



Man of Lies

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Category: Romance, Adult, M-m Romance, Crime And Mafia

Description: Mason:

I live my life in perfect control. I have to. My family depends on me to protect them, and my work keeps me buried in deadlines. The only time I let myself breathe is on my bike, tearing through the night at speeds that could easily kill me.

Then Silas came crashing into my world. He's chaos wrapped in leather, all wild grins and eyes that see straight through me. He feeds my adrenalin fix in other ways. When he touches me, he tears through every wall I've built, leaving me shaking, exhausted, and craving more.

But the closer I let him get, the more I see the shadows he tries to hide. I don't know what he's keeping from me, but I know it's dangerous.

And I'm afraid it's the kind of danger that could tear my family apart.

Silas:

I should stay away from Mason. He's too sharp, too determined, and too dangerous for someone like me. The more he fights our connection, the more I want him. Watching him unravel is addictive—the way his control cracks when he's on his bike or in my arms.

But Mason's not just a man; he's a wildfire. If I'm not careful, he'll burn through the carefully crafted lies that keep my life together. Because the truth is, I'm living a double life. One wrong move, and everything I've worked for—everything I care about—could go up in smoke.

Mason's the kind of man who'll throw himself into the flames to save someone he loves.

I just don't know if I'm worth saving.

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Chapter One

MASON

The metalcot creaked under me like it was about to give up on life.

Couldn't blame it—I felt the same.

The mattress was thin enough to count as a form of penance, and the springs jammed into the base of my spine just hard enough to remind me that I'd hit rock bottom. Again.

The air in the storage room was stale and smelled faintly of dust, sweat, and old booze. Overhead, a single bulb drifted on a stripped wire, filling the room with weak light that illuminated every flaw: the scuffed concrete floor, water-stained walls, and a desk strewn with a graveyard of scattered tools and empty beer bottles.

The Dead End wasn't a place that improved anyone's life, but I kept crawling back for reasons I couldn't explain. It wasn't much, just a biker bar filled with outlaws and mean drunks, but the chaos drowned out the noise in my head.

Some days, that was enough.

A muffled crash thudded against the wall, followed by the sharp tinkle of breaking glass. A low rumble of voices rolled in beneath the mournful whine of good ol' Southern rock spilling from the jukebox.

I lay flat on my back, staring at the ceiling until my vision blurred. The bridge of my glasses pinched, but I didn't bother fixing it. I'd told Silas I just needed a place to crash—which was mostly true.

What I hadn't told him was why.

I hadn't explained that the noise in my head was too loud tonight, or that the home I shared with my brothers felt so big and airless, I could barely breathe.

Eden House was meant to be a Beaufort family legacy, passed from one generation to the next—but Boone had no blood heirs, just a stubborn streak and a house too big for one man. Rather than see it handed off to the state, or worse, some distant cousin who'd never stepped foot in Louisiana, he'd left it to us instead. A pack of strays with his name on our adoption papers and nowhere else to go.

For a man who'd spent his childhood hopscotching between trailer parks, barely one step ahead of CPS, Eden was too big, quiet, and full of a past that didn't belong to me. Stately arches, polished floors, sprawling grounds...on paper, it had everything my brothers and I wanted. Wealth. Permanence. A place to belong. But I'd never been able to shake the feeling that we were just borrowing it, living in the remnants of someone else's history.

Sometimes, it was just easier to leave.

No one asked why. Not my brothers, and sure as hell not Silas. That wasn't his way. He just took one look at the strain on my face, pointed to the storage room at the back of the bar, and told me to lock the door behind me.

I liked to pretend I kept coming back because of the lack of questions, but I'd never had a talent for lying to myself.

I came here for him.

Silas McKenna was a problem I didn't need—and one I couldn't shake.

I found him the way I find all my trouble—by accident, with a bit of bad luck thrown in. My bike had decided to betray me at the worst possible moment. A brand-new fire engine red Ducati Panigale V4, all sleek lines and brutal speed, and it still managed to stall out like a temperamental show pony, thanks to some bullshit with the quickshifter. It left me stranded on a sweltering Louisiana highway, cursing Italian engineering, and torn between pushing the bike to the shade of a nearby lot or sticking around to watch a python slither across the pavement.

Silas stood behind the bar, lazily dragging a rag across the counter, all broad shoulders and long legs. Built like he knew how to take a punch but was better at throwing them. The permanent scruff darkening his jaw only added a careless charm to his easy, lopsided grin—the kind that said he didn't take a damn thing seriously. Least of all me.

"You buy that thing to ride or pose with it?" he drawled, glancing at my bike through the window.

I hated him instantly. Until I didn't.

Our dynamic hadn't changed in the past two months. Silas: the biker ex-con, chaos wrapped in denim and leather, driving me up the wall with his smartass attitude. And me: the uptight lawyer, fully aware I should stay away but unable to resist. Every few weeks, I found myself walking back through the door, tossing out some excuse about needing a place to crash, then locking myself in the back room he kept for drunks too far gone to drive.

Now, instead of sleeping, I lie there counting heartbeats while the last person I

needed to be tangling with lingered on the other side of the door. Talking. Teasing. Saying things I didn't want to hear but couldn't stop listening to.

"Door's still locked, counselor," he called, his lazy drawl making the flimsy barrier between us feel paper-thin. "You know, if you wanted privacy, you could've stayed home."

"Go away, Silas. I'm trying to sleep."

His laugh was a slow, knowing rumble that slipped under my skin and stayed there. "You didn't come here to sleep."

No. I hadn't. That was the problem.

"Still playing hard to get?" The question was all smoke and whiskey. "We both know this locked door is just for show. If I really wanted in, you wouldn't stop me."

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My jaw was locked so tight my teeth ached. His sandpaper rasp was doing things to me, stripping my self-control down to raw nerves. I clenched the metal frame of the cot, sweat slicking my palm, wound so tight I half-expected my bones to creak under the pressure. It would take nothing—just a flick of my belt, a hand shoved down my pants—but no matter how quiet I was, he'd know. Somehow, he always knew.

"Silas," I ground out, hating the crack in my voice. "Go back to the bar."

He didn't. Of course, he didn't. I was so attuned to his presence that it was easy to pick up the scrape of his boots when he shifted.

"You've been working too hard. All those late nights. All that stress winding you up. Bet you've got a knot somewhere." His voice dipped, rich with promise, and I could almost feel his fingers at the base of my neck. Warm. Callused. Knowing. "Wouldn't take much to work it out for you, counselor."

He wasn't wrong. The grind of deadlines and late nights had dominated my life for years. If I slowed down, even for a second, everything I juggled would come crashing down. It was all I knew. All I allowed myself to know. And somehow, despite the gulf of differences between us, he saw it.

"You don't know anything about me," I protested, forcing the words out through clenched teeth.

"Don't I?" His words carried a private thread of amusement, as if he was savoring a joke at my expense. "I know you can't stop coming back. I know you lock yourself in that room and hope it'll keep me away. But it never does, does it?"

I squeezed my eyes shut, fighting a surge of helplessness, but it was too late. My control was already slipping. With unsteady fingers, I popped the button on my fly and slid a hand beneath my waistband. I was already so hard it hurt, and a strangled moan caught in my throat. I bit down on my lip to keep the sound from escaping.

But he knew. He always fucking knew.

"Come on, counselor." His low growl ripped up my spine. "Open the door."

My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth, dry as dust. I swallowed hard. The room was stifling. My glasses were fogging, and I shoved them up my nose more roughly than necessary.

"I told you," I hissed, squeezing my swollen length to the point of pain, "I'm tired."

"Tired, huh?" He let the word hang, thick with disbelief. "Bet I could wake you up real quick. Or maybe you're not tired at all. Maybe you just don't want to admit what you're really doing in there. Tell me, sweetheart. Do you get off thinking about me when you're all alone? Or do you need me here to push you over the edge?"

I scoffed, dragging my hand from my waistband and white-knuckling the cot's metal frame instead. "Don't flatter yourself," I muttered between stiff lips. "Whatever you're imagining, it's not gonna happen. This is just a convenient place to crash."

"Bullshit." Just like that, the teasing lilt dropped from his tone, replaced by something cool and certain. "You're just scared."

"I don't get scared."

"Pretty boy, you live like you're scared of everything," he drawled mockingly. "Scared of screwing up, mostly. Losing control. That's why you come to me. So I can take it

from you."

Every scrap of heat left my body in a rush. I sat up abruptly, buttoning my slacks and glaring at the locked door. "I don't know you," I said softly. "You don't know me."

"Yeah," Silas mused under his breath. "That's what makes this fun."

I winced and opened my collar, dragging thick, humid air through my nostrils. He wasn't wrong. That was the worst part. We'd both been dancing around our attraction for too long.

The door creaked slightly, as if he'd leaned against it. "I can't promise you much," he said, quieter now, rough in a way that made breathing hurt. "But I can promise I'll be good to you. All you've got to do is let me in."

The insane urge to give in crashed over me. I hated how much I wanted it. Wanted him. It wouldn't take much. Just two steps, and I'd be at the door.

Instead, I snatched my helmet from the foot of the cot and yanked the door open so hard that Silas had to catch himself on the frame.

God, he was beautiful. Built like a man who never had to ask twice for anything. Worn jeans clung to muscular thighs, stretched tight in all the right places, like they'd been made to fit him specifically. His long, dark hair was tied at the nape of his neck, improbably neat and clean for a man who lived above a dive bar. Plenty of older bikers had the look, but it wasn't just anaesthetic on him. It was effortless. No one else wore it quite like he did.

For a moment, I forgot why I needed to leave. All I wanted was to lean into him and let his strength and warmth seep into me. Steady me. Or maybe drop to my knees, wrap my arms around those powerful thighs, and beg him to put his hands on me. But

then his dark eyes met mine, and reality hit me like a sledgehammer.

I shoved past him and bolted toward the parking lot.

Humidity slapped me across the face, bathing me in sweat when I stepped outside. I told myself I wasn't running, but the crunch of my boots hitting gravel said otherwise.

My Ducati waited at the edge of the lot, its sleek lines catching the flickering neon of the Dead End's sign.

The door slammed open behind me. "Running won't help, kid," Silas called, laughter threading through his voice.

The Ducati was sleek and aggressive and built for speed. It wasn't the easiest machine, but it responded to me like a well-trained animal. Every twist of the throttle was an extension of my will. I leaned into each curve, allowing the raw power to hum through my bones, drowning out the chaos in my head. When crashing at the Dead End didn't work, this was my only other option—burning down the back roads, trying to outrun myself.

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Sometimes, I almost believed I could.

Then I caught a flash of light in my sidemirror. Another motorcycle, coming up fast.

My stomach bottomed out.

The bike growled as I pushed it harder, speedometer climbing, yellow line blurring beneath my tires.

But it wasn't enough. It never was.

Chapter Two

SILAS

The beautiful bastard was going to get himself killed. He was leaning into every turn like he was trying to kiss the asphalt, as if he had something to prove.

I kept close enough to catch the flare of that damn Ducati's tail light but far enough to stay off his radar. Keeping pace was easy; tracking someone who didn't want to be followed was second nature by now. Even when they tried to outrun me.

My bike growled steadily beneath me, perfectly contrasting with the Ducati's shrill, aggressive scream. Beneath those starched suits, Mr. Attorney was all flash and speed—a high-strung showoff on two wheels. My custom Scout wasn't built to match his pace, but it had muscle where it counted.

So did I.

The heat never let up. Not even at night. After more than a year stuck in the Louisiana backwoods, I should've been used to it, but thick, swampy air clung to my skin beneath my jacket. The only relief came from speed—the rush of wind whipping past, carrying the reek of damp earth and sunbaked asphalt.

I kept my eyes on him—always on him—watching as he punished that bike like it owed him money. That kind of reckless riding didn't come without a cost. The bike would take its pound of flesh soon enough.

For a man who kept his mouth shut and his cards close, Mason Beaufort was an easy read. At least, for me. I knew the type. He carried too much in his head with nowhere to put it, so he flirted with trouble like me, or with death on the back of a machine more than capable of granting it.

Idiot.

I had no business messing with him. He wasn't like the usual lowlifes and lost souls that drifted through my roadhouse—he was finer than that, sharper in ways that had nothing to do with the cut of his suits. I knew better than to get involved with a man like him. Letting anyone in was a risk I couldn't afford. Not here, especially now, when I was walking a line I knew wouldn't hold forever. But Mason kept coming back. And I kept letting him.

I didn't even know why.

He was attractive in a clean-cut, conventional way I'd never gone for before. Half the time, I couldn't tell if he was fit or just wiry; those expensive suits hid everything. His black hair was always styled as if he didn't want anyone to see it undone, which only made me want to wreck it more, just to see it wild. Too many office fluorescents and

not enough sun had left him pale, but his blue eyes burned like the center flame of a gas burner. And those glasses—wire-rimmed, severe, and a full-on kink all by themselves. Whenever he pushed them up his nose, I had to fight the urge to bend him over something sturdy.

It could be the contradiction that got me. He was so controlled on the surface but absolutely raw underneath. Whatever the reason, I could never tell him to stay away. He was stubborn, arrogant, and too damn pretty for his own good.

But tonight, he was mine to deal with.

The road twisted sharply, and Mason's bike fishtailed across a patch of loose scree. My stomach dropped as the Ducati went into a sudden death wobble.

"Christ," I muttered, gunning the engine to close the distance.

Mason eased up on the throttle and shifted his weight, steadying the bike enough to veer onto a gravel path. I followed, slowing just enough to keep my own tires from skidding. Pokeweed and sedge crowded the path, their wiry stems reaching into the hard-packed dirt where the gravel had thinned to dust. A copse of water oaks and sweetgums tangled together, shielding the path from the empty highway.

His bike rolled to a crawl before stopping just ahead, the engine cutting off with a final, guttural note. He didn't move; he just sat there, shoulders stiff, helmet still on, while I pulled up behind him. Quiet stretched around us. Even the crickets and cicadas had gone silent, smothered by the fading echo of our engines.

At last, he ripped off his helmet and dragged in a breath, but still, he didn't turn. He just sat there, head bowed, like he was thinking too hard—or trying not to think at all.

"Nice show," I said, swinging a leg off my bike. "What's the plan now? Set the bike

on fire and walk home?"

He stiffened, but he didn't look at me. "Go away, Silas."

"Not a chance." I leaned against the Scout, arms crossed, leisurely looking him over. "You're lucky you didn't eat it back there. One bad turn, and I'd be scraping you off the pavement. Not exactly my idea of a fun night."

He let out an irritated sigh and finally looked up at me. Moonlight glinted off his glasses, but it couldn't hide the tension tightening the corners of his eyes. "Why are you following me?"

"Somebody's got to keep you from turning yourself into roadkill."

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"I wasn't—" He broke off, dragging a frustrated hand through his hair. "I know what I'm doing."

"Sure, you do." I flicked the edge of his helmet, letting it clack under my knuckles. "Nothing says 'I've got this handled' like almost wiping out at ninety."

Mason sighed and pulled off his gloves with slow, methodical tugs, like he needed something to focus on. His fingers flexed once before he curled them into a fist, knuckles pressing into his thigh. "You're an ass."

"Takes one to know one, counselor." I stepped closer, just enough to get under his skin and crack his composure. He smelled...expensive. "What's the deal? You spend all day calling the shots, and now you're out here trying to see how the other half lives?"

Damn. If looks could kill.

His lips flattened into a hard line, but he didn't answer. All walls and no doors—same as always. Except tonight, cracks were starting to show: the tight jaw, the vein twitching at his temple, the way his hands kneaded his thighs like he didn't know what to do with them. His cheeks were flushed from the ride, and his hair was damp at the temples. He'd look almost boyish if I ignored the fire banked in those bright eyes. They were weapons, and he wielded them like one, trying to cut me with a single look.

People didn't intimidate me. Sharp edges didn't mean shit—I'd seen enough to know they were usually just window dressing. Everyone had a tell, and Mason's was how

he held himself, wound tight as a tripwire. His glasses had slid halfway down his nose, and he ripped them off, shoving them into his shirt pocket with a rough, irritated motion. It shouldn't have been sexy, but somehow, it was.

"You know," I said, dragging out the words like I was turning them over, "if you needed to blow off steam, you could've just said so. I can think of a few ways that don't involve wrecking your bike."

His gaze snapped to mine. "I'm not?—"

"Oh, I know," I cut in smoothly, letting a slow grin curve my lips. "You don't need anything. You're fine. Always in control." I tilted my head, watching the pulse flickering beneath his jaw. "Except you're not, and we both know it."

"Stop pushing me, Silas," he warned.

"You want me to push you." I reached out, grabbing the edge of his bike's handlebar and leaning in. "It's the reason you keep turning up. You don't touch my booze, and you're not looking for company. So what is it, counselor? You like how it feels when I back you into a corner?"

His tongue darted out to wet his bottom lip—a tell he probably didn't even realize he had.

"You want to lose control?" I asked, dropping into a deeper register. "Let me help you."

His breath hitched, and his hands tightened on the handlebars, but he held his ground and met my eyes. That was all the invitation I needed.

I closed the gap between us, one hand sliding over his to pry it off the bar, the other

gripping his jaw to tilt his face up. His pulse fluttered under my thumb, breath coming fast and uneven. I leaned in close enough for our noses to brush, close enough to absorb the heat from his skin.

"You're already halfway there, wildcat," I whispered, my breath skating over the seam of his lips. "Take the last step."

His eyes widened, and his breath hitched. His chest heaved beneath that damp, clinging shirt, every inhale unsteady, like he was fighting himself. That kind of self-control might have impressed me—if I didn't already know it was hanging by a thread.

"This is what you wanted tonight," I murmured, stroking his jaw with my thumb, holding him exactly where I wanted him. "So take it."

His throat bobbed on a hard swallow, and I saw it—the push and pull of desire. The battle against whatever was holding him back. He wasn't going to make the move. No matter how bad he wanted it, he was too afraid.

I could only be so patient.

So I took the choice out of his hands and kissed him.

Chapter Three

SILAS

When our lips met, I knew I'd been right—he needed this just as bad as I did.

His body locked up for a single heartbeat before he broke, fisting my shirt like he couldn't decide whether to pull me closer or push me away. I chose for him, wrapping

an arm around his waist and hauling him straight into my arms.

That answered my first question: he was slim but tight with lean muscle. So, he didn't spend all his time in the office.

I pressed him back against his bike, sliding a hand into his hair to wreck whatever careful styling he'd done that morning. It was softer than I'd expected. The way he shuddered under my touch woke the primal monster deep inside me. My other hand settled on his hip, tugging him flush against me as I deepened the kiss.

"You don't make things easy, do you?" I murmured against his damp lips. "So damn stubborn."

"Shut up," he growled, nipping at my bottom lip and glaring when I pulled back enough to meet his gaze. Color spread down his neck, but I knew it wasn't embarrassment. His breath was coming fast. I'd barely touched him, and he was already primed to explode. I grazed my teeth over his jaw, then bit down just hard enough to win a hiss from between his teeth.

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"You're trembling, gorgeous," I whispered, biting down harder this time. "Go ahead, tell me to stop. I dare you."

Before he could gather his pride enough to argue, I spun us both, putting myself between him and the bike. Leaning back against the leather seat, I locked my hands around his biceps and pulled him down to his knees. A flare of pride had him resisting, but just for a second. I didn't ease up, and the fight drained out of him as he hit the gravel.

"Good boy," I said, and I meant it, but my teasing lilt had his lips pinching tight.

"Don't push it," he warned, but his hands were already clutching my thighs.

I combed my fingers through his ruined hair, tugging just enough to tip his head back. Holding his gaze, I wordlessly unzipped my jeans. Mason's eyes flared, and his gaze dropped, watching hungrily as I pulled my hard length free of my boxers.

"This is why you keep coming back, isn't it?" I murmured, leisurely stroking myself just to watch his eyes go dark. "You kept pushing, hoping to force the issue, waiting for me to take the choice from you. Tell me I'm wrong."

He didn't. He couldn't. The flush creeping up his throat was answer enough.

I hooked a finger under his chin, forcing his gaze back to mine. "Say it."

His lips parted, but no sound came out. His throat worked, then finally, "Yes," he bit out, raw-voiced and furious. "Goddammit, yes."

A low growl rumbled in my throat as I applied gentle pressure under his chin, coaxing his lips apart. "Open up," I rasped, dragging the swollen head of my cock along his bottom lip.

Mason's breath hitched. His lashes feathered against flushed cheeks, eyes slipping shut as he surrendered to the inevitable. Then he did as he was told. His lips parted, his pink tongue flicking out to wet them, and a warm rush of breath fanned over me.

"That's it," I groaned, pushing into his mouth as he moaned around me, the vibration shooting through my spine like lightning. I gripped the back of his head, angling him just right, and started sliding in and out of that perfect mouth. His fingers curled into the leather seat, nails biting the seam as he let me take what I wanted. His tongue flicked along my length, teasing the sensitive cleft, each slow drag setting off a burn in my blood.

This was a mistake, and we both knew it. The kind of crazy that got people hurt. But knowing better didn't mean a damn thing when he was right there, on his knees in the dirt, nostrils flared because his mouth was too full of cock to breathe. The sight hit me like a drug; a fantasy I hadn't even known I had until now. Until him.

God, he was hot. Worth every bit of trouble he was about to bring me.

"Look at me," I commanded sharply.

His eyes snapped open, glassy with lust even in the dark. I fisted a hand in his hair, guiding him deeper until I hit the back of his throat. He gagged but didn't pull away, determined to take whatever I gave him.

"That's it," I murmured, giving him the approval he craved. "Take it all."

The slick, obscene sounds spilling from his mouth set a pulse of heavy need

throbbing in my balls. I reached down, fingers tracing the stretch of his lips around my cock, skimming over the bulge pressing against the soft curve of his cheek. He tried to moan, but the sound was muffled, nothing but a desperate vibration against my skin. Sweat slicked his temples, his breath steaming from his nostrils in short, ragged bursts. Bathed in moonlight, flushed and wrecked, he was so goddamn beautiful I nearly came on the spot.

"You want this," I hissed, bucking my hips. "You've been gagging for it for months. Ever since we met."

Mason's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed convulsively, pulling off my cock long enough to gasp, "Yes," and then plunging back down on it.

I cradled his head in both hands, guiding his movements until he was working me faster, his pace turning desperate. Precum smeared his lips and chin, shining in the moonlight as he moaned around my length. His cheeks hollowed, dripping saliva down my shaft, lost in the sheer pleasure of surrendering—for once. If he'd ever done this before, it hadn't been recently. I'd put money on that. He was wound so tight that I could probably get him off with only words.

"You're gonna make me come," I warned, throwing back my head and fighting to hold out just a little longer.

I didn't want this to end too soon. Once it was over, the post-nut clarity would be a killer for both of us.

But I couldn't last forever.

"Fuck," I groaned, tipping my head back and staring up at the stars spinning overhead. I let go, spilling into Mason's soft, waiting mouth. When I looked down, he was still there, eyes wet, throat working, taking it all. He didn't pull away until I was

wrung dry.

I slumped against the bike, panting, and finally managed to loosen my grip on his hair, giving him room to breathe.

Still, I couldn't take my eyes off him, kneeling in the dirt like some kind of fallen angel, chest heaving, sweat pooling in the hollow of his throat. He licked his swollen lips, and my spent cock gave a lazy twitch at the sight of my release glistening on his tongue. His face was blank, shuttered tight, but his body told the truth. He was as hard as an iron bar, straining against the zipper of his fancy slacks, so thick that the fabric looked ready to bust.

I wanted to see him. Wanted my hands all over that pale, untouched skin. But forcing him to give in against his better judgment was even better. He needed it. And I loved giving him what he needed.

"Unzip," I ordered in a voice that had gone guttural.

He moved to obey, but he froze just as his fingers grazed the button at his waistband. His hand dropped, bracing against the ground instead. His head bowed low, hiding his expression, but I didn't miss how his fingers spasmed around a fistful of gravel.

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Silence consumed us. Even the cicadas sounded distant. It hit me then that he'd barely said five words since we parked. The most important one had been 'yes'—I'd made damn sure of that—but suddenly, I had the sinking feeling I'd missed something crucial.

And that wasn't like me.

"Angel," I said softly. I reached for his hair, but my hand froze midway. This wasn't something a touch could fix. Not with a man like him. "Hey. Look at me."

He didn't. Guess he was done taking orders. Instead, he deliberately swiped his thumb over the corner of his mouth and stood. He brushed the dirt from his palms and shoved them deep into his pockets, like that would hide the shaking. When his eyes finally met mine, they were ice cold.

"I have work in the morning," he said in a voice so hollow I barely recognized it. "I need to go."

"Whoa," I protested, buttoning my jeans and catching him by the bicep when he tried to circle around me. "Hold it, slick. You don't have to?—"

"I said I need to go," he cut me off, slipping free like vapor and swinging a leg over the bike. His back was to me as he grabbed his helmet and jammed it over his head, movements mechanical but not angry. It would've been better if he were angry. Anger was something I understood, something I could diffuse. Not this.

His hands had steadied by the time he adjusted the chin strap. He only looked at me

once his face was safely hidden behind the reflective visor.

"Don't worry," he said, voice low and muffled. "I'll drive safe."

He didn't wait for a response. The engine roared to life, shattering the stillness and drowning out whatever I might've said. He twisted the throttle and pulled out so cautiously that I knew it was a show for my benefit. So I wouldn't follow. Then, just as the red glow of his tail light began to fade, the Ducati shrieked. He gunned it, vanishing into the night.

I sighed and dropped onto a half-rotted log by the roadside. I sat there long after the sound of his bike faded, staring at the empty stretch of highway, trying to figure out where the hell I'd gone wrong.

I'd thought—I'd been sure—this was what he wanted when he started sniffing around my bar. An outlet. A way to let go. But the look on his face told me I'd misjudged him.

"Shit." I dug a cigarette from my pocket and lit up. I hated the taste, but the habit was reflex at this point. The nicotine steadied my hands.

For the first time in years, I had no idea what my next move was.

Chapter Four

MASON

The first, crumbling step up the back stairs of Eden House nearly took me down. The second I lifted a foot, my thighs seized up; a deep, biting ache that I'd be paying for all day. I clenched my teeth and hauled myself up anyway, gripping the railing like a safety rope on the side of Everest.

Sweat trickled down my spine, soaking into the waistband of my running shorts. Early summer meant morning was the only time to squeeze in a run without frying like a chicken wing, but the humidity was brutal. I felt soggy, wrung-out, and useless as a limp dishrag.

My lungs still burned from the twelve-mile punishment I'd put myself through, but at least my head was finally quiet. Halfway through the run, my thoughts had burned out, leaving nothing but the whoosh of my breath and the steady thunder of my heartbeat.

