by the buffet, wide-eyed and uncertain. Vlad had Wylie balanced on his shoulders, but he lowered Wylie down to the floor now. Resting his hands on Wylie's shoulders protectively.

“Get him out of here,” Neil barked.

Credence yanked Welch out of the room. Blackbeard, Gatling, and Tex followed after him. Neil cupped my face in his hands and kissed my forehead, folding me into his arms.

“Sorry about that,” he said.

After a pause, Connie spoke.

“I didn’t see anything.”

Nathan shook his head.

“I didn’t see anything either. Let’s get this wedding started.”

As the evening wore on and the alcohol flowed, the rowdiness grew to a raucous crescendo. It felt strange, enjoying myself, even though I knew what Neil would do to Welch when the party was over. But that was part of being married to a biker.

I had to steal these happy moments while I could. There was no telling when club business would call Neil away. I wasted years looking toward a future that never came. Fretting about it.

I needed to live for the moment now. With this man by my side, the weight of his arm draped around my shoulders.

“Where’s the kid?” Neil bellowed.

Baby Doll elbowed Crash. He stepped forward, shoulders hunched, cheeks flushed. Probably a little drunk.

“My wife has a gift for you,” Neil added.

Crash’s gaze flicked to me with a spark of confusion. I rose from my chair and passed him a large flat box.

“Try not to let Neil get under your skin,” I said. “He has a soft spot for you. Even though he won’t admit it yet.”

I returned to my seat next to Neil, cuddling under his arm again. He kissed my temple, resting his large, warm palm on my hip.

Crash pried the lid off the box and pushed the cloud of tissue paper aside.

“Holy shit, no way.”

He pulled a cut out, with a Prospect patch stitched into the back, and another one on his chest. Neil held up his empty bottle of beer.

“I need a refill, Prospect,” he called. “If you want to be a Blackjack, you better make it an ice-cold one.”

A cheer went up around the room, accompanied by applause, whistles and howls. Crash slid his cut on, grinning from ear to ear.

“I’ll get right on that, Prez.”

I yawned as I stumbled into the house. It was nearly midnight, and I was tipsy from drinking so much at the clubhouse. Neil fumbled for the light switch, but I caught his wrist, and pulled his arm around me instead.

“Don’t need a light,” I mumbled. “I know the way.”

Neil and I drifted down the hall to our bedroom, peeling off layers of clothes as we went. I kissed him, sloppy and so deliriously happy that I couldn’t think straight. He dragged the zipper of my dress down, sliding it off my body until it pooled on the floor.

“My wife,” he whispered. Gliding his hands over my shoulders, down my arms, cupping my breasts. “My beautiful, perfect wife.”

I tugged my panties off, tossed my bra aside. Neil gathered me into his arms as he dropped onto the mattress, enveloping me with his body. Guiding my leg over his hip, he nudged the tip of his cock at my entrance.

“I’m yours,” I murmured against his lips. “Always yours. Only yours. Forever and ever.”

I broke off with a groan as he slipped inside. Deeper, deeper. Bottoming out. Neil swore softly, kissing my neck, my breasts, my lips. I closed my eyes and held him close.

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I was finally home. Right where I belonged.

Epilogue

Kingpin - Four Months Later

“Honey, we should have been at the clubhouse ten minutes ago.” I rapped my knuckles lightly on the bathroom door. “Is everything okay?”

Hattie was never late. Never. She prided herself on that.

“I’m coming,” she replied, hurrying out as she fussed with her hair. “So bossy and impatient. Do you have the present for Blackbeard?”

I gestured toward the driveway.

“Already packed on the bike. Let’s go.”

We were having a big bash for Blackbeard’s forty-fifth birthday at the clubhouse. I couldn’t wait to nag the bastard about getting old and going gray.

Hattie grabbed her helmet by the door. Although I couldn’t help noticing that she seemed...frazzled. She wouldn’t meet my gaze either. I caught her arm as she passed me. Cradling her chin, I tilted her head up to meet my eyes.

“Didn't you say we were running late?" she said.

I frowned.

“What’s going on with you?”

“Nothing,” she replied. “I lost track of time, that’s all.”

I searched her face. That didn’t feel right. In fact, it felt like a lie.

“You never lose track of time. Not once in your life.”

Hattie brushed my arm off.

“Well, when you’re creeping toward fifty like I am, your brain starts to slip a little.”

I knew a distraction when I saw one, and Hattie was trying to throw me off her scent. But I released her arm and let her go. For now. I’d pry an honest answer out of her later.