The trail had been here long before us, carved through cypress and palmettos by generations of hunters hauling game to the Jesuit priests who once ran an orphanage on this land before it became the Beaufort estate. Now it was mine. No cars. No people. Just me, the crushing humidity, the slap of my feet against packed earth, and the occasional rustle in the underbrush. It skirted the water's edge, then looped back toward the house, uneven enough to feel like penance if you ran hard.

The sky had just lightened to a brilliant, pre-dawn white by the time I dragged my cramping body back to the estate. Somewhere in the fields, a barred owl called, its low, haunting notes carrying over the quiet. The rolling lawns were steeped in blue and gray, and a nearby willow swayed like an antebellum ghost, its long branches trailing eerily in the breeze.

It still hit me sometimes—how crazy life had turned out. For a kid who grew up crammed in a single-wide with a heavy-drinking father and a mother who talked to people who weren't there and spent rent money on tarot readings, my world should have been nothing but missed opportunities and closed doors.

And for a long time, it was.

The day our mother disappeared and our father dumped us at the fire station with a

single trash bag stuffed with clothes, my twin brother, Ben, squeezed my hand so hard I thought he'd break it. Neither of us said a word. We didn't have to. We knew what came next—or thought we did.

If someone had told me then that we'd end up here, carrying a name that opened doors instead of slamming them shut, I would've laughed in their face. Or spit in it.

But Boone Beaufort took us in, gave us his name, and ensured we never went without again. He did the same for Gideon, Gage, and even Dominic, though none of us shared a drop of blood. And all he asked in return was everything—our loyalty, our futures, our souls—dedicated to making this parish better than the one that made us.

He'd given us a future, but sometimes I wondered if we'd never left the past behind. We'd only dressed it up in finer clothes. Because, for all the doors that opened, Ben had still spent five years rotting in a prison cell for something he never should have been locked up for. And I'd spent every second working myself to the bone to fix it—blasting through law school at double speed, throwing myself into a career that burned me at both ends, chasing every lead, every loophole, and every corrupt bastard who had helped lock him up.

Ben was always the one to take the hits. Even when we were kids, he'd stepped between me and our mother's worst moods, took the blame when our father was drunk, and made sure I ate, even if it meant going hungry himself. He fought when I wanted to run and stood between me and the world when it turned ugly.

And then, when we finally had a shot at something better, he left me behind.

Not out of selfishness—Ben didn't have that in him. Enlisting was just the next way he tried to carry the weight alone. He always said I was the smart one who could take Boone's second chance and make it count. So, he tried to set me free; signed up,

shipped off, and let the military chew him up and spit him back out.

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All so he wouldn't drag me down with him.

He'd barely found his footing as a civilian before they tossed him in a cell for saving Gage's life. All it took was one wrong blow when Gage's old man came at him with drunken rage and a gun. The bastard went down and didn't get back up, and Ben's self-defense claim crumbled when the gun disappeared. He did five years; it would've been life if my buddy Colton hadn't turned up the missing weapon.

Ben had been granted supervised release—but not freedom. His original conviction hadn't been vacated, just called into question, which meant he was stuck in limbo while the post-conviction review dragged on. The court hadn't overturned the charges, just loosened the leash to cover their ass. He was out, but only under strict conditions: ankle monitor, regular check-ins, and a curfew tighter than most parolees.

One wrong move and he'd be back behind bars.

Until Ben was safe, I didn't have time to think about anything else—least of all a reckless, leather-clad mistake I couldn't quit despite my best efforts. But this morning, I'd finally exhausted myself enough to silence the craving.

I stalled out on the steps, clutching the handrail, and waited for a wave of dizziness to pass. My whole focus narrowed to the fridge inside the house—Gatorade, water, salt, anything to keep my legs from locking up before I could drag myself to the shower.

"What, you training for a marathon?"

I dragged my head up, still catching my breath, and spotted Gage sprawled on the

porch swing like he didn't have a care in the world. Damn near gave me a heart attack.

Barefoot, shirtless, and sunk deep into the cushions of the swing, he looked like he'd either just rolled out of bed or never made it there in the first place. A half-eaten piece of cold fried chicken dangled from his fingers, grease shining on his knuckles.

I swallowed hard, but my throat was still dry as hell. "Something like that."

"Figures," Gage muttered, resting an arm over the back of the swing. "You keep pushing yourself like this, you're gonna drop dead before forty."

I dragged a wrist across my forehead and shot my youngest brother a dry look. "Then I'd better make this decade count."

Gage snorted, stripping a bite of chicken from the bone. "Yeah, well, let me know if you need help picking your headstone. I know a nice little grassy spot in the family cemetery. Right beside Boone. You two always had the most in common. Workaholics with a martyr complex. Never let anybody help 'til it's too late."

I squinted and looked away, past the edge of the porch where dawn had just started painting gold on the treetops. Sweat was cooling fast on my skin, leaving me clammy, every inch of me aching from the miles I'd used to punish myself. I flexed my tingling fingers, shaking out the lingering tremor. The worst part wasn't the exhaustion—it was knowing it wouldn't last.

The swing creaked as Gage rocked it with the lazy drag of his foot across the porch planks.

"I get it, you know," he said after a pause, sounding like he'd rather be prying his nails out with rusty pliers than having any kind of heart-to-heart. "You think if you

keep moving, nothing can catch up. But you can't outrun the past. Trust me. I oughta know."

"I'm not running from anything," I muttered, flicking him an annoyed glance.

Gage made a skeptical noise, tearing off the last bite of chicken before wrapping the bone in a napkin. "Yeah? Then what the hell do you call this?" He waved a hand at me—sweat-soaked, shaking, and still gasping like I'd just gone twelve rounds with my own demons.

"I call it doing what needs to be done." I dragged a wrist across my forehead, flicking sweat onto the steps. "Gideon won't touch paperwork, and the foster program's got me running in and out of court every week. And let's be real—you and Dom flirt with trouble like it's a goddamn first date. Somebody's got to clean up the mess."

Gage snorted. "Uh-huh. And what's the endgame here? Keep going 'til you drop?"

I sighed and rubbed the back of my neck, rolling tension from my shoulders. "I'll rest when Ben's safe."

Gage's foot stilled against the porch. "And what if that day never comes?" He wasn't teasing now. "What if you fight like hell, do everything right, and it still ain't enough? You gonna run yourself into the ground forever?"

I turned my head just enough to look at him from the corner of my eye. Gage had learned the hard way that not all fights ended clean. Sometimes, you could claw your way out of hell only to find the devil waiting at the exit.

He was our youngest by nearly a decade, but life had put him through the wringer early. For years, he'd been all wild temper and bad decisions, throwing punches at the world like it owed him something. It was good to finally see some peace in his eyes.

That was Wyatt's doing. Gage had loved him his whole life, but it wasn't until he stopped running and owned it that he'd finally settled down.

The rest of us weren't likely to be that lucky.

"That's not going to happen," I said flatly. I couldn't afford to believe otherwise.

Gage studied me for a beat, then sighed, rubbing a hand over his unshaven jaw. "Boone used to say the same thing."

"Yeah, well. Good thing I'm not a sixty-year-old with a heart condition."

Gatorade felt like a fever dream for a moment, so I climbed the steps wearily and dropped onto the swing beside Gage. The wood groaned under our combined weight, but neither of us paid any mind. "It's too damn early for your philosophical bullshit," I muttered, bracing my forearms on my knees. "What are you even doing up?"

Gage shot me a look that said he knew exactly what I was doing, but he let it go for once. Instead, he stretched his legs out, crossing them at the ankles with a sigh. "Ivy had a rough night, so I sat up with her."

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"She doing okay?"

Gage sighed, glancing out at the gold-dappled oaks. "She will be," he said softly.

Ivy wasn't like most of the kids in Eden's foster program. She hadn't come through the system; she'd slipped through the cracks. From what I gathered, she'd spent months crashing in the back room at the Dead End—just like me—but Silas never let her get too comfortable. He'd tried to protect her, but the Dead End was dangerous, especially for a teenage girl.

Some thugs jumped her in the parking lot one night. If Gage hadn't been there, she might've disappeared across state lines, just another victim of interstate trafficking. After that, I pulled some strings, placed her in Eden's foster program, and ensured nobody came sniffing around.

That kind of shit happened all the time. The same world that ruined girls like Ivy was the one Silas moved through like he owned it.

And I still wanted him—desperately.

It was a nasty thought that lodged like a splinter under my skin. Impossible to ignore. I spent my days working with the Attorney General's task force, fighting to put men like Silas behind bars, and my nights pulling kids like Ivy out of trouble that had his fingerprints all over it. Yet every time I tried to stay away, I ended up right back where I started—circling him like a dog on a short chain.

Not all of us were as lucky as Gage and Wyatt.

I could still taste Silas—faint traces of salt and heat lingering on my lips like a brand. I could feel the weight of his hands, the hunger in his mouth, the quiet confidence in every move he made, like he knew exactly what I needed before I did. And maybe he did.

That was the problem.

It wasn't just about sex. It was how he looked at me, not with softness but with certainty. Like he saw straight through the walls I'd spent a lifetime building and had no intention of letting me hide. I wasn't used to that, and I hated how much it mattered.

I didn't regret leaving him on the side of the road without looking back. Maybe it made me a coward, but it was the smart play. I had responsibilities and a job that didn't leave room for indulgence. I'd taken what I wanted, watched the strain break across his face when he came, and bailed before he could return the favor. I couldn't risk him rewiring my brain for pleasure, but I had a sinking feeling it was already too late.

If I was being honest—and I usually was, at least with myself—I was unraveling. The tighter I pulled the threads, the faster everything slipped through my fingers.

Silas was a distraction I couldn't afford.

Chapter Five

MASON

I felt like I'd been steamrolled and left to bake in the Louisiana heat. The morning run was supposed to clear my head, but all it did was turn my legs to jelly and leave my lungs burning with every breath. But that was the point, wasn't it? Punishment, pure

and simple. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but add a sleepless night to the mix, and I was primed to crawl through the rest of the day fueled solely by caffeine and spite.

Mostly spite.

Now, crammed behind my desk in a cold metal chair, glasses sliding down my nose and shirt sticking to my back, I was starting to think I'd overdone it. Not that I'd ever admit it.

The office wasn't doing much for morale. For more than a year, the task force had operated out of a repurposed warehouse, a relic from when Devil's Garden still had industries that didn't revolve around farming or bribery. The place was all exposed brick, grimy, steel-framed windows, and a ceiling that leaked when it rained. With the AG funding our efforts to untangle decades of corruption, we should've rated a building that wasn't held together with duct tape. But maybe that was intentional. The rough edges had a way of keeping our cadre of cops and attorneys focused on what mattered.

The hum of efficiency was my meditation. The clacking keyboards and whining printers might've been almost soothing if not for the dull throb behind my eyes. No one cared if I was half-dead in this environment, as long as I delivered results.

My kind of place.

My eyes burned from the blue light of my laptop, so I shifted focus to the case files stacked at my elbow. The dog-eared manila folders felt like a relic in the age of cloud storage, but everything in Devil's Garden was stuck in the past.

I'd have worked off Sanskrit tablets if it meant getting closer to what mattered: tearing down the corrupt machine that had already stolen five years of my brother's

life. Money and connections ruled this town, but that didn't make the officials who buried the evidence untouchable.

They'd gotten away with it for too long, and I wouldn't stop until every piece of their rot was exposed.

I breathed deep and forced my attention back where it belonged. My stomach growled, and I glanced at the clock. I hadn't eaten since... yesterday, probably. By now, my body's signals were easy to ignore. I just wanted to finish combing through this stack of old warrant requests.

"Jesus, Mason."

I glanced up, irritated. Colton Langford was leaning against my desk, arms crossed, watching me with a look that bordered on amusement. We'd known each other since college, when we were both juggling a double course-load to fast-track our law degrees. We'd never set out to be friends; he had the kind of privileged childhood and easy confidence that made me want to punch him on principle. But apart from my brothers, he was my only friend these days.

Befriending Colt turned out to be the best decision I'd ever made. When he became the lead investigator for the AG, he'd pushed for me to join the special task force. He'd found the weapon that exonerated Ben and got him out of prison. Now, he was the one keeping Ben on conditional release in his own apartment. I owed him. But every time I thought about it, the shame was so intense I wanted to puke. Every step of the way, Colt had been the one saving Ben. Not me.

I sat back, removed my glasses, and gave him my undivided attention.

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Because subtlety was never his strong suit, he said, "You look like hell."

Just like that, my attention was lost.

"Thanks," I said dryly, returning to my file and flipping a page, hoping he'd take the hint.

Colt, being Colt, didn't take the hint. He dragged a chair over, sprawling out like he owned the place. Blond and handsome in that polished, GQ-magazine way, he looked like he'd stepped out of a country club and accidentally landed in a government office. His sense of style had rubbed off on me over the years, whether I liked it or not, but I still couldn't pull it off the way he did.

"You been here all morning?" he asked, tipping the chair back on two legs and looking around curiously, as if he hadn't been in the office for so long he'd forgotten what it looked like.

"Just like every morning," I said, not bothering to look up as I dragged a highlighter across a line item that caught my eye. "You should try it."

He rolled his eyes. "Look, I get it. You're on a mission, but you're not a machine. You haven't taken a day off in months. You're pushing too hard."

"Noted," I said flatly, still focused on the file.

"Yeah, I'll bet." He tilted his head, giving me that no-nonsense look he used to rattle witnesses. "You're done. Take a break."

I hated that tone—the senior investigator tone. He didn't use it often, but when he did, it always pissed me off. I paused, the highlighter bleeding into a single spot on the page, and glanced at him. "I'm busy."

"You're always busy," he said, unperturbed. Before I could respond, he stood, grabbed my elbow, and hauled me out of the chair with the strength of a guy who'd once been an All-American quarterback. "Time to get busy eating. Let's go."

I yanked my arm free and gave him a light shove. "You really get off on bossing people around."

"Works, doesn't it?" He smirked and straightened his tie. "Now, move your ass. And because I'm a considerate friend, I'll even treat."

I opened my mouth to argue, but his look stopped me cold. It wasn't pity; Colt knew better than to try that. It was more like he'd already hit his limit for bullshit this morning and pushing would only make it worse.

"Fine," I muttered, slamming my laptop shut with a sharp click and grabbing my attaché case. "But make it quick."

Colt grinned, already heading for the door. "You're the one who spends forty minutes deciding between a burger and a salad, Beaufort."

After hours in the cold, sterile office, the humidity hit me like a slap. It felt like being cuddled by a wet mop. Thankfully, the diner was only half a block away, and still, we were forced to peel off our suit jackets by the time we reached our table.

Devil's Garden wasn't exactly a tourist hotspot, and Lucille's sure as hell wasn't a place found in any guidebook. But it was better than a Michelin-starred restaurant. The squat, unassuming building and sagging awning promised nothing special, and

the hand-painted sign out front read simply: Breakfast, Lunch, Supper. No gimmicks.

Inside, it was even less impressive. The vinyl floors were scuffed by decades of footsteps, and the walls were crowded with mismatched art: local prints, family photos, and signs bearing slogans like laissez les bons temps rouler and tipping isn't a city in China. The tables smelled faintly of bleach water and always felt just a little sticky, and the chairs wobbled enough to make sitting down a calculated risk. But it was worth it for the fried catfish, po'boys dripping with gravy, and collard greens seasoned to perfection.

The wiry woman behind the counter yelled in a cigarette rasp, "Émile, I told you not to burn my roux! You do it again, and you're out!"

Through the pass-through, Émile didn't flinch; he kept stirring his giant pot with an even bigger wooden spoon.

She noticed us lurking at the entrance and flapped a towel at the crowded room. "Pick any open spot, baby. I'll be right with you."

Colt beelined through a crowd of blue-collar men in grease-stained coveralls, old couples nursing half-empty cups of coffee, and a kid in a football jersey stuffing his face with barbecue ribs. Warm and lively and noisy, too loud for my crowded head, but I followed anyway.

"You'll feel better after a dive into cholesterol," Colt said, propping his elbows on the table and studying the laminated menu we'd both memorized months ago.

I didn't bother answering, scanning the words swimming on the menu, but they refused to stick. The last thing I wanted was small talk and fry grease. My stomach churned at the thought, but I was running on fumes, and I knew it.

A waitress in a ponytail and Saints jersey sauntered over with a pitcher of ice water. "What can I get y'all?"

"Sweet tea and a shrimp po'boy for me," Colton said, decisive as always. He always ordered the same thing, and the smirk he slid my way when I added a grilled chicken salad told me I was just as predictable.

The girl arched a brow, clearly unimpressed with my choice. "You sure, sugar? We don't do iceberg lettuce and ranch here."

"Sweetheart, it's the only thing I'm sure of these days," I said, handing over our menus.

She shrugged like she'd seen worse choices, jotted it down, and left me to deal with a chuckling Colton.

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"Coffee and grilled chicken," he said, settling back and sipping his ice water. "God, you're fun, Beaufort."

"Says the man whose idea of branching out is spicy mayo on his po'boy," I shot back.

He grinned, completely unashamed. One of his most annoying qualities was his total indifference to other people's opinions. "Hey, I know what I like. You, on the other hand, act like food's a necessary evil. It's honestly a little sad."

I took a long pull from my coffee when it landed on the table, scalding the back of my tongue. It hit my stomach like straight vinegar, and I dug into my pocket for a roll of antacids. "Yeah, well, I'm not here to enjoy myself."

"No kidding," he said, his grin slipping into something more like a grimace. "You're lucky I like you, or I'd have ditched your ass back in college."

"You'd have failed macroeconomics without me."

He laughed, hooking one arm over the back of his chair, straining the buttons of his crisp dress shirt. It looked like something he'd ripped off a department store mannequin. His eyes were pale and shrewd as they studied me. "So, how's it going with Sheriff Vanderhoff's warrant history? Any leads on why every judge in this parish rubber stamps his no-knock warrants?"

Just like that, my mood soured. "It's like slamming my head against a brick wall."

He nodded, taking a sip of his tea. "Keep at it. Guy's slippery as an eel, but he can't

wriggle out of the net forever."

Vanderhoff was a thorn in every Beaufort's side. He and Boone had hated each other in that quiet, genteel way of old Southern families—cold smiles at Sunday service, daggers at the country club. But when Boone adopted us, his disdain boiled over. He made it his personal mission to keep us in line, throwing every petty charge he could at us as kids: vandalism, disorderly conduct, even a bogus theft charge that cost me a summer in court when I was sixteen.

When Ben accidentally snapped the neck of Gage's old man, Vanderhoff seized his chance. He handed the murder case to the DA, Preston Vaughn, on a silver platter. And for reasons I still couldn't understand, Boone hadn't fought back—not like we wanted him to. He'd thrown money at Ben's defense, hired the best lawyers, but it wasn't enough.

Now, Boone was dead, and the wounds were still fresh. We didn't forget. We didn't forgive. I'd tear through every warrant, informant, and case Vanderhoff had ever touched until I found anything I could use against him.

As if reading my mind, Colt said quietly, "You haven't asked how Ben's doing."

There it was; the topic we'd been circling around. Colt always knew how to push the one button I was trying to avoid. For a man so self-centered, he could be annoyingly perceptive when it came to Ben.

My fingers spasmed around my coffee cup, and I carefully set it down before I snapped off the handle. "You tell me," I said tonelessly. "He's barely spoken to me since he got out."

Colt didn't reply. One of his talents was provoking people to talk without saying much. I recognized the trick, and still, I found myself adding in a rough voice, "He's

completely shutting me out."

"Maybe he is," Colt said, watching me sympathetically. "But that doesn't mean it's your fault. He doesn't blame you for not getting him out sooner. You know that."

"Yeah?" My tone was so sharp that I startled the woman at the table across the aisle. I gritted my teeth and lowered my voice. "How can you be so sure?"

"Because that's not the kind of guy he is." Colt took a swallow of sweet tea and furrowed his brow. "I think he just needs time. He's fine physically, but emotionally... it can't be easy, you know? He doesn't sleep well. Locks every door in the apartment. Jumps if I walk up on him too fast. He can't let his guard down. Not with Vanderhoff and the DA breathing down his neck, ready to punish him for embarrassing them."

"Sounds like you know him better than me these days," I said bitterly.

Colton studied me, pale eyes flicking across my face like he was weighing my words. He wasn't big on coddling emotions, so he kept it simple. "Help me take down Vanderhoff. Once he's behind bars, Ben will have room to breathe. Then you can deal with whatever's going on between you two."

The waitress chose that moment to set down our plates. "Y'all need anything else?"

"No, ma'am," Colton said smoothly, flashing a grin that had her twinkling back at him.

While I chased a cherry tomato around my plate with my fork, Colton dove into his sandwich like a man who hadn't spent the day marinating in frustration. When he finished, he dropped his napkin onto his empty plate and patted his stomach with a satisfied sigh.

"Back to the grind," he said. "I'm heading to the Dead End to dig into some leads."

My head shot up in surprise. "The biker bar?"

"I guess." Colt shrugged apathetically. "The guy who took over running it—McKenna? He's courting trouble. The place is a hotspot for lowlifes. Word is the sheriff and his deputies look the other way whenever something goes down, and I want to know why."

My blood pressure spiked, and my fingers spasmed around my fork. I forced myself to set it down before it clattered. Colt was too busy watching a woman on the sidewalk to clock my reaction, but I still felt cornered. He'd see right through me the second he took a closer look.

His next question snapped me back to the present. "You know anything about McKenna? He's not exactly your type of company, but you both ride bikes. I figured word gets around."

I knew plenty. I knew the smoky rasp of Silas's voice, the scent of leather and whiskey that clung to his skin, the way my body responded to a single cut from his dark, laughing eyes. But that was my dirty little secret.

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I shook my head, pushing the memory down. "Nothing worth mentioning."

"That a fact?" he murmured, his pale eyes studying me with that cold, calculating look he always had when sizing up a problem.

I met his gaze head-on, holding my ground and bluffing my way through it. After a moment, he just shrugged, an almost imperceptible shift in his posture that said he wasn't buying it, but he didn't care enough to push.

"Keep your ears open, anyway," he said coolly. "Maybe stop by the place on your bike and unofficially check it out for me. I've got a feeling that place is hiding something big."

"Sure," I said faintly.

Silas was exactly the kind of man who belonged in Colt's crosshairs. Not the type who should even know my name—let alone say it the way he did. The fact that he did left me feeling exposed, like I'd stepped out of the role I was supposed to be playing and into something dangerous.

If Colt ever found out...God help me.

Chapter Six

SILAS

The sun hung huge and heavy in the late afternoon sky, baking the gravel lot into a

spiderweb of cracks. It wasn't even real summer yet, and the tufts of pokeweed along the edges were already drooping, their glossy leaves curling inward like they were trying to escape the heat.

Sweat rolled down my bare back, soaking into the waistband of my jeans, but I didn't mind. Louisiana heat didn't leave much room for complaint. You either made peace with it or you learned to suffer.

Still better than the stench inside: beer, piss, and regret, all marinated under decades of cigarette smoke.

The bar was quiet for now. Just a couple of old-timers nursing warm beers and older grudges. Middle-of-the-afternoon crowd. Harmless, mostly. Easy enough for Hank, my part-time bartender, to handle on his own.

Real trouble didn't roll in until after dark. That's when the parking lot turned into a market for things I wasn't supposed to see—buyers, sellers, runners. I didn't like it—hell, I hated it—but my hands were tied. This job was all I had.

Turning a blind eye to the quiet shuffle of product was one thing. But when that product had a heartbeat? That was different. But what was I supposed to do when even the sheriff looked the other way?

The best I could manage was reaching some of the girls before someone else did. The cot in the back room was always there. Open to anyone who needed it—not just sexy, blue-eyed lawyers.

Vanderhoff liked to imagine he ran this town, but as far as I could tell, he was just a stooge—and crooked as a cracked compass. Best-case, he buried his head in the sand to avoid admitting Devil's Garden had gone to hell on his watch. Worst case? He was on the payroll of whoever actually pulled the strings.

My rap sheet had guaranteed he'd hate my guts from the jump, and he didn't bother pretending otherwise. First time we met, he'd made it clear—cause trouble, and he would throw me in a cell without blinking.

So, I kept my head down. Watched the wrong people get hurt. Let things slide. And every damn day, I felt it stacking up—quiet, steady, and heavy as a body count.

I put a bit too much force into the torque wrench, and it gave a sharp, satisfying click as the bolt locked down. Probably tighter than it needed to be, but I didn't care. The chain tension had been off—I'd felt it last night while chasing Mason through the backroads. A loose chain meant slipping or worse, especially with how I pushed this bike.

The Scout was my pride and joy, a sleek beast I'd built with my own hands, and the only thing that followed me between jobs. Closest thing I'd ever had to a stable relationship.

A flicker of movement caught my eye, and I looked up fast. It paid to stay alert in a place like this. In the reflection of my side mirror, a sports car glided into a shady patch beneath a sweetgum and parked. Real subtle.

If Mason thought that car was incognito in a town like this, he was out of his damn mind. The cherry-red Porsche stuck out like a sore thumb—shiny and spotless in a place where most vehicles were patched together with duct tape and prayer.

Last night, I figured I'd chased him off for good. Guess not. Here he was, back for more, pulling in with that polished machine of his purring like he'd just driven it from a showroom.

I was still shirtless, slick with sweat under the punishing sun, and I'd bet good money he noticed. I lifted my ponytail off my neck and crouched to check the next

bolt—nonchalant but angled just right. Let him look. I wasn't shy about being watched. Years of practice made that easy. What mattered was making sure they only saw what I let them.

Without looking over my shoulder, I called out, "You lost, counselor, or just looking for a repeat performance?"

Silence. Then the creak of the car door, followed by the crunch of gravel under expensive loafers.

I leaned against the bike, wiping grease from my hands, and let my eyes drag over his body's long, lean lines. He always dressed like he had something to prove—tailored, sharp, every detail calculated. But Jesus, he wore it well.

No tie today. Top two buttons undone, just enough skin to catch the eye and fuck with my focus. The man could probably make a spreadsheet look sexy.

He didn't just get under my skin—he scraped something out of me. Every time he got close, the part of me that knew better shut down.

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I wanted him.Bad.The kind of want that ruined my focus and left me running on blind instinct. I wanted him wrecked and stripped of that tight control he clung to like a life raft. I wanted him back on his knees. I wanted to see how far he'd fall if I kept pushing.

"Didn't think you'd be back so soon, slick," I drawled, tossing the rag in a bucket. "I'm starting to think you're a glutton for punishment."

He raised a brow, coolly amused, but I caught the flicker in his eyes. He was pissed. Pissed at himself for coming back. Pissed at me for making him want to.

"Don't flatter yourself, McKenna. I'm not here for you."

"Sure looks that way." I shrugged like it cost me nothing. "You're too straight-edge to have developed a taste for the swill we serve."

His jaw flexed, just once, but that tic at his temple gave him away. "I'm here to offer a friendly warning."

Oh, good. One of those.

"Lay it on me," I said, grinning as I spread my arms wide in mock welcome. "I'm all ears."

He glanced toward the Dead End, and I followed his gaze, stiffening when I caught movement near the back door.

A girl—thin, twitchy, maybe seventeen if you squinted—was slinking through the shadows like she belonged here. She didn't. Not even close. Too young, too brittle, the kind that got swallowed whole in places like this. Her fake ID was trash, but she didn't come for the drinks. Just a street kid looking for somewhere to disappear. The cot in the back room was safer than whatever waited out there. For now.

I didn't have the heart to turn her away. Not yet. But I'd seen too many girls like her turn into ghost stories—and the kind of men who liked that look were already sniffing around.

Gator's people were circling. Names I knew, faces I didn't trust, and a smell I recognized. Rot wearing cologne.

Mason's mouth flattened. When he turned back to me, his eyes had gone ice cold.

"Look, I'm not blind," he said in a low, clipped voice. "I know what kind of people crawl out of the woodwork here after dark. I've seen the money changing hands, and I've kept my mouth shut."

"Yeah?" I met his stare, all humor gone. "Keep doing that."

"I tried, but now it's drawing attention you don't want." He stepped close, crowding me, and for a second, I thought about pushing back. Just to feel him flinch. But nah. Anger was rolling off him in waves, and that took the fun out of it.

So, I let it go, settling my ass on the seat of my bike and stretching my legs out in front of me, as casual as I could fake it. Let him come closer if he wanted. Let him pretend I didn't make him shake with a single touch.

"What kind of attention?" I asked, tongue in cheek. "Health inspector? Because I shut down the kitchen for a reason when I bought the place."

He gave me that look—the one that said he wasn't buying the act. “Don’t play coy, Silas.”

I sighed through my nose. "What do you want me to say? Trouble shows up. Doesn't mean I invite it."

"And when that trouble hurts people who didn't ask for it?" he said, searching my eyes. Lord knows what he expected to find there. Most days, I couldn't even look in the mirror without wondering who the hell I was.

I forced a lazy shrug. "People make their own choices. I don't get a vote in that."

His eyes narrowed. There it was—that flicker of judgment dressed up in clean lines and legal distance. I'd seen it last night too, in the way he looked at me like he couldn't decide whether to fuck me or throw me in a cell.

"What about when they don't have a choice?"

"Maybe ask the sheriff," I said, lip curling. I didn't bother hiding my disgust. "He's the one playing blind. This place is what it is. I'm not here to play hero."

"You've got a hell of a way of justifying things."

"And you've got a hell of a way of shoving your nose where it doesn't belong," I said, but there wasn't any fight behind it. Just truth. After fourteen months of rot and sleaze, he was the only thing that'd cut through it. First flicker of light I'd seen. Shame it was already fading.

"Go home, counselor," I said quietly. "You're not built for what's coming."

Mason's shoulders went stiff. Sweat beaded at his temples, and his black hair, usually

all neat and polished, was starting to curl at the edges. The heat was getting to him. I had the sudden impulse to drag my fingers through it and mess him up even more. But one look at his eyes told me to keep my damn hands to myself.

Still, there was something about the way he stood there, angry and wired, refusing to back down. It made my life harder, sure. Didn't make it less impressive.

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"You're a real piece of work, you know that?" he asked in a clipped voice.

"Yeah," I said, giving him a slow once-over and letting my eyes catch on the spot where sweat had soaked through his shirt, just below the collarbone. "But you keep coming back."

The way his jaw ticked told me I'd hit a nerve. Good. I was pissed too. Mostly at myself for thinking I could afford to toy with someone like him. I wasn't exactly settled. Hell, I never was. I could be gone any day—new name, city, and story. That's the job. People like me didn't stick around. We didn't put down roots or build lives, and we sure as hell didn't get tangled up with men like Mason Beaufort.

I'd heard that name on day one. Five boys, all adopted by some rich, reclusive hardass who raised them into damn legends. Depending on who I asked, they were either saints or criminals. Maybe both. Either way, they were untouchable.

I didn't know all of them, but I'd heard enough to stay cautious. Dominic was the real one to watch, polished on the outside, but there were whispers about the organization he ran out of his high-end restaurant, Saxa Fracta. He was the kind of man who smiled while he buried the bodies.

Mason was different. Whenever he was around, something in me snapped awake. Maybe that made me selfish, but hell—when he was close, the guilt went quiet. The emptiness didn't hollow me out so bad.

I craved that feeling like a goddamn drug, and just like any drug, I knew it'd ruin me if I let it.

"So that's it?" he snapped. "'Screw you, I do what I want'? That's all you've got for me?"

"That's all you get," I said sharply. "We're not friends. Just because I let you get on your knees last night doesn't mean I owe you anything."

The look he gave me could've carved bone. Fury: plain, cutting, and satisfying in a twisted way.

"You're unbelievable."

"No," I drawled, tilting my head. "What's unbelievable is you standing here acting like this place just started smelling bad. You knew what it was the second you walked in. You're not pissed because it's dirty. You're pissed because you let someone like me put his hands on you."

His shoulders went tight and his mouth twitched. Just a quick tick, like he was choking down what he truly wanted to say. "You think you've got me all figured out, huh?"

I leaned back against the bike, arms crossed, grinning slow and mean. "Pretty sure."

"You think I grew up with a silver spoon? That I look down on anyone living rough?" That tone, quiet and cutting, had my dick twitching before my brain caught up. "I grew up in a trailer with roaches in the walls and duct tape holding the place together. My brother and I used to wrap our sleeping bags around our heads to keep bugs out of our ears. Getting tossed into the system could've broken us. Instead, we got lucky."

His eyes pinned me. "But even if I'd never met Boone Beaufort—if I was still out there busting windows for pocket money? I'd still draw the line at hurting people who can't fight back."

I didn't blink. I'd been looked down on by better men, and I sure as hell wasn't about to give him the satisfaction.

"Yeah, well. Congrats. You won the jackpot. But you were still a kid when that rich old bastard scooped you up. You never had to check the felon box just to flip burgers. So don't judge me for surviving my way."

"Your record's not the problem." Mason closed the distance, and suddenly, he was right there, stepping over one of my outstretched legs until he was nearly straddling my thigh.

My pulse jumped, but I held still. Let him make the next move.

He leaned in, his pricey cologne curling through the heat between us, all clean spice and money. It wrapped around me like a warning.

"It's how you treat the people around you," he said, voice low. "How you let them get hurt and don't lift a finger to stop it. Because you let it happen and pretend that's not the same as doing it yourself."

My hands curled into fists, but I didn't rise to the bait. Couldn't.

His breath ghosted over my cheek, eyes locked on mine, and the heat rolling off him was enough to make the Louisiana sun feel polite.

"You're a pussy, McKenna," he said, almost whispering now. "And if you don't clean your own house, you're going to call down interest you're not equipped to handle."

This was bad. I should've told him to turn around and walk away. Should've shoved him back, gone inside, locked the door.

Instead, I grabbed him by the jaw, fingers digging in just enough to feel the throb of his pulse beneath my thumb.

"You've got a hell of a mouth, counselor," I growled. "Let's see what else it can do."

Then I kissed him—hard.

He grabbed my shoulders, not to stop me but to keep from losing his footing. His lips opened under mine, hot and biting, and I licked into his mouth, tasting salt and sweat and a hint of coffee lingering on his tongue.

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He caught my bottom lip with his teeth, dragging just enough to make my blood spike, but he was the one who groaned.

I swallowed the sound like it belonged to me.

Didn't matter who might see. Didn't matter what this meant. All I cared about was his body heat and the way his shirt bunched between my fingers when I pulled him closer.

When he finally pulled back, his breath was ragged and his lips were swollen.

"I never claimed to be the good guy," I rasped.

He dragged a thumb across his bottom lip, watching my mouth like he wasn't done. Then his storm-dark gaze snapped to mine.

"You're a mess, McKenna," he said quietly. "And you're going to take me down with you."

My smirk cut wider to hide the sting. "Probably. But you'll come back anyway."

He didn't answer.

He didn't have to.

Chapter Seven

SILAS

Devil's Garden at night looked like a knockoff noir set, all shadowed corners, flickering street lamps, and thick, shimmering humidity. But it was more the result of poor city planning than any deliberate attempt at charm. Cracked sidewalks, busted pavement, and a city too broke—or too corrupt—to give a damn.

Downtown put on a quaint little show during the day, with its brick facades, cobblestone charm, and that old art house theater with the broken marquee. But after dark? The place exhaled a different atmosphere. The air was slick with fry oil from nearby food trucks and something sickly-sweet drifting from an open window overhead. Jasmine, maybe. Or cheap perfume.

I stuffed my hands in the pockets of my riding jacket and squinted at the string of neon signs bleeding color onto the street. 'Cold Beer' in one window. 'Live Jazz' in another. The club hunched between a pawn shop and a dilapidated convenience store, ivy crawling up the bricks like it was trying to escape the place. If it had a name, I'd never heard it. The brick was crumbling, the awning sagged, and music leaked between gaps in the front door. A saxophone wailed, low and aching, from somewhere inside.

Precisely the kind of place Sylvia liked to haunt.

"You look like hell," she called from one of the wrought-iron patio tables, waving a half-empty martini glass like she was directing traffic.

I wasn't exactly dressed to impress. Clean jeans, black T-shirt, and hair still damp from a post-garage shower were good enough. No matter how hard I scrubbed, the faint scent of grease clung to my skin. But this was Devil's Garden. People asked questions if I showed up in anything fancier than boots and a pulse.

"Yeah? You look gorgeous enough for both of us," I drawled, kissing the layer of makeup on her cheek before pulling out the chair across from her. The legs screeched against the concrete, earning us a few annoyed glances. Sylvia didn't notice or care.

She'd picked the most private table on the patio, tucked behind a dying potted plant and a water feature that sounded like it had a bladder issue. She probably figured the splashing would cover her loose mouth, but it would have me hitting the john before long.

She leaned forward, resting her chin on her palm, red nails drumming against her cheek. "That shirt's working overtime, sugar."

I let the comment slide, settling into the chair with a lazy slouch. "Is this a social call, or are you planning to be useful?"

"Don't be mean," she purred. "You love it when I get mouthy."

I loved that she liked to talk. Especially when she thought I was listening for the wrong reasons.

She sat as if people were watching. Chin up, ankles crossed, fingers wrapped around the delicate stem of her martini glass.

The whole scene felt staged for effect. Strings of patio lights stretched between the buildings, casting Sylvia in a warm, almost holy glow. If saints came in the loud, pint-sized variety—tight skirt, knockoff pearls, and perfume I'd smelled from the parking lot. Her dark curls were so stiff with spray, they didn't even wobble when she sneezed.

"Allergies?" I asked.

"I hate jasmine," she muttered, crinkling her nose. "Gives me a headache. You're not worth this level of discomfort, Silas."

"Sweetheart," I drawled, giving her a slow grin. "I'm worth a hell of a lot more."

She gave a snort, just flirty enough to pass for cute, and fanned herself like she was wilting in the heat. All for show. I let the corner of my mouth twitch. She liked to pretend this was a date, and I let her. The performance made her feel in control, and that made her chatty and careless. If she thought my attention meant something...that was her problem, not mine. Letting her believe I cared cost me nothing.

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A passing waiter in suspenders gave me a nod, and I ordered a stout without looking at the menu. Sylvia was already talking again, filling the space with gossip, complaints, and backhanded flattery while I smiled and egged her on.

"How's the new place?" I asked, settling back in my chair like this was just another night and not a slow walk through a minefield.

She made a face, all dramatic eye-roll and delicate disgust, then flicked at some invisible lint on her skirt like it had personally offended her. "Didn't last," she said, pursing her glossy lips. "Roommates wanted more benefits than rent could cover."

I didn't ask what kind. Everyone knew Sylvia wasn't shy about spreading her affection, so long as there was something in it for her. Apparently, a two-bedroom condo split four ways didn't rate.

My eyes narrowed. "So you're back with Gator."

She didn't answer immediately, buying time with a slow sip from her drink. Her lipstick left a perfect crescent on the rim. "Didn't say that," she murmured.

"You didn't have to."

She watched me over the rim of her glass, her gaze sharp beneath the flutter of false lashes. She liked to play dumb, almost reveling in how people underestimated her. But she knew better with me.

"You always were good at reading between the lines," she said. "Must be why Gator

doesn't trust you."

I flashed my teeth in a grin that felt too wolfish around the edges. "He trusts you?"

That earned a genuine laugh, but it was dry and humorless, the only kind her unhappy soul knew how to make. "Sweetheart, Gator doesn't trust anyone. But he likes the way I look when I lie."

I didn't doubt it. Sylvia was built for deception—soft curves, big eyes, and just enough charm for a man to forget she had teeth. Even I caught myself thinking of her fondly now and then.

"And how do you look when you tell the truth?" I asked, just to see how she'd answer.

She leaned forward, resting one elbow on the table, her voice dropping to something silkier. "I guess we'll find out."

I let that sit for a beat, then tilted my glass toward her. "So, do I need to buy you a second round before you're in a sharing mood?"

Sylvia traced a lazy circle on the rim of her glass, eyes following the motion like she was somewhere else in her mind. Her rings clinked against the crystal, loud in the hush of conversation filling the patio.

"Gator's in one of his moods," she said finally, and my ears perked up at the peevish edge creeping into her tone. "Snapped at one of the runners last night for looking at him too long. Poor kid couldn't've been more than sixteen. I thought he was gonna piss himself."

She took a hefty sip of her martini, setting the glass down with too much care—like

she wanted to break it, but not yet. "He gets like that sometimes. Meaner than a two-headed snake. Ever since we got back together, he's been treating me like furniture. Sit pretty, stay quiet, don't get in the way. In my own damn house."

I didn't say a word. Just sipped the foam off the top of my stout and waited. Sylvia didn't do well with silence—it made her nervous.

She glanced at me beneath her lashes, then dropped her gaze like she was reconsidering. "I shouldn't be saying any of this."

"You haven't said anything yet."

She tipped her head back and cracked out a bitter laugh that was too shrill and went on just a little too long. When she'd finished, all the mirth was gone from her face. "He started keeping two phones again," she said softly, wiping a fingernail at the corner of one eye. "You know what that means."

"It means he's nervous," I said, carefully. "Nervous men make mistakes."

She gave me a sidelong glance. "So do the people standing too close when the hammer drops."

"Sounds like you're looking for an exit," I said, tilting my glass in a mock salute.

She didn't deny it.

Instead, she leaned back and exhaled through her nose, like something was pressing in on her ribcage. "Word is there's a task force out of Baton Rouge sniffing around. State-level. Nobody knows who sent them or what they're after, but Gator's spooked. Real spooked. Bury-your-burner kind of spooked."

I nodded slowly and let my gaze drift across the patio, casually clocking the couples at nearby tables like I wasn't listening too hard. Eagerness didn't play well with this crowd.

"They digging into his operation?" I asked, watching as an old woman in a floral sundress slipped scraps to a dachshund under her chair.

"Depends who you ask." She stirred her drink with a chipped pinkie nail. "Some say it's about the drugs. Others think it's the girls."

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I kept my face blank. The girls. That landed like a stone in my gut.

Sylvia went on, either oblivious or pretending to be. "He's been cleaning house. Asking questions. You know Gator—he's not exactly the jump-at-shadows type. For him to get scared?" She shook her head. "It must be bad."

I leaned back, thumb drifting along the rim of my glass, and studied her closely. "That's why Gator's been keeping his distance from the bar?"

"He doesn't want to be seen anywhere too visible, especially with rumors flying." Her hand disappeared into that tiny purse she always carried, some gaudy little thing with rhinestones and a broken clasp, and came up with nothing but receipts and irritation.

I pulled the soft pack from my jacket pocket and tapped a cigarette loose, holding it out between two fingers before she could go diving again.

She hesitated before taking it with fingers that trembled just a little.

"Then you can remind him the Dead End's always been good to him," I said evenly. "I make sure of that. No cops and no questions. Just business."

The string of patio lights buzzed faintly, spotlighting us like actors mid-scene, talking pretty while the real damage happened behind the curtain.

She blew a slow stream through pursed lips, eyes narrowing as the smoke curled between us. "You really think that makes you look loyal?"

"It makes me useful." I didn't push. Didn't need to. She was a natural gossip—staying useful was how she survived. The message would get where it needed to go. "And you can tell him that too."

She opened her mouth, but whatever she was about to say got swallowed by the sound of the club door creaking open. A burst of laughter spilled out with the music, loud and jarring in the hush of the patio.

I barely looked up at first. Just another pair of drunks weaving into the street—a woman in heels too high, her date clinging to her like they were on the deck of a sinking ship. A younger girl followed, clutching a sequined purse and texting with one thumb, eyes glued to the screen.

And then—him.

Mason stepped into the spill of lamplight, hair tousled and unstyled, the collar of his shirt open in a way he'd never been around me. Careless. Effortless. Like he belonged here.

But that tug I felt drawing us together was one-sided.

Because he wasn't alone.

The man at his side was blond, broad-shouldered, and built like a war monument. His face was the type I'd expect to find stamped on a Roman coin. Where Mason carried his power like a package of tightly compressed dynamite, this one moved like a caged lion: power in every step but never quite relaxed.

Their heads were bent close as they stood near the entrance, voices low and intimate, finishing whatever conversation had started inside. Even from across the patio, I caught the moment the man's fingers subtly grazed Mason's arm, like it wasn't the

first time he'd touched him that way. Like it wouldn't be the last. It wasn't flirtation. It was a claim.

Something about them worked—too well. They looked like they belonged together: dark and golden, polished and powerful, like they'd been made to match under perfect lighting in some magazine spread meant to sell a lie about love.

My stomach turned.

It shouldn't have mattered. That's what I told myself. Over and over. But it did—and the lie tasted bitter on my tongue. Jealousy twisted through me, and I had to plant my hands on the arms of the chair to keep from lurching to my feet.

What the hell was I doing?

Sylvia clocked the shift instantly. "Friends of yours?" she asked dryly, following my gaze.

"Something like that," I muttered, clenching my jaw so tight I thought I'd crack a tooth. The urge to cross the patio and rip them apart beat like a drum in veins.

But what would I even say? He wasn't mine. Never was, and never would be.

He hadn't fallen for me. He'd fallen for the story.

She took a long drag from her cigarette and asked, "Which one?"

Even if I'd planned to answer, I didn't get the chance.

Because just then, Mason looked up.

Like he could feel it—feel me—his gaze cut across the patio and locked on mine, and for a moment, the street noise vanished. No music, no conversation. Just the ringing in my ears and the unblinking weight of those blue eyes. He wasn't smiling, but his lips parted like he'd forgotten how to breathe, and something in his expression pulled tight. But he didn't look away.

Neither did I.

Sylvia exhaled beside me, the stream of cigarette smoke loud in the stillness.

"Never mind," she said, wearing a smile that didn't touch her eyes. "I figured it out."

Mason still hadn't moved—but Blondie did.

His gaze followed the invisible thread stretching between us, and one corner of his mouth lifted, just enough to set off the alarm bells ringing at the base of my spine. Then he stepped off the curb and started toward us, casual as sin, like he was certain he'd be welcomed when he arrived.

I was on my feet without thinking, but it wasn't a challenge. It was instinct; the kind I'd developed after years of learning to stay one step ahead of a blow before it lands.

That's when Mason stepped between us.

Chapter Eight

MASON

With one hand, I caught Gideon square in the chest, halting his advance just short of the table. It wasn't easy to drive him back a step. Though we'd wrestled constantly as teenagers, Gideon had always restrained himself, acutely aware of his physical advantage. He outweighed the rest of us by a good thirty pounds of solid muscle; a man devoted to peace but fundamentally engineered for conflict.

Even the devil would think twice before crossing him.

Tonight, he wasn't even in uniform—just a dark T-shirt stretched across his broad chest and a pair of jeans that made him look more like a bouncer than a priest.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" I hissed, pitching my voice low to avoid drawing attention.

He met my gaze with his trademark calm: amused and entirely unrepentant. No man who wore a cleric's collar should take such satisfaction in making people squirm, but Gideon had a talent for it. By fifteen, he'd perfected the look: righteous on the outside, smug as hell underneath. Just a stronger version of that maddening Beaufort confidence we'd all inherited in different ways.

"I didn't like how he was looking at you," he said, as if that explanation was enough.

"He wasn't looking at me." The denial was automatic—and ridiculous.

The spark of laughter in Gideon's eyes told me he agreed. That look always meant trouble. I'd seen it too many times not to recognize the signs.

"I just want to meet the man who managed to rattle you," he said, slick as polished glass.

I huffed a quick breath through my nostrils and smoothed my features into something less transparent. "This isn't a meet-and-greet, Gideon."

He tilted his head, feigning confusion. "Sure seemed like one by the way you were both staring."

I didn't bother denying it. Lying to a priest was bad enough; lying to Gideon was

downright dangerous.

"You're not helping," I said softly.

"I didn't come here to help," he replied serenely. "I came for the jazz. Everything else is a bonus."

That was the problem with my oldest brother; he was freakishly perceptive. Too attuned to human weakness. He'd cracked me open like an egg and read the messy insides at a glance. Silas hadn't helped matters, glaring at us like we owed him money.

Of course, Gideon would find it hilarious. But Silas wasn't a man to play with like that, and I wasn't in the mood to clean up the fallout.

I turned slightly, enough to put a little space between myself and the table, pretending to adjust my cuff while I focused on keeping my expression locked down. Gideon remained close, hovering in my peripheral vision like a silent rebuke, all composed amusement and quiet judgment. I could still feel his eyes on me, watching for another tell, searching for another crack.

I should've known better than to agree to dinner, but I'd been working so much that I hadn't slept more than three hours in my own bed, and it was impossible to ignore the guilt trip a priest could pull.

"Take an hour, Mason," he'd said. "You're human. You need to eat. It's not a sin to rest when you need it."

Rest felt like a foreign concept. I hadn't slept properly since Ben was arrested. How could I? He might've been the older twin by three minutes, but I'd always been the one looking ahead to keep us both safe. That was our pattern. Always had been. We

were a team, even when everything else fell apart. Or at least, we had been. Now, he was out, but not free—and I was burning the candle at both ends, clawing at a system that had swallowed him whole and called it justice.

Every night Ben spent in limbo felt like a failure. Guilt had embedded itself in my bones so profoundly that I didn't know who I'd be without it.

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I had no room for rest, and definitely no room for a man like Silas McKenna.

Gideon watched me for a long, quiet moment. I didn't look at him, but I felt when his mood shifted. It was like a pressure valve releasing. Gideon had pushed, testing the limit before I cracked, and now he pulled back. The usual carrot and stick.

"If you want me to leave, say the word," he said levelly. "I've got to head back to Eden anyway. I promised Loretta and Gage I'd cover the overnight shift with the kids."

I let out a slow breath, staring down at the cuff I was pretending to adjust. "It's not that."

"I know, but don't forget that you're human. Not a machine. No man can outrun his own needs forever, Mason."

The hair on the back of my neck lifted the moment he touched my arm. The air behind me started to crackle. I didn't need to turn to know the source, but impulse won out over judgment, and I glanced over my shoulder anyway.

Silas's eyes were coal-dark and fixed on me with dense, seething fury. He stood at the back of the woman's chair, one hand curled around the metal so tightly that his knuckles were blanched white. Every inch of him broadcast anger, from the hard set of his jaw to the glint of sweat at his temples, like violence and sex were just two sides of the same coin—and I couldn't tell which one he was about to flip.

I didn't know what set him off, but Christ, he looked good angry.

I glanced back at Gideon, just long enough to catch the flicker of something softer in his eyes. Understanding, maybe. Or concern. I wasn't sure which was worse.

"You don't need to worry about me," I told him stiffly. "Not with Dom and Gage wreaking havoc."

He chuckled darkly. "Gage has settled down since he and Wyatt got engaged."

"What about Dom?" I asked, cutting him a look.

It was a cheap shot, and we both knew it. Dominic hadn't set foot in Eden since he put Wyatt in the hospital with a pair of brass knuckles. He'd thought he was protecting us; all the signs had pointed to Wyatt framing Ben and betraying us all. But Dominic hadn't waited for proof. He'd acted—and he'd been wrong.

Now it was a vast rift that none of us knew how to cross. Gage wouldn't even speak his name, and the rest of us were stuck pretending like our family hadn't fractured right down the center.

But Gideon had taken it the hardest. As the eldest, he carried the burden of leading the family, and he'd always had a soft spot for Dominic. Watching him hold the line between justice and loyalty was like watching a man drown on dry land.

We didn't talk about it, but if my personal life was fair game, so was his.

His mouth tightened, and his eyes went cold. "You don't have to talk to me," he said, stepping back. "But talk to someone. You're going to break soon, and I don't think you've left yourself room to come back from that."

Then he turned and walked off, past the club and down the sidewalk, like he hadn't just gutted me in public.

I watched him disappear into the darkness with long, unhurried strides. Confident that nobody was foolish enough to mess with him even in this seedy part of town.

Breathe, I told myself. Just breathe. This wasn't the place to unravel.

"Mmm." The woman at Silas's table let out a throaty hum, all faux innocence that scratched up my spine. "Shame about the blond. I was hoping he'd come over and introduce himself properly."

I turned, giving her a long, flat look.

Heavy makeup, cheap jewelry, and perfume so strong she must've rolled in it. She was younger than I'd first thought and dressed for action, legs crossed, and skirt hiked so far up that shadows were doing more privacy work than the fabric. One shoe dangled off the tip of her toe.

I didn't recognize her, but I didn't need to. She looked like dozens of regulars who warmed the barstools at the Dead End on any given night, looking for company, but for some reason, I was still surprised to see Silas with her.

I shouldn't be. But bitter jealousy filled my mouth, and no amount of pride could pretend it didn't exist. I didn't know who she was or what she meant to him. Maybe nothing. Maybe everything. But he was touching her chair like he had a right, and I hated how much that got under my skin.

"Sorry for interrupting your date," I said coolly.

Silas's cheek twitched like he didn't like the sound of that. He hadn't moved, but his entire posture radiated barely leashed temper, one hand gripping the back of her chair like he needed the anchor. The woman didn't seem to notice. Or maybe she did. Maybe she liked it.

"Oh, sweetheart," she purred in a syrupy voice. "As far as I'm concerned, the more the merrier. In every sense of the word."

She winked at me over the rim of her glass, and I had to bite down on the inside of my cheek to keep my expression from cracking.

"Sylvia," she said, bracelets clinking musically as she extended a hand across the table.

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My upbringing had me taking her hand whether I wanted to or not. "Mason," I said brusquely. "Mason Beaufort."

"Beaufort?" She leaned back in her chair and gave a low whistle, eyes sweeping me with theatrical interest. "Well, damn. A real Beaufort in the flesh. Didn't expect to see one of 'em hanging around this side of town. Guess I should've worn nicer panties."