In mid-October, the leaves were blazing with red, orange, and gold. My breath fogged in the crisp, cool air. As long as there wasn’t snow on the ground, my bike would remain on the road.

Hattie huddled behind me for warmth as we headed to the clubhouse. She loved the bike now, and we took joy rides every Sunday afternoon, following the road wherever it would take us.

When we arrived at the clubhouse, the parking lot was full and the party was in full swing. Blackbeard had a large, sprawling family—cousins, aunts, uncles, siblings, and in-laws—and it seemed like everyone who was even distantly related to him had managed to cram themselves inside.

I veered into a scrubby patch of grass behind the clubhouse and parked. After helping Hattie off the bike, I handed Blackbeard's present to her for safe keeping. I hooked my finger into her belt loop with a tug, pulling her against me.

"You're not thinking about making a run for it again, are you?" I asked lightly.

I knew she wouldn't. But something was off about her this morning, and I wouldn't rest easy until she told me what was going on.

Hattie rolled her eyes and rose on tiptoe with a quick peck to my lips.

"I'm not running, I swear. I'm fine, Neil."

She hooked her arm through mine, tugging me toward the clubhouse. When we stepped inside, a blast of music and laughter greeted us. Blackbeard wore a paper crown, lopsided on his head, with dozens of ropey beaded necklaces draped around his neck. Cousins, nieces, and nephews clamored around him as he passed out candy. His abuela scolded him in Spanish from the bar, carrying a plate piled high with food.

"Diego, sit down and eat," she called. "You're too skinny. I spent all morning in the kitchen and you haven't even touched a bite yet."

Blackbeard waded through the kids as they fished around in his pockets for more candy. His abuela held up a bite of food on a fork with an insistent look.

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“Abuela, I can feed myself—” he protested.

“Eat!”

He sighed and closed his mouth around the fork, taking the bite. His abuela beamed and patted his shoulder.

“You’re a good boy. But you shouldn’t be single at your age. Why don’t you have a wife yet?”

Blackbeard glanced up and noticed Hattie and me by the door. He waved us in, looking somewhat relieved at the distraction.

“It’s about time you two showed up,” he said. “I was getting ready to send out a search party. Maybe you can convince Abuela that I’m not the marrying kind, and any woman who bothered to marry me would be miserable.”

“I don’t believe that for a second,” Hattie countered, setting the gift on a nearby table with the other gifts. “Abuela, keep wearing him down.”

Blackbeard swore softly. His Abuela swatted him and clucked her tongue.

“Watch your language, Diego. Such a filthy mouth.”

“Believe me, Abuela,” he replied. “The ladies don’t have any problem with that.”

She gasped and swatted him again. He laughed, skirting out of reach.

I watched Hattie during the party. Searching for signs that would indicate why she'd been so distracted and reserved lately. If something was bothering her, she would tell me in her own time. But I hated waiting. Hated thinking that she was fighting some invisible battle alone, without me.

The only thing that brought me some measure of comfort was seeing her wearing the cut I had made for her. Kingpin's Property arched across her back in bold letters, announcing to the world that she was mine. And my ring glittered on her finger. She never took it off these days.

After the gifts had been opened, and half the food had been demolished, the door opened. Nine bikers filed in.

Instantly, everyone in the clubhouse bristled at the newcomers' colors.

Forsaken MC.

I pushed my chair back, wood scraping against wood, rising to my feet. I caught Hattie's eye on the other side of the room and beckoned to her. She practically flew to my side.

The Forsaken fanned out, surveying the room. They weren't here for the party.

"What the fuck do you want?" I demanded.

The leader, Al "Popeye" Bradbury, stepped forward and gestured at the room. He was a grizzly old man—older than me—with a patch over one eye, a brawny build, and forearms covered in sailor tattoos from his time spent in the Navy.

"We were in the area and we thought we'd drop by to extend a neighborly hello."

“You’re not welcome here,” Blackbeard said, gruffly. “So you can take your neighborly hello and shove it up your ass.”

Crash dropped his beer, glass shattering on the floor, and started forward. Vlad grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and yanked him back.

“Youfuckerskilled my brother,” Crash spat.

Popeye put a hand over his heart in nothing but a condescending gesture.

“And I sincerely apologize for that. Why don’t we let bygones be bygones?”

Crash swore and fought against Vlad’s hold. Vlad shoved him down into a chair, one meaty hand clamped on his shoulder to keep him in place.

“You know damn well you’re not welcome here, Popeye,” I said.

The Forsaken had been a thorn in our side for years. Testing the boundaries of our turf. On more than one occasion, we got into a heated skirmish or two, protecting what belonged to us, what we’d fought so hard to build.