I grimaced, managing a thin, bloodless smile despite the sour taste in my mouth. "I doubt they were meant to stay on anyway."

She let out a bark of laughter, and a dozen heads turned toward the jagged sound. There was no joy in it.

Silas still hadn't spoken.

That unsettled me more than I wanted to admit. The silence wasn't passive—it was predatory. Every muscle in his body was clenched just short of movement. He watched me like a big cat, studying my weak points, a breath away from tearing into my throat. When those black eyes met mine, all I saw was violence.

Wanting him was the most reckless thing I'd ever done. It meant giving up control, and I'd spent a lifetime learning how to never do that again.

We stared each other down for a long, hostile moment. Even now, the air between us felt so charged it practically hummed. I could feel it in my teeth, behind my eyes, in the parts of me I didn't let anyone see. My stomach knotted, but I refused to give him the satisfaction of flinching.

Instead, I deliberately dropped my gaze, giving him a cold, dismissive once-over. I wanted him to feel it. I wanted him to know exactly how it felt to stand where I was, burning with jealousy from the inside out and forced to pretend it didn't matter.

"Well," I said, turning to Sylvia and schooling my features into something civil. I released her hand gently, straightening the cuff I couldn't stop fiddling with, and took a small step back from the table. Just enough to signal the conversation was over. "Y'all enjoy your evening."

If she replied, I didn't hear it over the ringing in my ears. I just turned on my heel and walked away, spine straight, a million drops of venom locked behind my teeth.

I didn't look back. Not once. But—God, how I wanted to.

Chapter Nine

MASON

He was hunting me.

Even without looking over my shoulder, I sensed it. The air had changed, grown dense and charged, heavy with the pressure of a pending storm. It reminded me of the moment right before a hurricane when the whole parish held its breath. But the sky was a cloudless spray of stars, clear and blameless. The storm wasn't up there.

It was behind me.

The prickling at the back of my neck wasn't my imagination. Neither was the way the shadows behind me shifted like they were pacing me. My steps echoed too loudly in the empty lot, rubber soles striking the pavement like a speeding drumbeat that bounced off the surrounding brick.

Devil's Garden always hummed after dark, deeper than insects, right down to the city's bones. But tonight, it was quiet, like the volume had been dialed down just to hear my heartbeat.

It was Silas. It had to be. He had a way of being everywhere and nowhere at once, a hunter who didn't even need to make a move to leave me feeling exposed.

My Porsche sat at the edge of the lot, its cherry-red paint barely gleaming beneath the dying streetlamp. I popped the locks and nearly jumped out of my skin at the quiet, metallic click. My instincts were screaming that he was close, but I gritted my teeth and reached for the door handle. I refused to give in to paranoia and look over my shoulder.

That's when I felt him, right behind me. Too close.

My body moved on autopilot. Before I could think twice, I drove a defensive elbow back into his ribs. But Silas was quicker. Unnervingly fast. He caught my arm mid-strike, his grip steel-tight as he twisted it behind my back in one fluid motion. Before I could draw a breath, he shoved me against the car and pinned me there, chest to back, bleeding his heat into me.

My cheek grazed the cool metal, breath fogging the finish. I couldn't turn enough to see him, just the suggestion of a shadow looming behind me, but I didn't need to. I knew him by feel alone: the strength of his hand, the drag of his rough fingertips catching the inside of my wrist, the scent of leather and whiskey filling my nose. His body was a wall of solid muscle at my back, trapping me and leaving zero wiggle room.

"You always this jumpy?" he whispered. His stubble grazed my temple, a rasp of friction that made me shudder.

Yes, because even though I wasn't a child anymore, I'd never felt safe. Not even once. But I'd rather bite off my tongue than admit it.

"Let me go," I said, but I was so breathless the command cracked. There wasn't much authority left in it. Just need.

He didn't let go. Of course, he didn't. Silas wasn't the kind of man who took orders—he was a man who made people regret giving them. His weight shifted, pinning me so hard that the door handle stabbed into my hip.

"If I didn't know better," he taunted in a dark voice, "I'd think you were scared."

I wasn't scared. Not of him. But the way my body responded, even when I was angry? That terrified me. It felt like a betrayal. My breath hitched, heat pooling low in my stomach when his grip flexed on my wrist, just enough to remind me how easily he held me still. His thumb dragged along the inside of my forearm, right over the pulse hammering beneath my skin.

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No matter how I steeled myself, I couldn't hide my reaction. It was humiliating.

"Get off," I bit out, flexing my shoulders and shifting futilely for leverage. It was useless. There was no give in him.

"Say please." The heat of his breath coiled around my ear like smoke, invasive and intimate.

"Silas..."

"The way you say my name...it sounds a hell of a lot like begging." His mouth didn't touch me, but I could feel the smile shaping his words. It hovered just behind the curve of my ear. "But I think," he added, voice slipping deeper, "you can do better."

I squeezed my eyes shut, willing away the chill skating across my skin. "Why won't you let this go?" I rasped. "You've got plenty of options at the Dead End. Easier ones. People who actually want what you're offering. Hell, you had one hanging all over you five minutes ago."

His body went so still it sent a fresh ripple of tension through mine, like I'd just tripped over a wire stretched too tight.

"I didn't touch her," he said fiercely. "You think that was a date? Christ. From where I was sitting, you and Blondie looked real comfortable."

I twisted my head, trying to glimpse his face, to make sense of what I was hearing—but he shoved me back.

"You were jealous," I whispered, barely daring to believe it.

For a long moment, he didn't respond. Not with words. But his fingers flexed around my wrist, and I swore I felt him tremble, just a little. When he finally spoke, it was a single guttural syllable.

"Yes."

I froze.

Not because of the word itself, but because of how he'd said it. Like it had been torn from him against his will before he could take it back.

No smirk was hiding behind the syllable, just raw, reluctant honesty. For the first time since we met, Silas wasn't toying with me. His iron grip, the press of his chest against my back, the uneven drag of his breath against my neck...none of it felt calculated.

Whatever was happening to us, it was more than just lust. It had him by the throat, too.

"Silas—" I started.

He spun me before I could finish. Fast and angry, so fast my shoulder popped in protest. My back hit the Porsche with a thud. Suddenly we were face-to-face—and Christ, up close like this? He was lethal.

Maybe he was too rugged to stand out in a photo, but in person, Silas McKenna was a smoking hot package of sweat-slick skin and a body built for violence. All raw masculinity that lit me up from the inside out. And worse—heknewit.

We were opposites, sure, but not the kind that balanced. We combusted.

His eyes searched mine, hunting for weakness, something I'd buried that he could drag into the light. Whatever he found, I wasn't sure he liked it. His expression hardened, tightening that mouth I wanted to kiss so desperately.

"Don't look at me like that," he said, reaching out to cup the side of my neck, stroking his thumb against my jaw so softly that it felt like a threat. "Not when you show up at my place whenever it suits you, then act like I don't exist when it doesn't. Not when you keep running the second it feels like too much."

"I'm not running," I ground out, "and I'm sure as hell not scared of you. I'm just bored."

I was lying through my teeth, and we both knew it.

"Yeah?" he murmured, leaning close. His breath skimmed the shell of my ear, and my whole body lit up like the fuse on a bottle rocket. "Then why are you shaking?"

Damn him—and damn my traitorous body for giving him every cue he wanted. He wasn't wrong. My hands were trembling, and my knees were locked tight to keep from sagging against the car. But it wasn't fear. It was sheer, unadulterated desire flooding my veins until I didn't trust myself to move.

"Because you won't let me go," I snapped, deflecting the only way I knew how.

His smile curved wickedly in the dark. "Damn right. We need to burn this off before it eats us alive. All we need are a few ground rules."

"Rules?" That one word managed to cut through my defenses like nothing else. The part of me that craved control, living and breathing by negotiation, latched onto it like

a lifeline. Something I could hold. If there were rules, I could stop falling.

"Yeah." The bridge of his nose skimmed along my jaw before his lips found the corner of my mouth. It was just a taste, barely a kiss, but it sparked every nerve in my body. "Rules. Boundaries. Call it whatever you want. You don't have time for this? Fine. Then we keep it simple, and we keep it clean."

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There was nothing clean about the way he was looking at me. Nothing simple about his gaze drifting to my mouth, tracking every breath, like he already knew how close I was to giving in. He looked at me like I was something he wanted to ruin.

I licked my lips out of reflex, but his eyes followed the motion like he was starving, and that hunger knocked the air out of my lungs.

"I need more specifics," I said at last, squeezing the words out in a voice that didn't sound like mine anymore.

"Then let's lay them out." He stepped back just enough to give me room to breathe and held up three fingers, ticking them off individually. "First: no interfering. You don't ask about my business, and I won't pry into yours."

My lips twitched in helpless amusement. "We've already broken that one."

"Then we start now," he shot back without missing a beat. "Second: keep it quiet. Nobody needs to know about this. Not your brothers. Not whoever you've got digging around my bar."

He said it coolly, like he'd clipped any personal judgment off each word, and I gave a slow nod. Agreement on record. I wasn't ready to acknowledge how close to the truth he might be, but I didn't want to lie to him, either.

"Third: we keep it physical." His rasp skimmed over my skin, dragging goosebumps in its wake despite the heat rising off the asphalt. "No strings. No expectations. When one of us wants out, we walk. No questions asked."

It was pragmatic. Rational. Precisely the kind of simple arrangement I should've wanted. But I didn't trust easy offers, especially not when they were too good to be true. And Silas, standing there with his ponytail slipping loose and his chest rising and falling with passion, wasn't offering clarity. He was giving me disaster in stages.

I reached for the loose strand of hair and brushed it behind his ear. His eyes widened, but he didn't flinch, and he didn't pull away.

"What happens," I asked quietly, "when that's not enough?"

Something flickered in his eyes—uncertainty maybe—but it vanished before I could name it. He stepped in until our chests brushed, dipped his head, and breathed against my lips, "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. No one's watching, counselor. No one's keeping score. Take what you want from me."

Just like that, I broke.

Everything I'd been holding back surged to the surface, weeks of restraint gone in an instant. I grabbed him by the neck and tugged him the final inch toward my lips.

The kiss was brutal, all teeth and hunger, obliterating every thought until there was nothing left but my need for him. Silas didn't just meet me; he devoured me, turning my own need against me until I couldn't see straight. So I closed my eyes. His warm, wicked laughter spilled into my mouth, and his arm came around my waist, pulling me tight against him.

With my eyes shut, I felt everything: his strength, his heat, and the raw, coiled power he was barely holding in check. And I wanted every inch of it.

He tasted like stout—rich, biting, with that elusive undercurrent of sweetness I'd already memorized as uniquely Silas. His tongue slid against mine, teasing, tasting,

and leaving me gasping. His self-control was surgical, restrained down to every calculated breath, and it was killing me. Every inch of my skin buzzed with a current that didn't feel like mine anymore. It felt like him—like some invisible wire had bound us together and started rewiring me from the inside out.

Then my phone rang, shattering the moment.

Silas groaned into my mouth and tightened the arm around my waist. "Ignore it," he rasped against my lips.

God, I wanted to, but the second one cycle ended, a new one began: incessant and impossible to ignore.

He stilled, resting his forehead against mine. We stood like that for a few ragged breaths, both of us straining to gather what was left of our control. Slowly, reluctantly, his hands slipped away. But the heat of his touch clung to me, even as I fumbled for the phone with trembling fingers.

The moment I saw the name on the screen, my stomach dropped. If Colton was calling at this hour, it wasn't good news.

"Colt?" I answered, already bracing for the worst.

"Get over here." I'd never heard him sound so grim. "Your brother's gone."

Chapter Ten

MASON

The school looked smaller than I remembered, but everything did at two a.m., when the streets were empty and the sky was dark, vast, and empty overhead.

I killed the engine and sat there for a minute, kneading the steering wheel, watching the building's shadowed windows like they might blink back. The night had finally cooled, but the air was heavy and motionless this far on the outskirts of the parish. Even the insects had gone silent. Nostalgia pressed against my ribs from the inside.

Colton hadn't said much when I got to his apartment; he'd just opened the door with a grim expression and a half-empty glass of gin in one hand. I'd seen him puking in the bushes after our LSATs, but I'd never seen him look like he'd had the wind kicked out of him.

"He just...left," he'd muttered, dragging a hand through his hair. "We argued this morning, but—I didn't think it was that bad." He wouldn't meet my eyes. "I came home from work and he was gone."

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No note. No call. No trace of Ben anywhere, not even a mug left in the sink. Just the ankle monitor, a condition of his provisional release, clipped and dropped neatly on the counter, as polite and final as a middle finger.

So now it was on me...and I'd never felt so clueless.

I'd spent most of my life fighting for Ben, but I had no idea what was going on in his head. I'd even called Gideon, hoping—stupidly—that maybe Ben had gone to Eden. But he hadn't. Of course, he hadn't. Gideon's voice had been gentle in a way that only made it worse, and I hung up with the sick certainty that I'd just admitted I didn't know my own twin anymore.

I'd been circling the city for hours, scouring every place Ben might go when he needed time to think. I checked the all-night diner Ben used to love, with the terrible coffee and pinball machines he always kicked when they jammed. I hit a few other places a man like him might go to blow off steam: twenty-four-hour gyms, gas stations on the outskirts of town, even the old trailer park we swore we'd never set foot in again. But I was hunting a ghost, a man who didn't seem to exist anymore.

Now I was down to the last place that made sense—our old middle school. A squat, ugly building we used to hate until Ben had figured out how to jimmy the fire escape and reach the roof. We used to sit up there for hours, smoking stolen cigarettes and daring each other to spit on the principal's car. Pretending we weren't scared to go home and see which mood mom was in that night: Leave it to Beaver or Breaking Bad.

It was a long shot, but that was all my life had ever been.

The fire escape was still there, clinging to the side of the building by a few rusted bolts and swaying just enough to keep my pulse elevated. I gripped the rail and started the climb, each step groaning under my boots as if the corroded metal might give way any second. It had felt easier when I was fifteen, back when I was all knees and elbows and always landed on my feet like a cat. As a grown man in slacks and a dress shirt, the whole endeavor felt absurd. But my muscles remembered the path.

I pulled myself over the ledge with a grunt and dusted my scraped palms on my slacks, taking a second to catch my breath.

The roof looked exactly the same: flat, exposed, and quiet, in the eerie way that forgotten places always were. At first, it looked abandoned, but then the glowing tip of a cigarette flared in the darkness. My eyes adjusted, and there he was—a broad-shouldered silhouette, perched on the roof's edge with his legs dangling into the void.

Ben didn't look up when I approached. His shoulders were hunched, elbows braced on his thighs, a cigarette burning low between his fingers. The cherry flared with each slow drag, casting the barest red glow across his scarred knuckles, but otherwise, he didn't move. From a distance, he looked like a gargoyle carved from stone. Heavy, so heavy, and not just because of the stacks of muscle he'd added in prison. So much weight was dragging at him that the roof didn't seem solid enough to support him. Like any second, the whole structure might give way—and he'd just keep sinking.

His strength had always come from stillness, but this wasn't the same. He didn't look like someone trying to be alone; he looked like a man who'd forgotten how to be anything else.

"Figured it'd be you," he muttered without turning his head.

I crossed the gravel-pocked rooftop and sank beside him with less grace than I would've liked. We sat without speaking, a long stretch of silence unfurling between

us as we stared down at the skeletal outline of the schoolyard. A breeze pushed the empty swings and stirred up the grass, bleached pale beneath floodlights that hadn't worked in years. It felt wrong, searching for a way to break the ice and coming up empty. I never lacked for words, but here I was, fumbling like a stranger beside the one person I was supposed to understand better than anyone. But the truth was, I didn't know what he needed anymore.

Eventually, I cleared my throat and grabbed the safest topic floating by. "I didn't know you were smoking again."

Ben blew a stream of smoke through his nose and held the cigarette out in my direction without looking. "Not a whole lot else to do in prison."

I didn't smoke. Never had, not even back when we were teenagers and I used to bum cigarettes off kids in the boys' bathroom to resell for spare change. Adrenaline was my vice. That's what I chased when my skin felt too tight to contain me.

Maybe he'd forgotten that.

I took the cigarette anyway, grimaced, and took a quick puff. The taste coated my tongue, pungent and acrid in a way that never bothered me when kissing Silas. But it did now. I took another drag, if only for something to do with my hands, and squinted at him through a drift of smoke.

We had the same black hair—or we would've if his wasn't buzzed so short—and the same blue eyes. He'd always been a big man, my height but twice as broad, but prison had filled him out like a heavyweight fighter. His biceps strained the seams of his cheapt-shirt. He didn't seem comfortable in his clothes. In his skin. I'd noticed it the first time we hugged after he exited the prison gates. He moved like he didn't trust his own strength. Like he was afraid of hurting whatever he touched.

I flicked a glance down at his bare ankle. "Missing something?" I asked, voice dry as dust.

He rolled his eyes. "I just wanted a few hours of real freedom," he muttered. "You can tell my babysitter to unclench."

"He's worried about you." The bite in my voice surprised me, but Ben didn't so much as blink.

"He shouldn't be."

"What about me?" I demanded, passing him the cigarette before I crushed it between my fingers. "You didn't think he'd call me the second he couldn't find you? I've been scouring every ditch in the parish for hours, hoping I wouldn't find you face down in a puddle."

He let out a humorless bark of laughter. "Not yet."

"No," I said flatly. I didn't raise my voice, but I wanted to. "Instead, you're trespassing on school grounds at two in the morning. I'm not even here as your brother, you know that? I'm here as the attorney for a dumbass client who just pissed all over the terms of his conditional release and thinks that's not gonna end with a squad car and a cell."

Ben didn't try to defend himself. He just turned his head and looked at me—really looked—for what felt like the first time in years. The man I saw staring back at me wasn't the brother who'd stood between me and hell without question. There was something colder in his eyes now. He'd been stripped down to a base model of only the parts necessary to survive.

"You look tired," he said quietly.

That was all I heard lately, like it was news and I didn't see it every time I looked in the mirror. The hollow eyes and sharper angles of my face weren't just exhaustion. It was erosion. The same slow, quiet pressure that had been grinding me down for years.

The only time it let up, the only time I felt like a man and not a machine, was with Silas. With him, I could breathe. Not because he was soft and made me soft, but because he saw right through me and still didn't ask me to be anything other than what I was.

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I gave a short, bitter laugh and looked out over the rooftops. "This is just how I look now," I said. "You'd know that if you'd let me come see you."

Ben tipped the cigarette to his lips, inhaled deeply, and let the smoke drift through his nose. I could feel him watching me from the corner of his eye, gauging how far to reach. He didn't speak for so long, maybe that was all I would get. Then he admitted reluctantly, "I didn't want anyone to see me that way."

I understood that kind of pride. It was hardwired into our bones, growing up with nothing, spending half our lives proving we're more than the world said we were. But understanding didn't keep me from resenting how long it had taken for Ben to admit it.

"I wasn't there to judge," I said finally, swallowing the lump in my throat. "Just to see you."

"I wasn't there." He flicked the ash off the roof, following it down with his eyes until it disappeared into the darkness. "The man I was inside...that wasn't me, you know? You wouldn't have recognized him."

"You think I haven't seen you at your worst a dozen times?" I bit out furiously. "You think you could admit to anything that would shock me? You're still my brother, Ben. That's not something time or distance gets to rewrite."

He didn't answer, but I caught a muscle spasming in his jaw, the slow grind of molars as he stared straight ahead. The cigarette hung forgotten between his fingers, burned nearly to the filter.

"I just need a little time," he said finally. "Time to get my head straight and figure out where I fit."

"Fine," I said. "Take the time. But stop being selfish about it. You can't just cut your monitor and take off, not with Vanderhoff and the DA itching to get you back behind bars. You're an embarrassment to them. You get that? They played fast and loose with your conviction, and now they're just praying you'll do something to convince a judge you're a danger."

His eyes narrowed, and I knew he wanted to argue, but I wasn't finished. "The only reason you're out is because the AG's office opened an investigation long enough for Colt to shove a motion through. That judge didn't vacate your conviction, Ben. He agreed to a conditional release pending judicial review. You're a free man on paper and a felon in every way that counts. They gave you just enough rope to hang yourself. So don't."

Sullen color worked its way up Ben's throat. "I didn't mean to cause trouble," he muttered, eyes fixed on the skeletal outline of the schoolyard.

I snorted. "You're a Beaufort. Trouble's in the name."

He gave a small, humorless huff and offered a fist to bump. I knocked mine lightly against it. Some habits survived everything. Even prison.

"Next time you're feeling caged, give me a call. I'll take you for a spin on the Ducati until it passes. Hard to be mad at the world when you're screaming down the highway with your hair on fire."

Ben's lips twitched, and I could tell he liked the sound of it. Just like the old days, when I'd hotwire an old junker and we'd take it ripping through the cane fields.

"Yeah," he grunted wryly. "My babysitter would be real happy with that."

"He put a lot on the line for you. He's got a right to be pissed," I said, reaching out to deliver a light smack to the back of his head like I used to when we were kids, trying to knock us back into our old routine.

Ben recoiled before I could connect, catching my wrist in a grip so hard my bones creaked.

We both froze.

Slowly, awareness bled back into his eyes. The tension in his fingers released like a trap springing open. He dropped me and pulled back, putting extra space between our bodies.

"Reflex," he clipped out, still refusing to look at me.

"Yeah," I muttered, rubbing the sting out of my reddened skin. "I get it."

That damn silence was back, but it felt different now. More brittle. Neither of us rushed to fill it. A breeze had picked up, tracing along my collar and chilling the sweat on my neck.

Ben stared straight ahead, his face carved from stone. Then, like it cost him something just to ask, he said, "He still mad?"

I studied him in profile—the thick line of his jaw, the way his mouth pinched tight at the corners. Guarded was his everyday body language these days, but there was no defensiveness in the question. Just resignation, the kind that came from already knowing the answer but needing to hear it confirmed.

"I don't know," I said finally. "He didn't tell me what the fight was about."

Ben nodded shortly. He didn't offer an explanation either, and I didn't push. They'd both been locked up tight for weeks, and I'd run out of tools to pry them open.

"Whatever it was," I said, tired down to the marrow, "you need to deal with it. He stuck his neck out to get you here. I wish it was me. God knows I tried. I turned over every rock looking for that damn gun. But in the end, Colt's connections got you out. He put his reputation on the line, signing up as your designated custodian. He's holding the leash right now, whether you like it or not, so don't make it harder than it already is."

He didn't like that. I might not be able to read him like I once did, but he was still my twin, and I'd recognize that lowering of his brow anywhere.

"It's complicated," he said tersely.

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I just nodded. "Yeah," I said, looking out over the dark rooftops. "It usually is."

We sat in the hush of the dead hours before dawn, side by side, saying nothing. As time dragged on, the quiet softened into something that wasn't tense; it just stretched too far. A distance we couldn't quite find a way across.

Once, Ben was as familiar as my own pulse, but now I couldn't begin to guess what was going through his head. Nothing good, at any rate.

My own thoughts weren't nearly so cryptic. They came organized in a neat to-do list already stacking itself into triage. I'd need to call the supervising judge by eight, file an incident report with the Department of Corrections, check the exact wording of Ben's conditions, and see how much legal gymnastics I could pull before Vanderhoff got wind and made it impossible to contain. I'd have to loop in Colton and send him to charm the DA out of filing for remand—he was always better at playing the slick, oily back-scratching game than I was.

And that was just Monday morning.

Exhaustion was already settling like sediment into my bones. It wasn't just whiplash from the crazy night. It was the accumulation of days and years just like this, stacked on each other. I was finally starting to falter under the weight, and the grim chill in Ben's eyes only added to the pressure.

I hadn't saved him, and I couldn't fix him. Hell, I could barely keep the system from chewing him up again.

It was a damn good thing Silas and I had set those boundaries. No strings. No promises. Because if he'd expected more from me—anything at all—I'd already be failing him. At this rate, I'd be lucky to carve out time to see him before the quarter closed.

Assuming he waited that long.

Chapter Eleven

SILAS

The Dead End was exactly how I'd left it—loud, dark, and stinking of smoke, despite the crooked no-smoking sign nailed over the door. The stench of spilled beer and cheap cologne hit me hard enough to coat the back of my throat, but it was so familiar by this point it was almost comforting.

Technically, the parish had a three a.m. closing law. Not that it mattered. I'd never seen the sheriff's department enforce more than parking tickets. We kept the taps open until the regulars stumbled out, and judging by the noise, that wasn't happening any time soon. Some half-dead country-rock track wheezed out of the jukebox, fighting to be heard over the clatter of billiard balls and the scuff of boots on the sticky floor.

Hank was behind the bar, pretending to clean a glass with a rag that looked like the one I used on my bike engine. He glanced up when the door slammed behind me, breaking into that sheepish grin he always wore when he knew he'd fucked something up. Pushing forty and still looking like a kid caught stealing a beer from his old man's fridge. Too eager to please. Too dumb not to cut corners whenever he could.

"Busy night?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

Hank shrugged, setting the glass down with a clink. “Eh, the usual. A couple of loudmouths came through, but they bounced early. No big deal.”

“No big deal,” I echoed, strolling behind the bar like I owned the place—because I did—and slinging an arm around his shoulders. I tugged him close to speak low in his ear. “Except I got a call about a girl being hassled in my place while I was gone. Teen. Way too young to be here in the first place.”

Hank’s grin faltered. He started wiping his sweaty palms on his shirtfront in a self-soothing loop. “I didn’t see nothin’ like that. Honest, boss. You know that I keep my head down.”

That was why I’d hired him. Hank never asked questions. He kept the lights on and his mouth shut, which was all I needed.

I leaned close enough to watch the panic pool in his eyes. “Try again,” I drawled. “Who were they?”

He swallowed, Adam’s apple bobbing hard, and avoided meeting my eyes. The flush creeping up his neck told me he’d seen more than he wanted to admit. “Just the regulars. The guys who hang around whenever Gator’s crew shows up. You know the ones.”

“Did they say anything?”

Hank hesitated, gaze ping-ponging around the bar as if checking for eavesdroppers. “One of ’em mentioned a late delivery,” he muttered. “Didn’t seem like much at the time.”

“And you didn’t think to call me?” I growled, dropping him so fast that he stumbled back a step. I’d never have known if I hadn’t gotten a heads-up from one of my

regulars after Mason ditched me.

He blinked, caught off guard by the coldness in my tone, and retreated further behind the counter. His hapless, hangdog expression triggered violent impulses in me, and I forced myself to draw a steadying breath. “You know how to reach me, Hank. If someone’s running their mouth about drop-offs in my bar, I want to hear about it before it circles back through the swamp.”

Because it always did. Eventually.

If I hadn’t already been on edge from Mason ghosting me, I might’ve let it slide. But now? I wasn’t in the mood to play nice.

I hated to admit it, but what pissed me off the most was that I wouldn’t have done anything different. Even if I’d been standing here when it happened, my hands would’ve stayed in my pockets. I wasn’t in a position to interfere. Not yet. Ultimately, the girls I tried to protect would probably be safer on the street.

Some nights, that sat heavier than others.

Once I’d unclenched my jaw, I clapped him on the back—hard. “From now on, you tell me everything. Right down to how much toilet paper they’re going through. Got me?”

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“Yeah.” He bobbed his head fast, practically steaming with relief as he set the smudged glass he’d been cleaning on a nearby shelf. “Then...you probably want to know they came back. The guys, I mean. Not the girl. She’s long gone.”

My focus sharpened. “Where?”

He jerked a thumb toward the rear exit. “Out back. Smoking behind the kitchen, I think.”

I cursed and stripped off my jacket, tossing it into a crate behind the bar without slowing down. The weight of it had started to feel suffocating. I stalked down the narrow hallway toward the exit. The noise faded with every step, but the smell followed me as I shoved through the door.

It was the darkest part of the night, but the air was still dense with the heat of early summer—humid, close, and sticky enough to cling to my skin like a film. Crickets and katydids bickered somewhere in the woods beyond the lot like they had a score to settle. The quiet here wasn’t complete, but it was better than the constant roar of big city traffic.

The lot was a patchwork of cracked asphalt and hard-packed dirt, littered with cigarette butts and crushed beer cans that reflected the lone floodlight I’d mounted near the hidden security camera. At the far end of the lot, the hulking, black-on-black shapes of trucks were parked nose to nose. The headlights were off, but I counted at least six bodies by the amber pinpricks of their joints and cigarettes flaring with each drag. Idling engines offloaded diesel fumes, mixing with the cloying, skunky scent of cheap blunts.

I swatted away a cloud of no-see-ums and strolled lazily toward the trucks. There was no tension in the air, just a low drift of voices broken by an occasional bark of raucous laughter. The easy, familiar routine of a wind-down after a long night of stacking felonies. Business as usual for Gator Hollis and his crew.

Sylvia stood in the thick of it, beer in hand, squealing as a man twice her age shoved his hand up the thigh-high slit in her skirt. Gator liked her out front and dressed to kill, a honeypot with a sharp tongue and a thousand-yard stare who hit every mark without flinching.

I watched her for a moment, not because I wanted to, but because she was impossible to ignore. Despite the tired lines around her eyes, there was a grace to her performance, a zest for life that she hadn't quite managed to stamp out beneath a spiked heel.

The easy normalcy of it after nearly wrecking a girl's life churned something hot and angry in my veins. But I was a pro at swallowing it down by now. Didn't even need to count to ten anymore.

Gator sat behind the wheel of an F-150 he'd parked kitty-corner to the rest for easy escape. One elbow was slung out the open window, the other hand resting lazily on the wheel like he was posing for a country album cover. He always looked like he'd hopped right out of the shower, clean-cut in every sense, with short, neatly combed hair, crisp jeans, and a plaid shirt always rolled to the elbows. The kind of guy who would walk my grandmother to her car and refuse to take a dollar in thanks. A born hand-shaker with a sunny smile and disarming good ol' boy drawl.

But his eyes gave him away. They barely blinked and never wandered. Predatory and patient, but flat, like two chips of flint set into his sun-tanned face.

He wasn't loud and crude like his crew; Gator didn't need to draw attention. He

thrived in the space between charm and menace, lulling others into a false sense of security right up until they handed over the knife he'd plunge into their backs.

A grin spread across his face as I approached, easy as butter melting in a skillet, but it didn't touch those shark-dead eyes. "Well, look who decided to join the party," he drawled, offering his fist for a bump.

I knocked my fist against his and reached straight into the cab, plucking up the open bottle of whiskey resting near his thigh. The cheap, smoky burn seared the back of my throat. "You know me," I said, wiping my mouth with my hand. "Always love a party on my own turf."

Gator chuckled, leaning back against the cracked leather seat like a man who'd never known a worry. "Your turf's been good to us, McKenna. You know I appreciate the hospitality."

"Sure," I said, passing the bottle back and settling against the truck with an ease I never felt around him. "I don't mind you moving a little product now and then. But I start rethinking our arrangement when that product draws eyes and questions."

His laughter was a rolling, pleasant sound, but his eyes never blinked. "Ain't moved a damn thing here all week," he said, dripping syrup and bullshit. "Been keeping it real low-key, just like we agreed."

I jerked a thumb at the group over my shoulder, three of Gator's regular tagalongs, lean and twitchy and laughing too loud at jokes that weren't funny. "What about them?"

He followed my gaze, and his expression tightened in a flex of disgust before smoothing out in a practiced grin. "I had no part in that, my friend. It wasn't business. Just too much booze and too little sense. You know how it goes."

“I got a message that some girl was getting hassled. In my bar. Under my roof,” I said, keeping my eyes on the shifty fucks nearby. A bottle dropped, and the glass shattering was loud enough to clip their conversation short for half a beat. I lowered my voice. “You know how this works, Gator. I don’t stop your people from doing what they do—but I stay in the loop. I know who, when, and where. Especially when it comes to girls. That’s not optional.”

His fingers drummed on the wheel in a rhythm too steady to be idle, drawing out the silence and letting me stew. That was his style; he never rushed a damn thing. It was how we’d spent the last year, circling each other, eyeballing trust without ever landing on it.

“That’s why I like you, McKenna,” he said at last. “You’re a stand-up guy. You look out for folks—even us.” His fingers kept that steady rhythm on the wheel, a subtle metronome to break the tension. “The world needs more men like us. People who know how to play all sides without pissing everyone off.”

That was bait if I’d ever heard it, but there was no avoiding it.

“I look out for myself,” I said, treading carefully. “Same as you. I like you, Gator. You and Sylvia have been regulars since I bought the place while the ink was still wet on my parole papers. But I’m on the hook when your people get out of hand.”

When I glanced over, his grin hadn’t budged. Still picture-perfect. But there was a flicker of ice in his eyes. He wasn’t happy. Judging by the cold way he watched his crew, he hadn’t been happy since before I arrived.

“You know how it is, McKenna,” he said breezily. “Some of these guys get too keyed up to quit. They bump into the wrong girl, say the wrong thing, and suddenly I’ve got a situation on my hands. But I don’t let them shit where we eat. I keep ’em in line.”

He passed me the bottle, and I took a long pull before answering, just to watch him sweat. “That’s good. ’Cause I’ve been hearing whispers. Nothing concrete yet. Just...noise. People are starting to ask questions about the Dead End. About me. Cops don’t usually care what happens this far down the road, but if somebody’s sniffing around, I need to know who—and why.”

Gator’s eyes narrowed, and his grin thinned into a razor-sharp slice. “You don’t need to worry about the cops.”

Yeah, and I’d kill to know why.

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I straightened up and cinched the tie at the back of my neck with a sharp tug, more habit than thought. It wasn't about vanity but about keeping it out of my face. The long hair, though? I'd be lying if I said that wasn't a little bit about vanity.

"Look," I said brusquely, "I don't mind you using the Dead End as a hub. Hell, it's worked for both of us so far. But when your crew starts drawing heat, it stops benefiting me and becomes a liability."

He cocked his head, watching me with those patient, predatory eyes. "What're you getting at?"

I braced one hand on the door and leaned in slightly to make sure he knew I wasn't bluffing. "If you want this arrangement to hold, I need some assurance that I won't be left dealing with the fallout. I've got my own priorities."

His fingers stilled on the wheel, amusement flickering across his face. "You asking for a cut, McKenna?"

I rubbed my thumb over a flake of chipped paint, thinking it over, but I already knew what I wanted—and it wasn't money.

"I want insurance," I said slowly. "Loose ends are a liability for someone with my record. If your crew kicks up dust, I need to know whose boots are behind it and who's paying to sweep it up. That's not a favor. It's the price of doing business."

He tilted his head, considering, and blew a laughing breath. "Okay, McKenna. I'll take it upstairs. Give me a few days to talk things over with my boss. I'll make sure

you're covered."

I gave a single nod and tapped the roof of his truck. "Good. I like the Dead End off the radar."

Gator's chuckle followed me as I headed back toward the bar. "You're a hard man to read, McKenna."

"That's the idea," I called back, keeping my shoulders loose and my pace unhurried. I focused on the crunch of gravel under my boots and ignored the hyena laughter of his pals still loitering by the trucks.

Sylvia was sitting topless on the hood of an old Chevy, letting a guy in a ballcap slurp liquor from between her breasts. I didn't stop. That was the deal.

It wasn't until I reached the door that I sensed Gator's attention slide off my back.

Inside, the Dead End felt smaller than usual. Hank was finishing up, pushing a dirty mop across the floor like he thought elbow grease could fix his mistake. I checked the register and headed toward my office at the back of the bar. It wasn't much, just a storage room with a desk and a couple of lockboxes, but it was mine, and quiet enough to think.

I dropped into the chair, pulled the bourbon from my desk drawer, and poured a shot into the glass I didn't bother cleaning. The burn was smoother than the rotgut Gator had been drinking, but it did nothing to clear my head.

Gator had agreed too fast. He never did anything fast, and he always had a price tag.

The only question was what he wanted—and whether I could live with giving it to him.

Chapter Twelve

SILAS

It had been three days since that night at the jazz club, and Mason was still haunting me. Not in some soft, poetic sense. More like a tension headache I couldn't stretch out or a craving I couldn't shake.

We'd traded a handful of texts, circling each other with the same careful restraint he preferred in person, but something always came up to keep us apart. Work, mostly—or that was just the bullshit excuse he gave me.

Now, sometime past midnight, I was halfway up the gravel drive to the Beaufort estate. I hadn't told Mason I was coming. If I gave him a heads-up, he'd have time to talk himself out of it—and I wasn't in the mood to be reasonable.

He'd been clawing at the back of my brain for too long. The taste of him clung to every cup of coffee, the snarl of his breath rode the exhaust on my morning ride, and his scent ghosted the collar of my shirt no matter how many times I changed.

Enough.

The thought of being with him had become the only part of my life that didn't feel like a performance, and I knew I wasn't the only one getting frustrated.

Mason didn't need to say a thing for me to know how much he needed this. Needed me. The man was strung tighter than a tripwire, and he was kidding himself if he thought he could keep that tension locked inside forever.

As the estate emerged through the trees, sprawling and defiant against the dark, a smile tugged at the corners of my mouth. Eden, they called it. I hadn't explored this

half of the parish much, so tonight marked my first in-person glimpse.

I couldn't decide if it was a disappointment or not.

The house was a paradox of decrepit history and meticulous upkeep, complete with white columns and a wraparound porch too cinematic to be accidental. From a distance, it had the bones of an old southern belle, but the closer I got, the more the cracks began to show. Ivy jammed hooks into the siding, and the wings on the angels flanking the driveway looked like they'd fractured mid-flight.

Any fool could see the place was bleeding money. Most folks would see a relic, past its prime and sliding downhill one slow inch at a time. But even a northerner like me could appreciate the history. It started as a Jesuit monastery back in the French Colonial era, then turned into an orphanage when war and disease left more kids than families, and finally, during the lean years of the Depression, fell into the hands of the Beauforts—one of the few families flush enough to buy property when the Church sold off its holdings. Since then, it had been remodeled, repurposed, rebranded—but never truly changed.

What a weird place to live.

I killed the engine at the end of the driveway, not wanting to break the uneasy atmosphere with twin exhaust pipes and bad intentions. The place didn't exactly invite company. The silence here had texture. Ancient branches creaked in the magnolia-scented breeze, night birds called from the leaves, and somewhere nearby, a bullfrog croaked. Sounds over sounds, layered so thick the property seemed to be murmuring.

Maybe that was why Mason didn't stay here much. He was always at his office or slouched at my bar with that glassy look in his eyes. That man had way too much noise in his head to sit still and listen to the ghosts.

It made tonight an anomaly. He'd told me he was working from home and too buried in deadlines to meet up, but that didn't stop me from needling him by text. Why would it? Watching him dodge my questions was half the fun. I could practically hear his irritation in every three-dot pause.

"You're ignoring me, counselor."

His response had been one word: "Working."

"At this time of night? In Devil's Garden? Not safe, sweetheart." That was bait, but it didn't land how I'd hoped.

"Home," he'd replied. Still one word. If he kept that up, it might just hurt my feelings.

“Thought you hated that place,” I fished, though I wasn’t sure it was entirely accurate.

“Doesn’t mean I can’t use the desk.”

“Bet you’re not using the bed, though. Need me to come teach you how to relax?”

I could picture him, hunched over some tiny desk from his high school years, typing away on a laptop while those pretty blue eyes turned bloodshot behind his fancy glasses.

“Good night, Silas.”

“We both know you’re not sleeping.”

That was the last thing I sent. His end stayed silent...but he didn’t tell me to leave him alone.

That was the thing about Mason—he built walls like a pro, but he always left the gate cracked just enough to let someone slip through if they dared. Might as well be me.

I caught myself grinning as I swung off the bike and peeled off my jacket. Mason was going to hate this. He’d accuse me of being reckless and selfish—and he’d be right. But he wouldn’t send me away.

I wheeled the bike into a patch of deep shadow where it wouldn’t be visible. No fence or guard dogs. That was something. Still, I wouldn’t bet against security cameras on a property like this.

I kept to the tree line, boots sinking into the moist earth, and stopped shy of the porch. My gaze swept the mansion as I tugged off my gloves, one finger at a time. My hands were steady, breath even, but every inch of me was on high alert. I wasn’t here to

make a scene, especially not with the foster program I knew they ran in the back wing. This wasn't that kind of visit.

I just couldn't stay away.

I paused in the shadow of a live oak, tilting my head to get a better view of the house. Midnight had come and gone, and the house had clearly settled for the night. Most of the windows were pitch black, except for two small squares of light at opposite ends of the upper floor. Access to the front window would be bannister to trellis to window ledge. The rear window was one swift climb up the branches arching like a cathedral ceiling overhead.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I leaned against the trunk and thumbed through my contacts until I landed on Mason's name. I didn't expect him to pick up. Hell, I'd have bet money on it. But to my surprise, he answered on the second ring.

"What?"

"You got an oak tree outside your window?" I asked casually, eyeballing my footholds in the knotted bark.

"What?" The irritation in his tone wasn't posturing this time. He sounded like I'd just asked what color underwear he was wearing. That would have probably been better received, all things considered, but damned if that sexy fatigue-rasp didn't wind me up.

"You heard me," I said, letting my smile spill out across the phone. "An oak tree. Outside your window?"

There was a pause on the other end, followed by an exhausted sigh and the faint rustle of papers. "Silas, this is the most ridiculous?—"

“Don’t overthink it, sweetheart. Just answer the question.” I lowered my voice a little, twisting it into that smooth, commanding tone he responded to every time. “Do you have an oak tree outside your window?”

He was quiet for so long I was sure he was about to hang up, but then I heard it—an unexpected chuckle.

“Yeah,” he said wryly. “I have an oak tree.”

“Good. Hang on.”

Before he could get another word in, I slid the phone back into my pocket, still connected. Let him listen and wonder.

The oak’s branches twisted toward the upper floors like a ladder custom-built for sneaking in and out. I blew on my palms, rubbed them together, and caught the lowest branch, testing its give before hauling myself up.

Not the suavest way to make an entrance, but grace wasn’t my currency. Climbing trees wasn’t a childhood memory. I grew up in a shotgun house in Dorchester, where winters froze us solid and summers were a cacophony of heat, sirens, and neighbor shouting matches.

Mason could use some unpredictability in his routine, anyway, and I was more than happy to provide.

By the time I reached the top branches, sweat slicked the back of my neck, and my breath had picked up. My new smoking habit was starting to take a toll, but I took a minute to intentionally slow it down before rapping my knuckles against the glass. Couldn’t be panting like a teenager on my first break-in.

The shadow of Mason’s shoulders moved behind the sheer curtain, and my pulse jumped like it hadn’t been briefed on how this was supposed to go. Just a man, I told myself. Nothing but a silhouette blurred behind a sheet of gauze. But it didn’t matter. The way he moved, with strength and restraint, was enough to set me off. He didn’t need to touch me to get under my skin.

The curtain rippled as he pulled it aside. He fiddled with the window latch, brow furrowed, muttering something profane under his breath when it stuck at an inch. Bracing a shoulder against the frame, he gave it one solid shove. The window creaked open, dragging the thin curtain outward on a funnel of air that carried the dark spice of his cologne straight into my lungs.

He tilted his head, bracing one forearm against the sill to lock eyes with me. “Tell me something,” he said. “That prison sentence you served...any chance it involved breaking and entering?”

“Not breaking.” I grinned suggestively. “Just entering. Figured it was time to test if the fit’s as tight as it looks.”

His mouth twitched, but the rest of his expression held neutral. “And if it isn’t?”

“I’d keep trying until it was perfect.” I held his gaze, waiting for him to blink first—but he didn’t. Instead, he coolly stepped back, allowing me to hook a leg over the sill and pull myself in.

“You’re insane,” he muttered, but there was no bite. Just a hint of disbelief and amusement.

“Takes one to know one.” I dusted off the seat of my jeans, scanning the room with a quick sweep.

The bedroom wasn’t what I’d expected. Mason moved through life like a man with a system: polished shoes, starched collars, and a brain like a scalpel. But this space was chaos. The bones were old money: carved walnut bed, brass-handled dresser, and a wingback chair that looked like it belonged in a library that smelled like Cuban cigars. Mason’s personality came through in the modern touches—a flat-screen on the wall, a steel lamp on a glass desk, and an open laptop plugged into a portable

battery. Case files teetered beside the desk in a precarious, knee-high stack. The space didn't look lived in so much as worked in. A battleground for the terminally driven.

But I hadn't come for the room. I'd come for him.

He was watching me warily, amused despite the dark smudges beneath his eyes. For once, he wasn't wearing one of his armor-plated suits, just sweats and a fitted t-shirt that clung to his lean runner's frame. He looked wrecked. Not the kind of tired a nap could fix. I'd seen that look in the mirror too many times over the years not to recognize it. He was hollowed out and running on fumes because stopping wasn't an option. Not for men like us.

I reached out, letting my thumb skate the top of his cheekbone, just enough to brush the shadow beneath his eye. His lashes flickered, drooping like he wanted to lean into my touch but couldn't allow it.

"You haven't crashed at my place all week," I said softly. "I know you weren't always doing it for my sparkling company. You need the break."

"I don't have time for a break." At least he sounded regretful. That was a start.

"Sure, you do," I coaxed, putting every drop of seduction I had into the words. "Your brother's back under a real roof, yeah? Whatever you're digging into at that warehouse downtown hasn't exploded yet, so unless I've missed a headline, you're finally ahead of the curve."

The corner of his eye twitched, just barely, a flicker of something that looked like surprise. Yeah, I bet he'd thought he was pulling one over on me with that slick little warning about someone digging into the Dead End. But I had tricks up my sleeve he'd never see coming.

“Face it—you’re a control freak, counselor. That’s half the appeal for me, I’ll grant you, but the monkey on your back’s gonna shove you off a cliff one of these days. So, take a break.”

“And I suppose you’re to provide that?” he asked, searching my eyes skeptically.

I dropped my hands to his waist and tugged him close, our bodies slotting together like they’d never been apart. “What can I say? I’m a giver.”

Our lips had barely touched when a knock at the door split the moment wide open.

Chapter Thirteen

SILAS

The universe had a sick sense of humor.

One second, Mason was in my arms, disheveled and beautiful, breath hot against mine—the next, he was yanking back like we’d been caught red-handed doing something filthy. Which we hadn’t. Yet.

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I slammed a palm against the wall beside his head and breathed through the raw frustration clawing up my throat. My forehead hovered inches from his, close enough to catch the aroused flush crawling up his neck. I'd spent a lifetime learning patience. Hell, it had kept me alive. But even I had limits.

“Whoever it is,” I growled, licking at the frantic pulse in his throat, “send them away. No way in hell we’re stopping this time.”

Mason smiled—the bastard. Like this was just a minor inconvenience and not a goddamn tragedy. His bright blue eyes held a flicker of amusement as he straightened, shrugging off my touch casually, and turned toward the door without a backward glance.

The man at the threshold filled the frame like he owned it: tall, broad, and built like a man who'd never had to raise his voice to get people moving. His blond hair already held a trace of gray at the temples, but somehow, it didn't make him look older. Just more established.

Mason looked mildly annoyed but not the least bit surprised. He shoved his hands into his pockets—probably trying to hide the fact that he was still half-hard—and leaned a shoulder on the jamb like this wasn't a cockblock of biblical proportions.

“Terrible timing, as usual, Gideon.”

That's when it hit me.

Gideon. The guy from the jazz club. The one who'd touched Mason like he'd earned

the right. The one I'd wanted to put through a wall. His brother, of course. Hell. I was usually better at connecting the dots.

They weren't blood, but the resemblance was there anyway, just not in their looks. It was in their expressions, the way they stood, the tilt of their heads.

Gideon didn't look like any priest I'd ever seen, but I wasn't particularly religious. Might've had a better opinion of religion if more of them looked like they could bench press a pickup.

"Depends how you look at it," Gideon replied. His gaze slid past Mason, landing on me with a curiosity I couldn't quite read. Not hostile, but not friendly either. "I learned to recognize that branch scraping against your window back when you and Ben used to sneak out to drag race in the cane fields. Never expected to hear someone climbing it again."

Mason sighed and ran a hand through his hair, messing it into unruly waves that made him look younger. "Gideon, this is Silas McKenna." He glanced at me apologetically. "Silas? My brother."

"The new owner of the Dead End," Gideon commented, widening his stance and folding his arms across his chest. "Nice entrance."

I grinned and helped myself to a seat at the foot of Mason's bed, wordlessly staking my claim. "Thanks. Harder than it looked from the ground," I said, throwing him a wink just to see if he'd flinch.

One brow ticked up, all practiced elegance. "Let's hope the climb down is easier," Gideon replied, smooth as linen. "Time to get started."

Mason spun around and jabbed a finger at me. "Don't you dare move."

I hadn't so much as twitched, but the panic in his voice was deeply gratifying. My grin widened, and I leaned back on my elbows, settling in like I'd just been handed a front-row seat to something fun. "Don't worry, slick. That was never gonna happen."

Mason huffed a slow, grudging laugh and turned his attention back to his brother. "We're not kids anymore, Gideon. Boone isn't here to ground us for having company after dark."

Gideon didn't blink. "I'm here, and you know the rules haven't changed. No visitors in the bedrooms. We've got teenagers in the house. Set an example."

His inflection was flat, as if he expected Mason to salute and say: yes, sir. But Mason held his ground without blinking.

This wasn't the man who melted at the growl in my voice and loved it when I bossed him around. This was the flip side, the razor-sharp intelligence and self-control that undoubtedly bulldozed every courtroom he entered. He didn't waver; he held like a goddamn force of nature, and right then, I realized I hadn't even scratched the surface of how deep he ran.

I wanted to laugh, but I was too turned on.

Gideon closed the gap and rested a hand on Mason's shoulder, dropping his voice to keep it private. But I wasn't in the habit of respecting boundaries.

"I'm glad you're living a little, Mase," he said warmly. "But it's better for everyone if you take it somewhere else. Especially for you. You'll never relax with that laptop right in front of you."

Mason hung his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Fair enough," he said ruefully. "We'll go."

“Good.” Gideon gave his shoulder one last squeeze before turning away. “Try not to fall out of any trees on your way down.”

Mason was so focused on watching him leave that he didn’t hear the floorboards creak when I rose from the bed. By the time he realized I’d moved, I was already behind him, reaching over his head to push the door closed. I caged him between my arms, breathing in the spicy scent of his cologne. His breath hitched, but I caught it. I noticed everything when it came to Mason.

“Looks like we’re moving this party, counselor,” I whispered.

“You sure you’re up for it?” he teased, pressing back against me and tilting his head in invitation.

My lips found the curve of his throat as I tugged his ass flush against my aching erection. “Sweetheart, I’ve been up for it since you walked into my bar.”

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He barked a shaky chuckle, but it wasn't laughter making him tremble. I slid my hands up his sides, tracing the line of his ribs beneath the thin cotton of his shirt. The frantic hum under his skin was pure voltage begging to be released. I wanted it unspooled. Wanted it stripped bare and poured all over me. But not yet. I needed to calm him down until we got there.

"You're shaking," I whispered, so softly he must have felt it before he heard it. "You're that worked up for me, huh?"

His head fell back to rest on my shoulder, and he let out a laughing groan. "This is my own damn fault," he muttered. "The first time I saw you, I should've..." His voice caught, and I watched his throat work around the words. "But I couldn't."

"Couldn't what?" I asked, letting my breath stir the short hairs at his nape.

"I couldn't take it. What you were offering, I mean. I've been focused on my brothers for so long..." His lips pressed together like he wanted to stop there, but then his expression spasmed, and for the first time, honesty spilled out. "I don't even know how to want something for myself anymore."

"Shhh," I murmured, skimming my palms over his waist, gentling him with my touch. "You don't owe me that. That's not how this works, remember? No questions. No strings. Don't overthink it."

"Overthinking is my specialty," he said dryly.

"Not tonight." I gave his earlobe a teasing nip and then pulled back. "Grab your

helmet. I'm taking you somewhere we won't get interrupted."

We didn't take the tree this time, and my knees sent up a silent hallelujah. Mason led me down a wide staircase lit only by the moonlight spilling from tall windows. It felt like a guided tour through a museum. Stern-faced Beaufort ancestors glared down from gilt-framed portraits like they were judging the company he kept. The air reeked of old money: wood polish, faded wallpaper, and laundered linen.

It wasn't tough to figure out why Mason preferred crashing on a cot at my place over sleeping here. The house was silent but in a heavy and watchful way. The kind of place that didn't let anyone forget where they came from. If I'd grown up here, I'd have been looking for a way out, too.

Gravel crunched underfoot as we hit the driveway, and on impulse, I reached out and grabbed his hand. His fingers were warm and slender but strong. It caught me off guard. I hadn't held a man's hand since...hell, maybe ever. My teenage years weren't built for romance. A shared cigarette and a grope behind the gym was about as tender as it got. And my adult life? Intimacy had no place in the schedule.

I used to think I preferred it that way.

Mason had a way of changing my priorities.

The Scout sat just off the main drive, matte black and half-eclipsed by shadows.

"Where are we going?" he asked warily.

"You'll see," I said, throwing a leg over the bike and patting the pillion seat behind me. "But trust me—it'll be worth the ride."

Chapter Fourteen

MASON

The Scout was all muscle and fury, rattling through my bones hard enough to shake some fillings loose. My Ducati was all about precision and screaming high RPMs. This beast was chaos barely held together by steel and torque. It sounded like a pissed-off grizzly bear tearing up the asphalt.