Popeye held up his hands in surrender.

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“Time to go, boys,” he said. “We wouldn’t want to ruin the fun.”

He waited while his brothers filed out again, one by one. Then Popeye gave a salute to me.

“Maybe we can come to an agreement sometime in the future. Wouldn’t you like to settle this tiff between our clubs once and for all?”

“I’ll rest easy when you’re dead and buried,” I shot back.

He chuckled.

“You’re an old dog, too, Kingpin. Your days are numbered just like mine.”

Before I could reply, he ducked out the door. Engines revved in the parking lot with a deafening roar. Then silence descended on the clubhouse again.

I wrapped an arm around Hattie’s waist, pulling her close to kiss her temple.

“Are you all right?”

She nodded.

“You knew those men?”

“It’s been a few years since we butted heads. I honestly thought they might have backed down...”

Crash shoved Vlad away and stormed out of the clubhouse. Poor kid was probably furious that he couldn't get his hands on the men who murdered his brother.

I searched the room until I met Gatling's gaze. All it took was a flick of my wrist to indicate the order he already anticipated. Keep a lookout for Forsaken who might be hanging around to cause trouble.

Gatling dipped his head in acknowledgement and slipped from the room, quiet as a shadow.

"I'll go talk to the kid," Big G said.

I exchanged a glance with Blackbeard. The Forsaken would be back. And this time, they were going to hit our territory hard in an effort to claim it for themselves.

Two hours later, the party began to wind down. Hattie was in the kitchen, helping to put away the massive amount of leftover food. I placed my hand on the small of her back.

"How are you doing?"

She looked up at me, searching my face.

"I'm fine. But it sounds like trouble is brewing on the horizon for you."

I sighed and kissed her cheek.

"It's nothing I haven't seen before."

Hattie chewed her lower lip, looking as if she wanted to say something else. Then she shook her head and decided against it.

“What?” I prompted.

“Nothing,” she replied, turning away.

I took her by the hips, guiding her to face me.

“You’ve been off for the past few days,” I said. “Are you worried about the club? Is that it?”

“No, it’s—well, yes, I always worry about that a little bit. But...”

Hattie fiddled with my silver chain. She usually toyed with it when she need to soothe her mind. I waited for her to continue when she was ready. She swallowed and blew out a breath, then dragged her gaze up to meet mine.

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“I’m pregnant, Neil,” she whispered. “I took three tests today. That’s why we were late. I had to be sure.”

The air punched out of my lungs.

Holy fuck. We were going to have a baby. At fifty-five years old, I would be a father. Something I never thought possible.

Hattie took my hand and pressed it to her stomach.

“I had hoped for this. For so long. When we got married again, I didn’t really think about it anymore. We were going to spend the rest of our lives together, and that was enough for me. But now...”

“It’s okay to be scared,” I replied.

She smiled softly.

“But I’m not. I’m ready for this. For a little boy, who looks just like you. Or a little girl who has you wrapped around her little finger.”

I managed a faint laugh.

“I wish I was as brave as you are.”

Worry flickered across her face. I realized how that sounded—like I wasn’t happy about the baby. I brushed my knuckles against her cheek.

“I just meant that you’ve always known you wanted to have a child. You wanted to be a mother. I...didn’t want to turn out like my old man. So, I figured it was safer to assume that being a father wasn’t in the cards for me.”

“You’re nothing like your dad, Neil,” Hattie whispered.

I wished I could believe that. But I still saw his face when I looked in the mirror—his gray eyes, the line of his nose, the set of his mouth. And his anger. Simmering just beneath the surface. My father had turned it against me, beating me black and blue. But I used my anger to defend my club, protecting my family.

I took Hattie’s arms and pulled them up around my neck, bringing her body flush against mine. She hugged me tight without a word, letting the news sink in.

“I’m going to need all the help I can get, chasing after our little rugrat,” I said. “I can’t imagine my knees will be in good shape by the time the kid is old enough to play catch in the yard.”

Hattie chuckled and broke away to look at me.

“You have plenty of men to back you up.”

Fuck, I loved her. More than words could ever say. My wife and soon to be the mother of my child.

“I hope you’re aware that I’m going to be a pain in the ass from here on out,” I said. “If you thought I was overprotective before, you’ll be smothered now.”

Hattie shrugged.

“Well, I would expect nothing less from my husband.”

Something primal curled around my heart at her words. I looped my arms around her, crushing her against my chest. Hattie smiled, kissing me, slow and deep and all-consuming.

My wife. Carrying our child. Just when I had resigned myself to losing her, she came back to me and made me the happiest man in the world.