The world blurred at the edges, a streak of dark treetops and headlight carving up the backroads. I ducked instinctively behind his shoulder, breathing in motor oil, leather, and that warm, spiced cologne I could get drunk on. I leaned into each turn with him, thighs tight against the seat, plastered to the hard muscle of his back. I'd never ridden as a backpack before. But my arms were locked around Silas's waist, and I hadn't let go.

I told myself that I hated letting someone else take the lead. But my pulse hadn't settled since the engine turned over, and the hard truth was, I didn't want it to. This was why I rode, for the rush and clarity. The illusion of freedom I'd chased most of my life. Except this time, it didn't feel like running. It felt like exactly where I was supposed to be. A low, unguarded laugh slipped out before I could stop it.

I'd expected him to head toward the Dead End, but he veered in the opposite direction, toward the only hint of elevation in the flatland of the parish. The road curved through the dark, winding higher until the trees began to thin and the night sky spread above us.

Silas pulled off near the edge of a rocky bluff, killed the engine, and kicked down the stand. The sudden silence rang in my ears, broken only by the distant murmur of the Mississippi far below. Even at this hour, the day's heat still radiated from the rocks beneath our boots, carrying a faint perfume of water and wildflowers. Moonlight spilled across the clearing, painting everything ghost-pale—except for Silas. He was all leather and shadow, solid and warm and real.

I glanced around the empty lookout, searching for landmarks to orient myself. Nothing clicked.

“I’ve lived here all my life,” I said quietly, “and didn’t even know this place existed.”

“Figured you wouldn’t.” Silas tugged off his helmet, shaking out his ponytail and flipping it clear of his collar. “It’s not a spot you stumble across by accident.”

I frowned, trying to catch his expression in the low light. “How did you find it?”

Instead of answering, he said, “Balance us for a second.”

I braced my boots on the ground and locked my knees. He swung a leg over to straddle the seat backward, hands planted on the pillion seat, one on either side of my thighs. The position was tight, forcing our knees to brush and shrinking the space between us to nothing. But his posture was loose and balanced, a king on his throne, like he’d done this a hundred times before.

With whom, I wondered.

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“Whenever I move somewhere new, I like to get a feel for the area,” he said. “Find the spots even locals don’t know about. You learn a lot about people by understanding the spaces they live in. What they value. What they don’t.”

It took a moment to remember what I’d asked. That wasn’t like me. But the way he was looking at me—dark and steady, like there was nowhere else he’d rather be—disoriented me more than I’d ever admit.

“How often do you relocate?” I asked, playing it cool despite my curiosity.

He went still, just for a beat, but I caught it. Then his fingers resumed their idle tapping rhythm on the top of my thigh. “Too much.”

His flat tone didn’t invite questions; I knew better than to push. He might’ve broken our second rule when he snuck into my bedroom, but we could still do our best to follow the rest. Especially the one to mind our own business.

I steered us back onto safer ground by asking, “What do you think of Devil’s Garden?”

He sighed, glancing out over the bluff, though it was too dark to see more than the glimmer of moonlight on the river below. Mountains weren’t a thing here, but even this little bit of elevation was probably breathtaking in daylight. “I like it,” he said slowly, weighing each word. “It’s quieter than Boston. Rough around the edges, but the kind of rough that’s honest. People here don’t pretend to be something they’re not. That’s rare, at least from what I’ve seen.”

The mention of his birthplace was so casual, I might've missed it if I hadn't spent my days dissecting language for a living. "You're from Boston?"

He hesitated, watching me with narrow eyes, like he was deciding how much of himself he felt like handing over. "Yeah," he said finally, running his tongue over his teeth. "Big family. Noisy. I was the youngest, so one day, I figured if I wanted to build a life for myself, I'd have to start somewhere else."

It sounded simple enough, but I sensed a truth to the words that didn't match the delivery. That kind of logic usually came after some damage had already been done.

"It didn't exactly go according to plan, did it?" I asked. "Seven years in federal prison, right?"

Unease flickered across his expression, but it was gone before I could identify the source. Not guilt or shame exactly. More like resistance. He didn't want to lie, but he wasn't about to open a door he'd spent years nailing shut. Not for me, anyway.

"The road curved," he said finally, dry but not unkind.

"It happens."

"Yeah." Humor warmed his gaze. "What about you? Did you always plan on fighting the good fight in Devil's Garden, or did life just...curve?"

The question took me by surprise. I blew out a slow breath and hung my head, staring down at the way his heavy thighs flanked mine. His knuckles were broad, sun-dark, and webbed with a pattern of thin white scars like he'd once put his fist through glass.

"Dreams weren't really a thing when I was a kid," I admitted ruefully. "After Boone adopted us, it started to feel like anything was possible. I decided on law school, and

after that, Ben joined the Army. I don't think either of us planned on ever coming back."

I rubbed the back of my neck, unsure why I was still talking—or why he was listening. Really listening. It was clear in the way his eyes never left my face.

"But you can't really outrun what you're born to be, you know? I was always meant to be part of this place. We all were. Whether we like it or not."

"Your brothers?" he asked in a low voice.

I nodded. "We inherited more than the Beaufort name. We took on a legacy. If we don't fight for this place... who will?"

The teasing light in Silas's eyes had faded, replaced by something grim. He wasn't smiling anymore.

"You'd be surprised," he said roughly, "how many people are fighting for places like this. Even if you never see them."

I frowned. He must've seen the question forming on my face because his jaw tightened, and he looked away. The moment hung there, charged and uncertain, until he broke it with a low chuckle. Then he reached up, brushing his fingers along my jaw and coaxing my mouth closer to his.

"Enough talking," he murmured, voice dropping an octave as his lips skimmed the corner of my mouth. His stubble scraped a spot where I'd nicked myself shaving, and I shivered. "We made a pact, counselor. Time to follow through."

My hands found his shoulders, solid and muscular beneath worn leather. The scent of him, salt and leather and musk, was like a hand around my throat. I couldn't escape.

“You gonna back out this time?” Silas asked.

“W-wasn’t planning on it,” I managed, fighting the hitch in my breath.

He chuckled like a man who knew he’d already won. He bit down on the hinge of my jaw, just enough to sting. “Good. Then hold on.”

He was on me in a second, but not my lips. That would’ve been too straightforward, and Silas didn’t do straightforward. He went for the throat. Literally. His lips sealed over my pulse point, teeth scraping the line of my Adam’s apple, as his hands skimmed beneath my shirt. His palms were rough and certain, tracing my shape, touching me like he had every right. Like he already knew I’d let him do anything he wanted.

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I curled my fingers into fists on top of my thighs, desperately struggling to ground myself. “I figured we’d be headed back to your place.”

“I live above the Dead End.” Silas’s growl vibrated against my throat, and his thumbs slipped beneath my waistband. “Drama there never quits. I closed up early, but there’s always some drunk bastard wandering the parking lot. I’m not taking any chances of getting interrupted this time.”

“So you picked a public place?” I asked, sharper than I’d intended. It was hard not to sound incredulous when he had both hands under my shirt and the fabric worked halfway up my chest.

His chuckle pulled a shiver up my spine. “You worried we’re gonna get caught?”

“We’re not exactly in the middle of nowhere.” But it felt like it. Right now, it felt like we were the only two people on the planet. “I like following the rules, you know. I made a whole career out of it.”

“Maybe that’s why you keep coming back to me. Tell me, counselor...” One hand slipped around the small of my back, dragging me hard against the slow grind of his hips. His grin was close to sinful. “How bad do you want to break the rules with me right now?”

I didn’t trust myself to answer, but Silas didn’t need it. My pulse gave me away.

His mouth curled against my throat. “That’s what I thought.”

Then his mouth crashed over mine. No warm-up or warning, just full-throttle hunger that almost matched my own. Almost. I kissed him back, matching the thrust of his tongue, opening up for him until the world narrowed to the taste of his mouth and scrape of his stubble against my chin.

He broke away just long enough to rip my shirt over my head, exposing my steaming skin to the night air. His palm skated possessively down my chest, right over my pounding heart, mapping muscle and bone like it belonged to him.

“Not what I expected under all those suits,” he murmured, tracing the cut of my stomach. “You hide this on purpose?”

I clenched my teeth against the rush of heat flooding my groin. “Never saw the point in showing off.”

Silas let out a low sound that might’ve been a laugh—or a growl. His hand slipped beneath my waistband, gliding over the length of my aching cock.

“You’re already hard,” he rasped, dragging the callused pad of his thumb over the swollen head. “Good. I don’t plan on taking this slow.”

I groaned, dropping my head and staring down at the hand moving inside my pants. His touch was maddening: light and precise and utterly fucking useless. Toying when I needed claiming.

“If you’re just going to tease, don’t bother touching me at all,” I gritted between clenched teeth.

He stilled, fingers going lax around my shaft before retreating completely. His heat lingered even after he pulled back, leaving me aching and unsatisfied, and then—like he was purposely trying to break me—he pulled away entirely. Leaning backward on

his seat and propping his elbows on the handlebar, raking his eyes over my body with lazy amusement.

“Go on then, pretty boy. Show me how you want it.”

My spine snapped straight, and the bike rocked beneath us. Silas’s legs kept the kickstand steady, but I was two seconds away from launching off the bike and kicking it out from under him.

“I don’t play games, Silas. I don’t have the patience.” It came out splintered and angry. “So if that’s what this is?—”

“It’s not,” Silas interrupted, unblinking. No grin this time. No smooth deflection. Just his eyes, locked on mine, serious as a heart attack. “It’s not a game,” he repeated, softer now, and as serious as I’d ever heard him. “But it’s all I’ve got to give you.”

Fair enough. I’d agreed to the terms. Hell, I’d drawn them up. Keep it simple. Keep it clean. But as I sat there, with his heat still lingering on my skin, something restless and unsatisfied stirred deep within. I missed his touch, and I resented the void it left behind.

For once, I wanted someone else to carry the weight. I’d been holding the line all my life, plugging leaks, keeping the house of cards from collapsing. First with Ben, then Gage, and then the whole goddamn Beaufort family.

I was tired.

Silas wasn’t offering to carry any weight. Not really. I wasn’t stupid enough to mistake a hand at my throat for anything real. But I wanted the illusion too badly to walk away. If all he could give me was this, I’d take it.

I'd take him—any way I could get him.

He caught the change in my eyes the moment it happened, and the smile that flickered across his face was filled with approval. He stayed where he was, lounging like a king, legs spread, waiting for me to step into the part I'd decided to play.

“Do it,” he commanded.

This time, it wasn't a request. It was the price of admission.

Chapter Fifteen

SILAS

I knew better than to give him time to think. Mason lived in his head; the second he started analyzing, he'd talk himself out of this. I couldn't let that happen.

Not when I needed him so badly.

It'd be easy to pretend this was just about control. That I wasn't chasing something deeper every time he gave in to me like this. But I wasn't in the habit of lying to myself.

So I went full shock and awe, striking him so hard and fast that he wouldn't have room to breathe, let alone second-guess what we were doing.

"Take your cock out," I growled. "Jerk off while I watch."

His eyes hardened, and I cocked an eyebrow, daring him to admit I was pushing him too far. That Beaufort backbone was stiff with defiance. I could practically hear his back molars grinding as he reached for his waistband. He hooked his thumbs into his waistband and slowly, agonizingly, eased his pants down just enough to free his cock. It sprang forward, curving elegantly toward his stomach, flushed and slender enough to fit perfectly in my mouth—if I let it.

"That's it," I coaxed, keeping my voice dark and indulgent, meant to pull him in and keep him panting. "Stroke that pretty cock for me."

His head dropped, dark hair falling forward to hide his face. What a shame. Those

sharp blue eyes were too pretty to hide behind his glasses, and right now, I wanted every piece of him exposed.

His strokes began tentatively at first, but as I continued a stream of filth in his ear, they got faster, rougher, needier, until his hand was flashing up and down his rigid shaft. His teeth sank into his bottom lip, fighting hard for pride, but the moans and whimpers won.

“Faster,” I commanded, watching him through hooded lids, entranced by the desperation etched across his face. “Come on, counselor. Show me how bad you want it.”

Color climbed his throat, staining high on his cheeks as he picked up the pace, fist flying in tight, frantic strokes. A ragged, guttural moan slipped out, and the sound punched right through me. I ground the heel of my palm against the fly of my jeans, chasing the memory of his mouth wrapped around me. Those soft lips, that desperate tongue. I could practically feel them as I watched him touch himself.

“You like this, don’t you? Touching yourself for me. You’ve probably done it a hundred times already. Every time you get near me, that pretty little cock of yours is already tenting your pants, begging for me to give it some attention.” I put my lips right against the shell of his ear, letting the words slip inside himlike velvet. “I’ve barely touched you yet, and you’re already this out of control. How does it feel?”

Mason’s answer was a choked gasp as he doubled down, white knuckles flashing over the swollen head of his cock. His jaw was clenched so tight the cords of his neck stood out in stark relief. The flush spreading across his pale skin was more than arousal now; it was the sting of humiliation and hunger. This was far outside his comfort zone.

“Tell me how much you love it,” I whispered, clasping him by the neck and yanking

him into a fierce kiss. He sucked my tongue hungrily, chasing it when I pulled back, whimpering whether he realized it or not. “Tell me how bad you want to be under me right now.”

“I...hate it,” he growled stubbornly. His eyes were blazing blue like a gas burner turned up to max. He was so close, I could practically taste his arousal. “You...fucking...asshole.”

I laughed, delighted, and brushed my thumb over his trembling lips. He clamped his mouth shut, denying me the sounds I wanted most, so I slipped my thumb between his lips and forced him to suck. He fucking melted. He slumped against me, and I had to wrap an arm around his waist to keep him from tumbling us both off the bike.

He was so damn close to breaking. Closer than I’d anticipated from just a few minutes of his own hand. I didn’t want him spilling too quickly.

“Come on,” I taunted, watching him unravel. “Edge for me, sweetheart. Show me how much you can take.”

“Oh fuck—Silas—” Mason choked out, twisting his head away, trying to hide from me. His hips bucked wildly, and he grabbed the base of his cock, trying to stop himself. Too late. He came with a raw, broken sound, streaking his stomach and thighs in sticky ropes. Helplessly, he clutched at the front of my shirt, hanging on for dear life as his orgasm ripped through him.

I kept my arm around his waist, holding him steady while I enjoyed the view: flushed cheeks, sweat-slick skin, and spent cock lying against the mess he made. Utterly debauched.

“That’s what I like to see,” I murmured, running my fingers through his damp hair. “Went off like a rocket there, counselor.”

His head lolled toward me. “Fuck you,” he muttered, hoarse and half-spent, but there wasn’t an ounce of venom in it. Just the last scrap of pride refusing to crumble.

I chuckled and caught him by the jaw, pulling him in for a kiss that shut him up fast. He gave in like he always did, parting his lips and greedily drinking me down. When I finally pulled back, I trailed my fingers down his chest, smearing the mess he’d made without apology.

“Here,” I said, reaching for the rag tucked in my saddlebag. I wiped him off with the kind of care that said I’d earned the right. He flinched under my touch, oversensitive now, but he didn’t stop me. His lashes were low, eyes half-lidded and blown wide—hazy, fucked-out, and still somehow focused on me.

Beautiful.

“Thanks,” he said, flashing a crooked grin I’d never seen before.

It took me a second to realize I’d spoken out loud.

I hissed when he groped me through my jeans, his fingers twitching like he couldn’t help himself. The pressure surged straight to my balls. It hurt to stop him, but when he popped the button and dragged the zipper down, I caught him by both wrists and held him still.

“Wait.”

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This wasn't part of the plan. I'd been holding onto this debt since the night I forced him to his knees and never repaid the favor, but a quick fuck in the dark wasn't good enough. Not for him. Not for me. I'd taken the edge off for him, but now I wanted more.

I guided his hands away, caught them in one of mine, and pressed them flat to his thighs. "I want to bring you home," I said gently. "In my bed. Under my sheets. Buried deep inside you 'til morning."

Mason wiped his hands on the cloth and tugged his shirt over his head in one smooth pull. He was turning it over in his mind, avoiding my eyes as he calculated the risk, putting distance between us now that he'd gotten a little post-nut clarity.

"Doesn't sound like keeping things simple," he muttered.

"It can be the simplest thing in the world if we let it," I said, stepping off the bike. My knees popped as I stretched, stiff from sitting backward for too long. I rolled my shoulders, twisting out the tightness, letting him look his fill. "Think you can keep your hands to yourself on the ride back, counselor?"

His snort was soft and biting. "Think you can?"

I settled in front of him, and his hands rested lightly on my waist, like he was still not sure he had the right to touch me. That didn't cut it. Not at this stage. I reached back, caught his wrists, and tugged his arms forward until they locked around me.

The engine came alive beneath us, a low growl that rippled through the bones. I let it

hum, let the vibration settle between us, then turned my head just enough for my voice to carry.

“Not a fucking chance.”

Chapter Sixteen

MASON

This was happening. Finally.

The Dead End had never felt this quiet. Even when I rolled off the borrowed cot at the crack of dawn, shaking off a few restless hours of sleep, there was always something to fill the silence: a garbage truck rattling the dumpster, the rumble of hungover bikers, or some sorry chump puking in the parking lot.

But tonight, the lot was empty, no idling engines or drunken laughter bleeding through the back door. Just the whine of cicadas in the grass and the hum of power lines overhead, buzzing like static in my ears.

I followed Silas up the back steps. The dark was so thick I couldn't even see my own hands, so I followed the sound of rotting wooden steps creaking beneath his boots. A single door waited at the top, cheap and weathered and peeling in strips, but the lock was solid and expensive. Not the kind of hardware people installed unless they had something worth protecting.

Silas slipped a key into the deadbolt and glanced back at me, eyes catching what little light there was, like he was checking to see if I'd changed my mind.

I hadn't.

The apartment wasn't much bigger than my bedroom, but what struck me wasn't the size. It was the emptiness; not the kind that came from laziness or indifference, but the kind that said: don't get attached. The man who lived here hadn't put down roots. He hadn't even tried.

The walls were so bare, I couldn't find a single bent nail or sun-faded outline where a picture might've hung. A two-top table huddled against the wall in one corner, smaller than the desk I'd used in high school. The kitchenette was stripped to the studs and equipped with nothing but a coffee maker, a microwave, and a mini fridge that looked like the place where takeout containers went to die. No dishes. No scent of food or spice. No sign of a life in motion—just the hollow stillness of someone who never meant to stay.

I turned a slow circle, taking it all in. "You move in straight from lockup? Because this place has all the personality of a goddamn holding cell."

Silas snorted and tossed his keys onto the table with a metallic clatter. "Yeah, actually."

That gave me pause. I hadn't expected him to admit it so easily.

"You never mentioned what you were in for," I said, keeping my tone casual, like I wasn't tracking every detail.

Silas took his sweet time answering. He shucked off his riding jacket and tossed it over the back of one of the dining chairs, slinging the scent of smoke and leather with it. Then he peeled off his gloves, working the fingers loose one by one, and dropped them beside his keys. The veins in his forearms stood out in stark relief as he leaned into the chair, weight braced on his arms, head bowed like he was giving the truth a moment to settle.

"Armed robbery," he said finally.

The hair on the back of my neck prickled. I wasn't sure what I'd expected, but it wasn't that. No matter how I looked at it, it didn't suit. Silas was reckless, yes, and he didn't shy away from violence. But he wasn't chaotic, and he wasn't greedy. He played the long game. Nothing about him suggested the kind of desperation that came with pulling a weapon and demanding cash. My instincts, the same ones that kept me one step ahead in court, were sounding alarms.

I crossed my arms and waited, giving him room to elaborate. Over the years, I'd learned that silence was its own form of pressure. People rushed to fill it. I'd been reading moods since I was a kid, learning when it was safe to speak, prudent to stay quiet, and when the only choice to survive was to lie. Those skills had shaped me and turned me into someone who could see straight through most people.

But not Silas.

He met my gaze without blinking. His expression was smooth and untroubled. Free of any sign of guilt.

"Who did you rob?" I asked, carefully. Not because I thought he'd answer—but because I needed to know how far he'd take the lie.

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"You forgetting the rules already, counselor?" His eyes narrowed, and he moved toward me, crowding into my space until I had no choice but to tip my head back to meet his gaze. "What's it gonna be, slick? You want to play twenty questions...or you want to fuck?"

I held my ground, but my pulse tripped. It always did around him. I could rationalize a hundred decisions in a courtroom, but I'd never found a defense against the way Silas looked at me. Or the way he moved. And when he reached for the hem of his shirt and pulled it over his head in one smooth, unhurried motion? All bets were off.

The man was cut from solid muscle, broad and robust in a way that came from more than just a bench press. It was the kind of strength built from years of real work and real fights, carved into him by a life I knew too little about. The elastic that tied his ponytail caught on his collar and snapped, and all that thick, dark hair cascaded down his back in a glossy sheet. He didn't run a hand through it or fix it. He just stood there, bare-chested and confident, letting me have my moment.

Anddamn, did I take it.

I stared like he was mine to stare at.

"God," I breathed, dry-mouthed and aching. "You're too good for this town."

I grabbed his belt, fingers curling into the worn leather, and yanked him toward me. He came without resistance, smirking like he'd seen it coming. Our mouths collided, and he caught me by the back of the neck, instantly taking control.

Somewhere in the tangle of breath and teeth and tongue, I dropped to my knees. Whether I volunteered or he put me there, I didn't know—and didn't care.

"Right where you belong," he growled, looking down at me with those dark eyes. He tipped my chin up with one finger, firm but careful. His free hand went straight to his belt, unfastening the buckle with practiced ease.

A shudder rolled through me as I fought with the button of his jeans, chasing that praise. I hated how he exposed me, how effortlessly he understood what I needed. But I couldn't fight it anymore. Not after weeks of restraint and second-guessing and pretending I could live without this.

I dragged his jeans down just far enough to free him—and Jesus, I'd forgotten how glorious he was: thick, flushed, and already slick at the tip. My mouth actually watered.

"You look so good like this," Silas rumbled, sliding his thumb down my cheek and skimming it over my mouth, pressing just enough to part my lips.

I licked his thumb first, then the head of his cock, before opening up and swallowing him inch by inch. He threw his head back and groaned, burying his fingers in my hair and holding me where he wanted. I took my time, mapping every ridge, reveling in the weight against my tongue and the way his breath hitched every time I convulsively swallowed.

When the muscles in his thighs jumped beneath my palms, I knew he was getting close. But just as I hollowed my cheeks to finish the job, he hissed and pulled back.

A choked whine escaped before I could stop it. I swiped my mouth with the back of my hand, still catching my breath, when his fingers caught my jaw and tilted my face up.

His eyes were burning.

"Get on the bed," he said, all smoke and sin.

It wasn't a request—and fuck me, I obeyed. I stripped on the way to the bed, yanking my clothes off like they'd started to burn, especially once I caught the sound of his boots crossing the floor behind me.

The mattress dipped as he followed, warm and solid as a brick wall. Wordlessly, he reached past me, yanked open the nightstand drawer, and tossed a foil and bottle of lube onto the sheets. Then his weight returned, blanketing me in a slow, inexorable press that drove me to my elbows.

"Just like that," he murmured, punctuating his words with a sharp bite at the nape of my neck. His hands bracketed my hips, lifting me onto my knees and adjusting me the way he wanted. One palm pressed into the small of my back, steadying me, while he spread me open with the other. I hadn't noticed him open the bottle, but his fingers were already slippery, coaxing me open with gentle circles.

"Look at you," he whispered, low and reverent. "Opening up for me so easily. You trust me to take care of you, don't you, baby?"

I dropped my forehead to the mattress and squeezed my eyes shut. But hiding wouldn't save me from the truth. "Don't make me say it," I muttered. "You already know."

He laughed, deep and pleased and indulgent, and the sound warmed me from the inside out. "That's my boy."

God help me, it felt like a reward.

Silas didn't rush. He moved with the devastating control of a man who already knew exactly how this would play out. Nothing like the hurried, forgettable encounters I'd forced myself to settle for. This felt different. It shouldn't, but it felt like it mattered.

I didn't want to obey him. Not really. I never wanted to obey anyone. But my body betrayed me, trembling with anticipation, desperate for what only he seemed to know how to give.

"See?" His breath was hot in my ear. "Told you I knew what you needed."

I heard the tear of foil, the slick sound of lube—and then he was there, thigh to thigh, fitting himself against me.

"Deep breath," he warned, kissing between my shoulder blades. He dragged his teeth across my skin and then bit down, just hard enough to pull my focus to the flash of pain and not the slow, stretching burn of his cock pressing inside.

"Fuck," I cursed through clenched teeth, twisting the sheets around my fingers.

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He was so big it should've hurt, but he was taking his time, working himself into me inch by excruciating inch. He went still once he was fully seated, letting me sink into the heat and fullness.

"You're goddamn perfect, you know that?"

I hung my head, breathing hard while I adjusted to the unbearable ache. "You gonna move," I panted, "or just sit there talking about it?"

A sharp slap landed across my ass, sending a crack of pain and pleasure blooming through me.

"You don't give the orders here," he rasped. "You take them. You take everything I give you."

And then he slammed into me; one deep, punishing thrust that knocked the breath out of my lungs. The second one sent a shockwave rolling through my belly. A broken sound wrenched from my throat, and I dropped to my forearms, forced to brace myself or get wrecked.

Silas laughed, and I felt him shift, adjusting his grip to flip me onto my back.

"Whoa." Panic flared, and I twisted, grabbing the edge of the mattress for leverage. "L-like this," I panted. "We stay like this."

"Ah." He caught on instantly. He slowed, partially withdrawing, teasing me with a series of shallow thrusts that left me gasping. "That's what this is about, huh? You

figure if you're not looking at me, you can still be in control. Keep me out of that head of yours."

That hit too close, but I gritted my teeth, breathing hard, refusing to admit he was right.

Silas sighed and smoothed a hand down my spine with a deceptively gentle touch. "You really that scared to look me in the eye?"

"I don't scare easy, McKenna," I ground out. The words came out like gravel, and the crack at the end gave me away.

"Prove it."

I didn't get the chance. Before I could reply, his hands locked around my hips, and in one clean motion, he flipped me. My back hit the mattress hard enough to knock the wind from my lungs, splaying me out beneath him.

He followed me down, slotting between my thighs and covering me with the full weight of his body. My hands flew to his arms, gripping solid muscle, biceps and forearms like rebar—but I wasn't trying to push him away. I was holding on. Bracing for the fall.

He propped himself up on one arm, the other catching my chin and tipping it up until I had no choice but to look at him.

"Now," he said, low and patient, "look me in the eye and tell me you're still in control."

I stared up at him, wide-eyed, caught between fight and surrender. But I didn't answer. I couldn't, not with him looking down at me like he saw right through me. He

understood every reason I should have pushed him off...and he was just waiting for me to realize none of them mattered.

"That's it," he murmured, searching my expression, soaking up my surrender. "You came to me for a reason, angel. Now let go. Take what you need."

Then he thrust back into me, rough and deep—and I shattered. A strangled sound tore from my throat, and I arched like a bow beneath him. His hand slid beneath the curve of my back to support my spine, cradling me as he set a relentless, punishing rhythm.

The room was filled with the sounds of sex: the sharp slap of skin, the creak of the bed, the ragged, breathless moans I couldn't bite back. Fuck. I'd spent my whole life keeping myself in check, five steps ahead of everyone else. It kept me safe. But I wasn't safe now. Silas had torn through my barriers like they were made of tissue paper.

I'd never even consciously handed him the power. He'd taken it, piece by piece, stripping away the me everyone else saw and replacing it with him. He filled every hollow place I'd never let anyone touch, invading my body, my blood, my lungs, until I breathed him out with every exhale.

It terrified me how much I wanted this—how much I wanted him.

My body wasn't my own anymore. It belonged to him. He commanded me, working me open, unraveling me like I was his to do with as he pleased.

Maybe I was.

Maybe I wanted to be.

His hand dragged up my chest and curled around my throat. Not squeezing. Just a

solid, grounding weight. A reminder of who was in control.

A broken noise ripped from my throat.

"That's it," he purred, low and filthy, reading the surrender in my face. "Knew you'd figure it out eventually. Go on. Come for me, angel."

God help me, that's all it took. Pleasure detonated behind my eyes. My spine bent, every muscle locked tight as I rode the razor-edge of release, caught between pain and bliss with nowhere to run.

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"Silas—"I gasped, helpless and pleading.

"I've got you, baby."

He thrust so deep I swore I could feel it in my stomach. One hand slid down my heaving stomach to grasp my spurting cock, pumping me through my climax. I slung one arm around his shoulders and bit down on the curve of his shoulder to muffle my cries—but they still ripped out of me, drowning out the deep, guttural groan that tore from his chest. One final, brutal snap of his hips, and he came too.

For a long time, neither of us moved.

His ragged breath gusted hotly against the side of my neck. He was heavy, but it felt so good sprawled beneath him, limp and boneless and safe. A wall between me and the rest of the world.

I should've moved. I needed to push him off and get cleaned up. Anything to put some distance between us. But instead, I turned my face to his throat and breathed him in, the scent of sweat and sex and leather.

Everything I wasn't supposed to want.

Humming lazily, he nudged my face with the bridge of his nose and kissed me gently as rain. "You're staying here tonight," he said fiercely.

It wasn't a suggestion.

It was a bad idea, but with his body still locked with mine and the scent of sex heavy in the sheets, I could barely manage a token protest. The air was thick with intimacy that I'd spent a lifetime avoiding.

"I've got work in the morning," I said, but even I could hear the lack of conviction in it.

"It can wait." He propped himself on his elbows to get a good look at me, as serious as I'd ever seen him. "The world won't end if you stop propping it up for a day."

"It'll damn sure get heavier," I scoffed.

"Then let it," he said, eyes locked on mine. "God knows when we'll get this chance again. Take it."

It went against my very nature. Everything in me was hardwired to keep moving, to control all the variables. Ben wasn't safe, the foster program needed too much work, and Dominic needed constant legal advice. There wasn't enough time to rest. But Silas's warmth was already crawling into my bones, and for once, giving in didn't feel like failure.

It felt like permission.

"Fine," I muttered grudgingly. "But just this once."

His stubble scraped my cheek when he smiled. "We'll see about that."

Chapter Seventeen

MASON

I woke to unfamiliar shadows and the dull, gnawing sense of disorientation. My body couldn't place where I was. It felt like I'd stumbled into some old, forgotten space I was never meant to revisit. The cracked plaster, the exposed wires, the thin mattress beneath me—all features of the houses where Ben and I grew up. Empty places. Cold places. Just like this one. A room that didn't try to feel like home, and never would.

My gut twisted with a low, sour churn.

But then I caught it—Silas's scent. It lingered on the pillow beside me, rich, spicy, and layered with a hint of smoke. I shut my eyes and let it slide into my lungs, and slowly, the chaos in my head quieted.

"Morning, counselor."

I caught a flash of movement from the kitchen and craned my neck. For a moment, everything stopped. Silas stood at the sink, bathed in the late morning sunlight spilling through the smudged window. He was naked and gloriously unashamed, glowing like a marble statue as he stirred a splash of milk into two chipped coffee cups.

The way he owned his space...it was enough to stop my heart for a second. I could've stared at him all day.

He crossed the room with both mugs in hand, moving with the grounded, easy confidence that only came from a man who knew his body inside and out. Silas never second-guessed his presence. He didn't take up space. He owned it.

Our fingers brushed as he handed me a mug, the casual touch far too intimate for something so simple. It shouldn't have sent a jolt of heat straight through my stomach, but it did. And the smirk that followed, that cocky, lopsided grin I was already too familiar with, told me he knew it.

I lifted the mug to my lips, expecting the familiar warmth of something drinkable. Instead, I got a mouthful of something acrid and bitter. The thin, sour taste stuck to my tongue, and I fought the urge to spit it out.

Silas chuckled, eyes twinkling with the same amusement he'd had since I first entered his bar. It wasn't cruel, but it sure as hell wasn't aimed at making me feel comfortable. It was a constant reminder that I wasn't as in control as I liked to think, but I'd gotten used to it. There was something almost affectionate in the way he watched me squirm.

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"Yeah, sorry about that." He knocked back a swallow without flinching. "I'm a Folgers guy."

"I learned to drink anything with caffeine back in law school," I muttered, screwing my face up to hide the grimace. "It's part of the deal."

Silas raised an eyebrow just enough to show he wasn't buying it. "Lying to me again, counselor? You've got a taste for the finer things."

"Quality over quantity," I shot back, letting my gaze wander over his chest, tapered waist, and thick, muscular thighs. "You may have noticed that already."

He chuckled and settled beside me on the mattress, more comfortable in his nakedness than I was even with a blanket bunched over my hips. He'd seen and touched every inch of my body the night before, yet somehow, I still felt like I'd been caught on the back foot. Silas had stripped away more than my clothes, and now I couldn't even begin to figure out what I was missing.

"I would've warned you about the coffee," he said, flashing that grin I was learning to love, "but you were too busy judging my place."

"I was just thinking how familiar it looked," I said dryly, lifting my mug again, though I had no intention of drinking it. "Not much different from the places where Ben and I grew up."

"Yeah, well, I don't really care about the scenery," Silas said with a shrug, rolling the empty coffee cup between his hands. "I've seen how easy it is to lose material things."

If I've got a roof over my head and fuel in my bike, I'm living just fine."

He flashed a smirk and leaned a little closer. "You think keeping everything neat and in line will keep the chaos at bay. Doesn't work like that, blue eyes. The world won't fall apart if you let yourself live a little. Take the day off. Let me show you what you're really missing."

I paused, more tempted by the offer than I should have been. My gaze slipped to the window, taking in the morning sunlight leaking through the glass. Silas's grin was even more blinding than that.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd taken a whole day for myself. I was always chasing the next rung in the ladder, but no matter how far I climbed, security was always just out of reach. The thought of letting go for a few hours was strangely...freeing.

I met his eyes and smiled. "You've got yourself a deal."

Silas's fingers threaded through my hair, lifting me with a firm pull until his mouth found mine. The kiss was brief, purposeful—and familiar. His lips were warm and slightly rough against mine, tasting of coffee and mint toothpaste. When he pulled back just enough to speak, his breath lingered against my skin.

"Get dressed," he ordered. "I'm taking you to breakfast."

The shower stall was a squeeze, so cramped I jammed my elbows every time I raised my arms, but I didn't care. At least the water was hot, just this side of scalding, pounding the stiffness out of muscles that hadn't gotten such a good workout in years. Running just didn't cut it. Steam billowed up, thick enough to fog the glass door, scented with Silas's cedarwood shampoo. Definitely not my usual, but spicy enough to clear my head.

He squeezed his toothpaste from the middle of the tube. I hated when Gage did the same thing, but the sight had me grinning for some reason. It lingered in the back of my mind, like the trace of cologne on the towel hanging by the shower, the razor left in the sink, or the watermarks from where he'd shaved without bothering to wipe it down. Small details that made him more than just the sexy bad boy I'd been fantasizing about. They made him real in a way he hadn't felt before.

My heart gave a painful tug.

Silas had set out a t-shirt and jeans, faded and soft from a hundred other mornings. The clothes were too big, slung low on my hips and pooling at my ankles, but the scent of his fabric softener curling around me was strangely comforting. It felt like slipping into someone else's skin as I tugged them on.

He chuckled once he got a good look at me. "Quite the fashion statement," he teased, eyes twinkling. "Time to complete the look."

Without missing a beat, he tossed me a helmet.

The Dead End in the morning was something else entirely. Except for the trill of an eastern bluebird sitting on a nearby power line, the parking lot was eerily quiet. No bikes, no cars, no neon lights. The bar was locked up tight, and the windows were dark. It felt like a place that didn't belong in the light of day.

Silas stood there, hands shoved deep in his pockets, watching me with a half-smile ghosting one corner of his mouth. This time, I didn't hesitate. I wrapped my arm around his waist and settled behind him on the Scout, snuggled up against him and bracketing his thighs with mine. Last night, riding as his backpack had left me feeling weak, but today, it was his strength infusing me, comforting me in ways I hadn't even known I needed.

Summer heat hadn't fully set in yet, but the humidity was already a hand around my throat. As Silas tore onto the highway, the breeze rolled over us, comfortably cool and scented of earth, wildflowers, and the faint tang of gasoline. The air had a certain sweetness, warming greenery and the mellow, almost musky scent of fresh-cut grass. The richness of rural Louisiana. It felt like breathing in something alive.

Orange slices of sunshine leaked through my helmet's visor, bright enough to make my eyes water, but I kept them popped wide as I rested my head on Silas's shoulder and watched the scenery fly by in a smear of deep green. When I rode alone, I was too focused on speed to absorb the sights. I must have ridden this highway a hundred times, but I'd never noticed the rolling fields broken by boggy swampland, sagging farmhouses, or barns with rusted tin roofs half-covered in moss that stretched further and further apart as the miles rolled by. At the edge of the parish, the last sign of civilization was a run-down fill station. The pumps were rusted and looked like they hadn't worked in years, and a faded red and white sign in the window promised cheap beer and boiled peanuts.

Silas gunned the bike, the engine growling in response, and I braced myself as we surged past the state line and into Mississippi. The air pushed back hard, flowing over us with the comforting summer scents of engine oil and hot asphalt.

Devil's Garden was sticky. It clung to my skin no matter how far we went or how fast we moved, but in that moment, with Silas's body warm and solid against me, it didn't seem so bad. The world felt free. The edges were softer—or maybe I was. The electric tension was still there, humming in my veins every time I looked at him, but I'd never felt so relaxed.

By the time we stopped for food, my stomach was so empty it felt like I'd swallowed a black hole. Silas must have heard it rumbling at his back, because he chuckled and pulled off at a roadside diner that sat at the edge of a sprawling, tangled stretch of kudzu. A giant rooster statue stood out front, painted bright neon pink, its beak

pointed toward the sky in a squawk. Above the door, a weathered sign read 'Cluckin' Good Biscuits and Gravy' in twisted, funky letters.

The shelves behind the counter were cluttered with a bizarre mash-up of merchandise: snow globes, ceramic roosters painted in clashing shades, miniature American flags, and vintage-style soda pop bottles with labels like Mama's Home Elixir and Ragin' Cajun Cola. A menu was handwritten in chalk on an oversized blackboard, boasting "Biscuits & Grits Tacos" and something called the "Crawfish Gravy Breakfast Sundae" that I couldn't quite wrap my mind around.

It felt like a tourist trap, quirky and a little weird, but the first breath of warm, buttery, biscuit-scented air had my mouth watering.

"After that coffee, I'm not sure I trust your tastebuds anymore," I said, giving him a sideways glance as we slid into a ripped vinyl booth. "But I'm too hungry to care."

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Silas grinned and sat back in his booth to make room for a waitress to set down brimming cups of coffee. "Don't judge a book by its cover," he said, scanning the room in a way that made it clear he wasn't seeing the same things I was.

"How'd you find this place?" I asked, burning my tongue on the first sip. The rich, nutty flavor of the dark roast rolled over my tongue, instantly settling my rumbling stomach.

His fingers tapped the edge of his mug, eyes drifting to the window, tracing some far-off line I couldn't see. "When I need to clear my head, I just ride," he said evasively. "I pull off wherever feels right. Discovered this place on a road trip a few months ago. It's got the best damn breakfast food I've found in any state."

Something about his familiar tone had me wondering how many mornings he'd spent here, how many quiet moments he'd taken in this odd little spot. The way he talked, like he'd just stumbled on it by chance, didn't match the ease with which he settled in, or the way the waitress winked when he caught her eye. He was trying to play it cool, like he didn't come here often, and I didn't see any reason to hide it.

"How many states have you been to?" I asked, casually fishing without pushing for anything specific. It was a tactic that didn't demand much but still allowed me to gauge how much he was hiding.

He shrugged, offering a lazy grin that didn't meet his eyes. "Everything south of the Mason-Dixon, I guess. Once I left home, I headed south and just kept going."

"That's...a lot of miles." I raised an eyebrow. "Where was your favorite place to

live?"

Surprise flickered across his expression, there and gone, but I noted it because I'd never seen it before. Not from him. He was the type who always acted like he could see everyone else's cards.

The light in his eyes grew distant. "I stayed outside Baton Rouge for a few months," he said thoughtfully. "A tiny house on the bayou. Not much to look at, and my only neighbors were the gators. It was nice. Peaceful, you know? Nothing but birdsong and the sound of water lapping against the dock. Every morning, this fog would rise off the water and...shimmer...until the sun finally burned it off."

For once, the sarcastic humor that was so much a part of him dropped away, leaving rare sincerity. I imagined him barefoot on a dock, sipping his terrible coffee and enjoying the silence. It felt so far from who he was now.

I leaned forward, intrigued, and curled my hands around my mug. "What made you leave?"

His expression stiffened just a fraction, like I'd crossed some unspoken line. I thought he'd shut me down entirely for a split second, but then he pulled in a slow breath and reset his shoulders, deliberately releasing his tension. It looked like a practiced move. Something he'd learned in prison, I supposed.

"Work," he said casually, shrugging like it didn't matter. "I had to move on after a while. It wasn't exactly... legal. Not the kind of thing I make a habit of talking about."

I studied him for a second, wondering what he wasn't letting on, but he was even harder to read than my brothers. Secrecy was my bread and butter, but it didn't suit a free spirit like him.

I took a slow sip from my mug, letting the warmth seep through me, and aimed to lighten the mood a little.

"So," I began, choosing my words carefully, "Do you think you'll go back there someday? Or... you plan to stick around Devil's Garden for a while?"

It made no difference. That's what I told myself, anyway. But for some reason, I couldn't breathe while he thought it over. His fingers traced the edge of his cup, but his eyes were turned inward, running through replies I couldn't see.

In the end, he forced a relaxed smile and said, "I get bored easily. I figure I'll know it's time to leave once the excitement wears off."

Ouch.

That was a line in the sand I couldn't ignore. It wasn't like I hadn't seen it coming, not when he'd made it clear from the start that he didn't do complicated. Neither did I, but somehow, somewhere in the dark hours tucked into Silas's bed, I'd begun to wonder what if. But there was no if. No future. There was only now.

"What about you?" Silas asked, sizing me up curiously and leaving the uncanny impression that he knew exactly what I was thinking. "You ever think about getting out of here? Maybe opening your own law firm somewhere else?"

It wasn't the question itself, but the way he asked it—like he was offering me a lifeline—that had me bristling. I stared into my mug, swirling the last cold dregs, and surprised myself by telling the truth for once.

"I used to think about nothing else, but it's never really been an option, you know? Not with my brothers to look after."

"They're big boys," he drawled. "They can take care of themselves."

"Can you?" I asked, cutting him a piercing look. "Always? Or would having someone at your back have saved you seven years in federal lockup?"

A muscle in his cheek twitched, and I knew I'd scored a point. I met his eyes, lost in the swirl of darkness there, and swallowed the lump in my throat I felt whenever I thought of him and Ben trapped in cages.

"We're men," I said thickly. "This is how it's always been for us. How we all had to be, from the moment we were old enough to know better. Don't ask for help. Don't let anyone see you weak. We handle our own shit, and if we don't, that's on us. No one's got time for sympathy. My brothers... they're the best thing to ever happen to me. Like winning the fucking lottery. If I can share the weight when things get heavy? I'll do it. Gladly. I didn't choose my family either time, but once they're yours, they're yours forever. I'm not the type to walk away from that."

I sat back in the booth and blew out a long, slow breath, letting go of the tension I'd been holding for what felt like years. A lifetime. Sometimes I wanted an escape, sure, and a man like Silas to tell me what to do. But I wasn't looking to run away or waiting for someone to tell me I didn't have to carry the load. This was what I was—who I was. The one who didn't get to fall apart.

Silas winced, his grin slipping a little. "Ouch. Guess I should call my siblings, huh?" His voice was light, but I detected a sourness hiding behind the joke.

I didn't play along. "How many do you have?"

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"Seven," he said without missing a beat. "Five boys, two girls. I'm the youngest. Not that it matters much now. We're all spread out, doing our own thing." He shrugged like it wasn't a big deal, but the way he said it gave me pause. "Not everyone gets a second shot at family."

"Never say never." Unthinking, I slid one foot between his motorcycle boots, nudging his knee with mine. The intimacy of it, and the way his leg pressed back against mine, had my pulse skipping a quick beat. "Those bonds will always be there. You've just got to pick them up."

Silas studied me, gaze softening like I'd just said something too fanciful to take seriously. "Sounds like you don't really want to leave Devil's Garden, even if you could."

It surprised me to hear it out loud. "Maybe not," I admitted, staring down at the spray of coffee grounds in the bottom dregs of my cup. "But it's not like staying is really a choice. It's more like...this place owns me. I'm tied to it whether I like it or not."

There was a long pause as he processed what I said, and when he spoke again, his voice was thoughtful. "I get that. Sometimes it's not about choosing where to go. It's about making a stand wherever you end up."

I found myself studying him closely, boring into him, trying to read behind his eyes to the parts he kept hidden.

"You ever think about something different?" I asked tentatively. "Something more permanent than a bed over a roadhouse?"

Silas's lips twitched, like he was debating whether to laugh it off like everything else. I wanted to kiss that expression right off his mouth, but I didn't get the chance. Before I could hook a hand around the back of his neck and lean across the table to plant one on him, he'd caught me by the wrist—almost like he sensed my need to touch him.

"Yeah, I think about it sometimes. But it's complicated. Doesn't mean I don't want something more, just..." he trailed off, gaze turned inward as he traced the blue map of veins beneath my wrist. "Sometimes, the life you end up with is the one that makes the most sense. Even if it's not the one you dreamed of."

My fingers spasmed as his thumb caressed the thin skin over my pulse, and there it was, that familiar sexy smirk curling his lips. The one that said he relished the effect he had on me. Then he released me—abruptly, like he was closing the door on the conversation. He threw an arm over the back of the booth and caught the waitress's eye, signaling her over with a flick of two fingers.

"Enough of the heavy shit," he announced as she made her way over. "Try the crawfish gravy breakfast sundae. It's weird as hell but worth every bite. Trust me."

I did.

That was the craziest part.

Chapter Eighteen

MASON

The day had spun down to a hazy tangerine glow by the time the Scout rumbled down Eden's manicured drive. Deep blue shadows were starting to paint long stripes across the grass as he pulled off beneath a copse of live oaks and killed the engine. My legs were sore as I climbed off the bike and tugged off my helmet.

He took one look at me and laughed.

"Got a little something on your face there, counselor," he teased, scraping a flake of sunscreen off the bridge of my nose. His own complexion was a healthy, sun-burnished tan, but I wasn't used to spending an entire day outside. After only a few hours, my office pallor had turned pink, and then red at the edges. We'd stopped at a shop called Risky Bob's for a tube of sunblock, and Silas pinned me in the grass and straddled my hips until I submitted to his scandalously thorough application. But it came in handy when we stopped in a park just outside Cypress Lake, rolled up our jeans, and went creek-wading like a couple of kids.

Except I'd never felt so carefree when I was a child. I couldn't remember a time life had felt this easy. This safe.

"You sure know how to make a guy feel special, McKenna," I said dryly, brushing his hand aside.

"I don't fuck around with trouble—and you? You're gonna cause me plenty." His eyes were twinkling in the gathering gloom. A sarcastic retort was on the tip of my tongue, but before I could unleash it, he slid a hand around the back of my neck and reeled me closer, brushing his lips across my cheek in that casual, infuriatingly intimate way he had. "Yeah, you're special," he murmured against my skin.

His kiss was soft at first, the featherlight skating of his lips down my jaw to my mouth, a lingering taste of him that made it too easy to forget the rest of the world. The house was lit up like a Holiday Inn through the screen of my half-closed lashes, and an extra car was parked at the base of the porch, but I didn't have enough neurons to link together to wonder why. I didn't care about anything but the satin texture of Silas's lips and the way his hand rested warmly against the back of my neck.

We broke apart just long enough for a sip of air, and I took a reluctant step backward,

but Silas caught my wrist, pulling me right back in.

"Not done yet," he whispered.

We kept kissing, sweet and languid, like we were teenagers again, standing on the edge of our first time, knowing that we'd experienced something that was ours alone. Nobody else could touch it. Each kiss was another link in the chain tying me to him, pulling me deeper into this bubble we'd created where nothing else mattered but him. The world around us faded. It was just the two of us, the breeze in the oaks, and the quiet hum of the summer evening.

For once, I could forgive myself for ignoring the rest of the world. I didn't want anything to interrupt the way he made me feel. Yeah, special—though I'd never admit it.

When I finally pulled away for real, the ache in my chest told me I was leaving something important behind. But Silas's eyes were still locked on mine, like he was waiting for me to say something?—

Just as I opened my mouth, a loud crack pierced the air, followed by the wind-chime-in-a-hurricane sound of shattering glass.

Our heads jerked toward the house just as Dominic flew through the front window in a jagged spray of shards. His body hit the ground hard. Gage followed a split-second later, leaping through the gaping maw of the centuries-old broken window and landing on Dominic like a crashing meteor. The sickening, wet-sounding crack of knuckles striking bone followed, loud enough to reach us at the end of the driveway.

Silas was the first to move, all instinct, racing down the driveway like a damn bullet.

"Stay back!" he shouted.

Like hell. This was my home—and I was faster. Years of running from shit that didn't want to be outrun gave me a head start, and I pushed off the gravel, overtaking Silas in an instant.

Nothing mattered more than getting to my brothers. We'd grown up scrapping any time tempers flared, but this was more serious than that. They wanted to hurt each other. I couldn't even tell whose blood was streaking the grass anymore.

I threw myself at Gage, hooking an arm around his throat, arms burning with the effort of yanking him off Dominic.

Gage snarled, and suddenly, the world spun. One second, I was hanging off his shoulders, trying to force him back, and the next, he ragdolled me over his shoulder like I weighed nothing. It all happened so fast, I didn't even clock flying through the air—only the thud of landing. It felt like being slammed into a boulder.

My lungs seized, and for a moment, nothing existed beyond a breathless, paralyzed gasp. Then I wheezed, clawing at the grass and dirt, desperate for oxygen that wouldn't come. My lungs had turned to stone, refusing to inflate no matter how hard I struggled.

Through the haze of my watering vision, I saw Gideon standing in the doorway, framed by a spill of warm light from the house. His eyes were fixed on the fight, but his expression was colder than I'd ever seen it—remote, like he was watching a piece of theater that didn't concern him.

Gideon, the peacemaker, wasn't lifting a finger this time.

There was no time for questions—not with Silas cutting through the fray like a knife. A switch had been flipped, and suddenly, he wasn't just an ex-con with a devil-may-care grin, but a man who knew exactly how to bring order to the chaos. He grabbed Gage's wrist, twisting it behind him in a way that had him growling like an animal caught in a trap.

I recognized the move immediately, the way Silas anchored Gage's arm with his forearm, locking it against a pressure point in his shoulder. I didn't know the term for it, but I'd seen it before in the courthouse when guards needed to take someone down without breaking their necks. Silas performed it without breaking a sweat.

Gage had been a fighter all his life, so he fought back hard, growling like an animal caught in a trap. Silas stepped into him, using his own body weight to drive him to the ground, and jammed a knee into the small of his back. The whole thing was over in seconds—efficient, controlled, and brutal.

"Settle down," Silas said, voice low, the command in it unmistakable.

He looked up and met my eyes from across the yard, and suddenly, it felt like that private bubble was back, surrounding us, shrinking the world to just him. Just Silas—and the electric connection neither of us could ignore.

I couldn't put my finger on when it happened, but somewhere along the line, I'd started needing him. Not just as an outlet to reluctantly blow off steam—but him. The way he moved, the light in his eyes when he smiled, and the way he effortlessly took control when I needed it most.

With his past full of bad choices and prison time, he wasn't made for solving problems, but somehow, whenever I was with him, the weight on my shoulders felt

light enough to carry. I'd never asked for a distraction like him in my life. I wasn't looking for it. But somehow, over time, he'd become the only man I could imagine turning to in a crisis. Even now, he was here with me, standing between my brothers like it was nothing. He made it seem easy.

It wasn't easy. None of this was easy.

Gage wasn't ready to quit. He struggled against Silas, face flushed with anger and grief that I couldn't begin to fully understand. Dominic, on the other hand, was still desperate to finish what they'd started. He was older and maybe wiser—but deadlier. We all knew it. So when I saw him head toward Gage, vulnerable on the ground, I didn't hesitate.

I surged forward, locking my arms around his waist and driving my shoulder into his chest, shoving him back with everything I had. Every inch of ground he gave felt like a goddamn victory, but the force of his resistance nearly sent us both to the ground.

"Knock it off!" I yelled, slipping in the wet grass and digging in my heels to keep him from going for Gage again.

"Did you think I'd forget?" Gage shouted, white-knuckling fistfuls of dirt and grass in his rage. He craned his neck, glaring up at Dominic through the blood dripping into his eyes from the cut above his eyebrow. "You think you could just waltz in here like it didn't happen? Like I'd ever forgive you for putting your hands on Wyatt and dragging him through that hell—my hell?"

Dominic didn't flinch, but the set of his jaw tightened. He turned his face away, unable to meet our eyes. Gage was the youngest of us, and in plenty of ways, he'd struggled the most. Dominic had always gone out of his way to protect him, sometimes more than he deserved. Hell, he'd even taken a charge for me when I was caught hotwiring my first motorcycle as a kid. But tonight, his patience was gone.

"You think you've got the high ground, little brother?" Dominic's eyes glittered with ice. "Who gave you that luxury? I'm the one Boone left to make the hard calls once he was gone. That moral superiority y'all enjoy? I'm the one who bought that for you with goddamn blood. You don't have to like it, but I did what I had to do. What I thought was right."

"Bullshit!" Gage spat a mouthful of grass and scrambled to his feet when Silas relaxed his hold, but he didn't try to go after Dom again. Silas still had a warden's grip on the arm he was twisting behind Gage's back, so Gage just stood there, wiping at the stains on his jeans with scraped and trembling hands. "You're so far gone, you don't even have a clue about right and wrong—if you ever did. You hurt the one person I love more than anything. We—we can't ever come back from something like that."

Guilt flickered in Dominic's eyes, but he hid it fast, burying it under layers of pride and self-righteousness so deep that most days he was probably able to convince himself he didn't feel it at all.

"I'm not looking for forgiveness," he said, so softly he might as well have been talking to himself—but he was staring directly at Gideon when he said it.

Gideon's cheek twitched.

They stared at each other for a beat, but even with all my experience interviewing witnesses, I couldn't read them. As the two oldest and the first to be taken in by Boone, they'd always been able to communicate without saying a word, but tonight, it felt different. Alien. Gideon's face was carved from granite, and the look in Dominic's eyes...it was pure violence. Whatever silent communication passed between them, it was enough to chill the blood in my veins.

"Come on, Dom," I said diplomatically, pulling his focus back to me. "We can work

this out, but you've got to give us some time."

Dominic didn't reply. His eyes flashed to me and then back to Gideon. One corner of his mouth lifted in a sneer.

"I'm done trying to make peace," he said, cold enough to sting.

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What I saw in his face right then was deeper and more virulent than anger. More dangerous. It was resentment. The same resentment I saw in Ben whenever I tried to help, something festering beneath the surface for so long that we'd all stopped noticing.

He wasn't just frustrated; he was exhausted. I could see it in the set of his shoulders and the way his hands shook before he shoved them into his pockets. Whatever had happened between him and Gideon, it was pushing him further away from us.

Gideon's face tightened, his mouth pressing into a thin line, but he didn't flinch. Of course, he didn't. I'd never seen anything break that aloof façade of his. He stood there like some avenging angel cast from marble, with an expression colder than I'd ever seen. After a long moment, his attention shifted to Gage—as if Dominic wasn't even there.

"Get this mess cleaned up," he ordered harshly, "before the kids see it and start asking questions."

Then he turned his back on every one of us, shoulders stiff, and retreated into the house without a backward glance.

I stood there, frozen, while the pieces of the moment slipped through my fingers. No matter how I scrambled after them, I couldn't make sense of what was happening. Growing up, we'd always had scraps and arguments. It was inevitable with five headstrong boys living under one roof, but Boone always kept us in line. He'd taken a bunch of troubled kids, lashing out at the world, and focused us on something productive. Without him...we were lost. Lost and lashing out at each other.

Silas's rough baritone pulled me out of my spiraling worries. Just like always. "You gonna behave if I let you go?"

"As long as he never comes back," Gage spat, lifting his chin and glowering across the yard at Dominic. "I want nothing to do with him."

"Likewise, little brother," Dom retorted coldly.

"You don't mean that," I said in a low voice pitched just for him. Dominic's whiskey-colored eyes flicked toward me, the first acknowledgement I'd received all night, but he didn't reply. The empty look in his eyes chilled me.

I gripped him by the back of the neck and tugged his face close to mine, hissing, "We're family, Dom. We don't have to keep doing this. Whatever's going on—we can work through it."

"You can't fix everything, Mason." There was something dark in the way he said it, a hollowed-out finality that raised the hairs on the back of my neck. I wanted to reach out to him, but I knew better. There was no reaching for something that wasn't even there.

"I can damn well try."

"You can't even figure out what's happening right under your nose."

"What the hell does that mean?" I asked, brow furrowing.

A bitter, humorless smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. I followed his gaze over my shoulder, but only saw Silas, restraining Gage with one firm grip on his arm.

When Dom spoke again, he sounded like he'd dragged the words over broken glass.

"I'm done carrying the weight for everyone. You don't want my help? Fine. Figure it out on your own."

Silence rang in my ears, but I couldn't break it. None of us could. We had nothing left to say. With a derisive scoff, Dominic shook his head and walked away.

It felt like the end of an era.

I stood there, frozen, staring after his back until he slid behind the tinted windows of his black Jaguar. I couldn't chase after him even if I wanted. All I could do was watch as another of my brothers slipped through my fingers.

I was so lost in thought that I almost missed Silas's approaching footsteps until his rough voice spoke over my shoulder. "You good?"

"No."

There was no fixing it—not this time. Not with Dominic, not with Gage...and not with Ben. I couldn't do it alone anymore.

I turned and met Silas's eyes, dark and steady and filled with quiet understanding. Eyes that always made me feel like he could see right through me. And for the first time in years, or maybe a lifetime, I dared to wonder what it would be like to have someone to share the weight. Someone with a devilish grin and shoulders broad enough to carry any load.

"I'm not okay," I admitted, sucking in a bracing breath. "But I will be."

Chapter Nineteen

SILAS

The road was open, dark, and mine. Exactly how I liked it. The rumble of the engine beneath me was all I needed to stay grounded, the world around me fading away, leaving only the hum of the bike and the rush of cool air across my face. But I wasn't really feeling it. Not tonight.

Mason was splashed across every wall of my brain, painted into every corner, soaking into the building blocks of my body. Leaving him standing in the wreckage of that decrepit old mansion had gone against every instinct I had, and even now, it felt like he wasn't really gone. All it had taken was a solid twenty-four hours of his company, and now he was riding with me like a ghost. The expensive scent that lingered on his skin even after a shower with my cheap soap, and the feel of his hard, lean body pressed behind me as we rode. The further I'd taken him from the parish, the brighter that smile lit up those blue eyes, stripping most of the tension from his face.

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

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I didn't do connections. Not real ones. I was the king of keeping people at a distance, building just enough rapport to get what I needed but never wading in so far that I couldn't see the shoreline. Mason was different. His waters ran so still and deep that I wanted to hold my breath and dive head-first without looking. He made me believe that I could. That maybe this time, I wouldn't fuck it all up.

But that was the problem. Because I'd been down this road before, and I knew what lay at the end of it. I remembered what happened two years ago. I'd been living under a different name then, pretending to be someone else. Someone who could actually help people. Or maybe it was more selfish than that, and I'd just been looking for a family to fill the void left by my own after we scattered to the winds. The family I'd found had needed help, and I thought I could be that for them, that I could fix what was broken.

But that wasn't my job. I'd never forget the betrayal in their eyes when they found out the truth, and how quickly it had turned to disgust. It was the same look I saw in my reflection if I looked too hard in the mirror—disgust at the empty shell of a man I'd become.

No one wanted the true Silas. They just wanted the man I pretended to be.

And now I was here, doing the same damn thing with Mason. He'd already started to fill a hole I'd become an expert at pretending wasn't growing every day inside me. He saw straight through the bullshit façade I'd spent years perfecting. Sure, he liked it when I got bossy, but the softer core underneath kept him coming back and gave him the safety he needed. God, I wanted to be that for him. But Mason deserved someone who could settle down, someone who could offer honesty at the very least. I could

never be that man. I was built out of so many lies, I didn't even know who I was anymore.

I was going to hurt him—and it scared the hell out of me.

I couldn't even guarantee that I wouldn't be coming after his brothers before long.

Especially Dominic.

The look in that man's eyes was dark, not just the look of a man who'd done bad things, but one who was used to getting away with them. I'd been around long enough to know when someone was hiding something—and when it came to Dominic, my gut was screaming that he was into more evil in Devil's Garden than his brothers could bear to admit.

I didn't hear it at first—just the quiet rumble of my bike beneath me and the steady hiss of the wind pushing past. Then a pair of headlights sliced through my peripheral vision, and the low growl of a much larger engine ripped through the night. A sleek, black Jaguar gunned it from behind a signpost on a darkened turnout, surging up to pace me, and I instinctively eased up on the throttle to allow it to pass.

My stomach dropped as the car veered into the lane with me, crowding me into the oncoming lane. The ultra-bright headlights swarmed me, blinding, and the highway warped to a narrow tunnel. There wasn't enough room for both of us, and the Jaguar wasn't letting up. It was a game of dominance that no bike could win.

The nose of the Jag cut across my front, forcing me off the pavement. My tires screamed as they skidded over gravel, and I threw myself into the skid, leaning into it with everything I had until my boots scraped the ground.

If I didn't get control, I was going down. Hard.

Gravel chewed at my tires, biting back, but I muscled the bike into a controlled slide, stopping just short of a patch of wild brambles that snagged at my jacket and scraped at my face. The sudden stop nearly pitched me over the handlebars.

The Jag idled nearby, purring like a panther, blocking me in to deny a quick escape. Behind the tinted glass, I could barely make out the figures of two men. In a blink, I had the nine-millimeter out of my saddlebag and trained center-mass on the man sliding from behind the wheel.

His face was hidden in the headlights' backwash, but I instantly recognized him. High cheekbones, angular jaw, and a Roman nose broken more than a few times. But something about his careless, controlled movements put me on edge. He was too at ease, like his anger from the earlier fight had snapped off like a broken switch. I didn't trust that reptilian calm. The guy was still a problem, but a quiet one now, the kind no one saw coming until it was tearing out a throat.

The giant in the passenger seat hadn't moved. He was big, swarthy, and built like a bulldozer; the kind of muscle kept around to clean up messes.

My finger twitched, lying along the guard, but I didn't touch the trigger. Not yet.

"You should've spent all that money you've got on driving lessons, Dominic," I said, careful to keep my anger from bleeding into the words. "You could've learned how to park that shiny toy in a way that won't get you shot."

Dominic's eyes slid over the barrel of my Glock, ambivalent enough to make it clear that I was the one being sized up—and found wanting.

"You aren't going to shoot me," he said emotionlessly, like he was stating a simple fact.

The cocky bastard.

I shifted my finger from the guard to the trigger, telegraphing the movement just to watch him squirm. "How's that?" I asked tightly, lifting a challenging brow. "How can you be so sure?"

He didn't even blink. He just stared back at me with those flat, shark-like eyes. A cold smirk twisted his lips, like he knew the game better than I did.

"Feds don't kill people in cold blood."

It hit me like a slap, right across the face. With a single word, Dominic had taken a scalpel to everything I'd built. My gut twisted, spasming around the icy wave of alarm flooding my body. No one had ever nailed me before. I'd never fucked up that badly—until now.

My pulse kicked up a notch, but the gun didn't waver.

He offered a cynical smile, like he was reading my every thought. "Well, not unless they're sure they can get away with it." His words weren't just a taunt—they were a needle, prodding for a reaction.

I didn't give him one, despite the raw panic creeping in. It was a new kind of fear that I couldn't bluff my way out of. I was a master at bullshitting. Always had been. Years of training had taught me how to spin a lie until it felt like truth—until it fit so perfectly into the narrative that no one could see the seams. There were no heroes in this job, so I'd never tried to be one. I just needed to stay one step ahead until we'd gathered enough evidence to mop up the ruined lives I left behind. It wasn't about being right—it was about control. Control the conversation. Control the game. I'd been trained to read people, adjust on the fly, and make them doubt themselves long enough for me to disappear into the background. Get in, get out.

But Dominic wasn't guessing. Somehow, he already knew.

Feds.Fucking hell.

No slick wordplay could wiggle me out of this mess, but I still had to try. "You're out of your mind," I spat.

Dominic's slow grin was all delight. He leaned back against the Jag, arms crossing with that same languid confidence, like the gun in my hand was nothing more than an annoying fly buzzing at his ear. The faintest smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth, but he wasn't rushing this. He was enjoying it. Watching me squirm.

"You really think you're the only one who knows how to lie?" he drawled, each word dripping with icy calm. "I've spent a lot of time studying people. I've watched how they move, listened to how they speak, learned how they lie." His gaze scanned me, taking me in from head to toe, and one corner of his mouth curled in disgust. "You're not that good."

Anger surged inside me, sharp and bitter, rising like acid in my throat. I took a step forward, lifting the gun a fraction, aiming right between his eyes. "You're on thin fucking ice, Beaufort," I warned through clenched teeth. "You've got no idea who you're messing with."

Dominic didn't flinch. Hell, he barely even reacted, that smug bastard. His eyes flickered briefly, as if he couldn't be bothered to care whether I pulled the trigger or not. Maybe he didn't. When he'd turned his back on his brothers and walked away, he'd looked like a man at the end of his rope.

He took a step forward, the sound of his expensive loafers crunching over the gravel

too loud in the stillness, and he didn't stop until his forehead kissed the barrel of my Glock. Then he went on as if I hadn't even spoken.

"Even the best liar slips up sooner or later—and you've slipped up, Donnelly."

The name hit me like a thrown knife, an attack I'd never prepared for and couldn't dodge. But he didn't stop there, and it didn't take long for the chill of his words to crawl under my skin, each syllable a blow to the mask I'd built.

"Born Silas McKenna Donnelly, July 14th, 1987. Graduated Northwestern, class of '09, and Quantico in 2011. You bounced around field offices, in and out of CID deep cover ops for years, until the last assignment went south. New Orleans, right? Three dead bodies." He clucked his tongue mockingly. "Hell of a mess to clean up."

Cold sweat was crawling down my spine, but I couldn't let him see that. The gun in my hand felt heavier now, a ridiculous show of force when we both knew I wouldn't pull the trigger. Slowly, I lowered the damn thing, letting it hang loosely at my side.

There was no point in pretending anymore. The game was over.

"What do you want, Dominic?" I demanded harshly.

He smiled widely, showing the edge of a sharp incisor, like he'd won something. "I want you to leave my brother alone."

"You made it pretty clear with that little show back at Eden that you've washed your hands of your brothers," I scoffed, hitching my chin at him in challenge. "So what business is it of yours?"

Dominic's smile guttered. His eyes narrowed, and annoyance flashed across his face before he tucked it away like a skillful actor pulling off a flawless performance. He

sighed and slipped his hands into the pockets of his slacks, an effortless move designed to look casual.

"Everything in this parish is my business," he said simply. He barely looked at me as he spoke, eyes focused off to the side, like he was thinking about something far more critical than this confrontation. "My brothers only think they want me out of their lives because they don't know any better. So, I'll let them think they've won. But without me, everything they love would fall apart." He paused, letting the words hang in the air like a threat—and a promise. "I'm the one standing between this parish and the rot that has a stranglehold on it, whether they like it or not."

There was no arrogance in his tone—no grandstanding. Just an unshakable, cold certainty that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

"The drug-running," I said slowly, following a hunch that had been nagging at me for months. "That's your operation, isn't it?"

The dark, vicious smile that crept onto Dominic's face was all the confirmation I needed. My gut twisted. Months of Gator leading me around by the nose, and the answer had been right in front of me the whole time.

The realization was crushing. I could've wrapped this up months ago if I hadn't been so obsessed with keeping my distance from Mason. I'd stayed on the sidelines, stuck to my "no interference" rule, and now I was left watching the wreckage pile up. How many could I have saved?

"You're the one flooding meth across state lines," I growled. "Aren't you?"

His smile didn't falter. If anything, it grew more amused. The kind of smile that meant he had nothing to hide; he was walking on the edge of a knife and perfectly fine with it.

"You've got a good nose for trouble, Donnelly," he drawled mockingly. "But you're only half right."

"Screw you," I hissed. "Do you know how many people you've hurt?"

"Do you know how many people I've saved?" His eyes flickered briefly, eyes narrowing like I'd said something that personally offended him. "Cornering the market allows me to keep the real animals away. My product is clean of fentanyl and keeps bodies off the streets. More than you feds ever did for us."

I took another step forward, my eyes narrowing. "You got a hand in the human side of it, too? How many missing girls are you keeping for yourself?"

The change was immediate. The smile vanished like it had never existed, and what replaced it wasn't just anger, it was fury deadly enough to start wars. His eyes went flat and cold, revealing a man who could kill without a thought.

"No." The word came out like a snap of a whip, final and absolute. "Never."

I didn't buy it. Dominic had too much to lose to be this ignorant of what was happening in his own backyard. No one in his position would let something like this slide unchecked.

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"Gator and his crew have been working both sides for over a year," I pointed out skeptically. "No way you'd let that slide unless you're taking a cut."

Dominic's face curled in disgust, his lips pulling back like I was something he'd scraped off his shoe. He shook his head slowly, like I was a child without the smarts to ask the right questions.

"No man can serve two masters," he said condescendingly. "But that hasn't stopped Gator from trying."

"Why allow it?" I pressed.

Dominic shrugged and glanced over his shoulder, checking in visually with the silent bodyguard. When he turned back and met my gaze, he looked impatient. "For the same reason you've been looking the other way," he said grimly. "I want information. I want the shot caller."

I let out a slow, cautious breath. His façade was thinner than I'd expected. He didn't have the grip on this town he pretended, and he was no clearer on the truth than I was. We both might have suspicions, but we were stuck without proof. Damn near helpless to stop it.

"So, what do you want from me?" I asked roughly.

Dominic's expression shifted, and the smugness faded—just for a moment. His jaw, usually sharp enough to cut glass, relaxed slightly, and the tight set of his lips loosened into something almost like a grimace, though it didn't quite reach his eyes.

The lines around his eyes, always tight with calculated control, softened, revealing a flicker of something almost human, just long enough for me to catch it.

Still calculating, but changing the approach, making it more personal.

When he spoke, I finally got the unvarnished truth, or a version of it, and that was enough to make my gut tighten. "I'm trying to help my brother," he said bluntly. "I want you to close your case, and then I want you out of my parish. You're not doing Mason any favors by playing around with him. He doesn't roll like that. You'd have to be goddamn blind to think he does."

Guilt gripped me by the chest, a jagged ache radiating out from my ribs, squeezing until it hurt to breathe. I'd told myself I could keep it all compartmentalized, blow off a little steam with Mason, and then cut and run once my job was done. But it was a lie, and I'd known it from the moment I'd first laid eyes on him. I'd just wanted him too much to care. I wasn't just watching this shitshow unfold from the sidelines anymore. I was balls deep in it.

I kept my face locked down, but Dominic eyed me coldly, weighing my expression for reactions I refused to give him.

"I'll give you what you need on the girls," Dominic said. "But you need to wrap this up before it's a mess neither of us can fix. And you leave my operation alone. That's the deal."

Every part of me instantly rebelled. It felt like making a deal with the devil. I didn't trust him—I'd be an idiot if I did. But I'd seen too many girls disappear, girls whose names I remembered and whose faces I saw when I closed my eyes. Girls who had looked at my bar as a safe haven, and who'd been fed into a system like chum for sharks. I needed that location more than I needed to arrest a backwoods Louisiana drug kingpin.

So I nodded. Once.

That was all it took.

He gave me a drop site in rural Mississippi, just over the state line; one of the waystations they'd been using to move girls west. Clean. Remote. Disposable. The kind of place that vanished off maps once it served its purpose.

When he was finished, Dominic started back toward the Jag. Purpose served. But before he slid behind the wheel, he stopped and looked back.

"Get out of town, Donnelly. You've got what you came for, and you've overstayed your welcome. Don't mess with Mason's head by dragging this out."

He stared me down with eyes flat as stone.

"I saw it when he looked at you tonight. He's in love with you."

Chapter Twenty

SILAS

The Dead End was almost a ghost town tonight, the kind of quiet that came after the rowdies had stumbled home and the real degenerates hadn't slunk out yet. Hendrix crooned from the jukebox, masking the faint hum of the dying ceiling fan and the clink of glasses as I washed up.

It should've been a slow night—the kind I could pass off to Hank and spend catching up on some sleep, but he'd called out sick, so I was stuck manning the bar all evening. Exhaustion was starting to tug at my eyelids. I'd been running on fumes all day, but even though this was just a cover job, I took pride in how well I ran the place.

The truth? This slow-drip southern life suited me; from the fresh, damp haze that hung over the parish every morning, to the po'boys and grilled catfish, and the way the sun set heavy over the swamp, turning the sky warm and amber. A place where time barely mattered, and the world would keep turning without any particular person there to push it along.

It was more comfortable than the rat race of the Bureau, hopscotching between field offices while everyone climbed over each other to get to the next rung on the ladder. I could never stand that shit. It could be how I grew up, but bikers and roughnecks were more my speed. No fake smiles, no bullshit politics, no one trying to impress anybody. Just folks living their lives with a little more grit and a lot less ambition.

That's what made me so good at what I did. I was comfortable in the margins and the raw, messy parts of life. Here, there was no need to show up with a suit and a smile, knowing damn well all anyone cared about was how much I could do for them.

In another life, I might've stuck around and kept the Dead End running. No aliases, no secrets. Just the bar, the open road...and Mason. The kind of life that never asked for more than I could give. But maybe that was the burnout talking. It was easy to fantasize about a life where the only thing to dodge was a bad review instead of a bullet.

As I rinsed suds from the last pint glass, the creak of the open front door brought my head up fast. A gust of damp air swirled through the room, thick with the scent of swamp, and a small, dainty woman stepped inside.

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"Hello, darling." She offered a brilliant smile.

I'd worked with Marie for years, though we hadn't been in the same room for a while. We'd spent the past fourteen months communicating via secure chat on a burner phone. I was surprised by how much older she looked. Her dark, bobbed hair was neat as ever, but the streaks of gray had grown thicker, and she'd traded out her trademark pumps for flats. She was dressed in a stiff yellow pantsuit, the bright color she thought made her look girlish, though she could have passed for my grandmother in the wrong light.

I liked her, but I wasn't happy to see her tonight. None of my team showed up uninvited unless things were moving faster than expected behind the scenes. A reminder that I didn't control the clock, and time was running out.

"I'm moving as fast as I can," I said, cutting to the chase. Marie wasn't the type to beat around the bush, and neither was I.

Her smile didn't budge as she slid onto the stool, adjusting the pleats in her jacket with a quick flick. "I'll have a Negroni," she said, sliding the menu aside and glancing at a bottle of Campari on the shelf behind me. "An extra dash of that. But keep the vermouth light, and give me a twist of grapefruit, not orange. Think you can handle that, barman?"

"Think that scares me?" I asked, raising an eyebrow. "I've had to handle your Chinese takeout order, remember?"

I grabbed the gin, poured it with a steady hand, added the Campari, and watched the

colors swirl together. A light dash of vermouth followed, just like she'd asked.

She wasn't fooling me; I knew exactly why she was making such a show of her order. It wasn't about the drink. She was keeping my hands busy, distracting me while breaking the bad news. My eyes flicked to her face briefly—still smooth, but something in the corners of her eyes, something tight in her posture, told me she wasn't just here for a drink. And that didn't bode well for either of us.

Marie watched in silence for a while. She leaned forward and folded her hands neatly on the bar, keenly interested. "You've gotten good at this."

"Not a lot to do around here but learn," I said evasively, cutting a twist of grapefruit, just enough to release the oils, and dropping it into the glass. "What have you got for me?"

"I looked into who was sniffing around your bar," she said. "But the better question is—who isn't? The task force that's been poking around is headed up by the Attorney General himself. We made contact and told them to back off before they blow your cover. The sheriff's got eyes on you most days, too. I'm sure you noticed."

"The squad car parked at the highway turnout?" I raised my eyebrows and slid her drink across the bar. "I noticed. Supposedly watching out for drunk drivers. Brought 'em coffee a time or two, just to let them know they're not subtle."

"Anyone in particular?"

"Usually it's Sheriff Vanderhoff himself." I shrugged, wiping down the counter without really looking at it. "Sometimes he puts one of his deputies on it."

"Teddy Cobb." It wasn't a question, the way she said it. "He's got his hand in a lot of pots. When it suits him, he reports to Vanderhoff, but when it doesn't, we've caught

him down at Saxa Fracta, feeding intel to Dominic Beaufort's organization."

"You know I made contact with him," I said grimly.

"I saw the update." Marie took a dainty sip of her Negroni, humming in approval. "We're already moving on the information you passed along. We've got people tracking the movements of local LEOs, but whoever it is, they've been keeping their hands clean. We can't pin it down until we catch him in the act."

I carefully dried the last glasses, lining them upside down on a clean towel beside the ice bin. "What about the location Beaufort gave me for the drop-off? The one in Mississippi?"

Marie's lips tightened. "We've got it locked down. The next shipment's set for tomorrow night. We're coordinating a sting op with local agencies. It's a full-court press, Silas. This is our chance to shut down that side of the trade—but once they go, we'll lose everyone on the hook on this side of the state line. You need to make a move on Gator's crew."

"Jesus, you don't give a guy much warning." I huffed a laughing breath through my nostrils, breathing deep to keep tension from ratcheting up my spine. "You want me to just show up at his doorstep and ask to tag along?"

Marie tilted her head slightly, a faint smile on her lips, but her eyes remained sharp. "Oh, don't make it harder than it needs to be, Silas. We both know Gator loves to hang around after hours, when all the prying eyes are gone." She glanced at her watch, then raised a brow at me. "Should be here any time now."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. She was right, damn it. The pressure of being pulled in too many directions was starting to wear me down. But I wasn't about to show it. Instead, I reached for a bottle of bourbon and poured a double. I had a feeling

I'd need it.

Marie's eyes followed the movement, but she didn't comment. She didn't need to. The silence that followed was thick with the understanding that neither of us could afford to waste time.

I took a slow pull from my glass, letting the warmth of the whiskey spread through me before setting the glass down and bracing my hands on the bar to get a good look at her. "You could've sent this over secure channels like you always do. So why the personal delivery, Marie?"

She didn't immediately respond, taking a careful sip of her Negroni, and then set it down with a subtle grace. Her eyes, usually shrewd and a little harsh, softened until I could almost see the version of Marie that existed before the Bureau, before the surveillance and the endless briefings. I'd seen her warmth in flashes over the years but never enough for me to trust. I'd kept my distance, like I always did.

In many ways, she'd been the most stable relationship I'd had. She was the one who could always be counted on, even if we never talked about the things that mattered. I had no idea where she lived, never met her husband—hell, I wasn't even sure what she did when she wasn't at work—but I knew, deep down, that she cared. She cared in quiet ways that never affected our bottom line, but it was enough. She was a constant I could depend on.

She shifted in her seat slightly, her voice dropping into a tone that didn't belong to a handler anymore, but to someone who knew me well. "I wanted to get a look at your face. Make sure you're still locked in. We don't want a repeat of what happened last time."

I swallowed and glanced down, rubbing at a water spot on the counter with the edge of my thumb. "I'm fine," I muttered, though the words felt thin in the space between

us.

"You're tired, Silas." Marie's eyes stayed on mine as she leaned forward earnestly. "Undercover work's a strange thing. You can stay in it for years and convince yourself you're still in control. You never even notice you've reached your limit. Then one day, you wake up and realize you've lost track of what you're doing it for. Who you're doing it for."

She'd hit me center mass, but I wasn't going to let her see that. I kept my hands busy, arranging the syrups on the counter so each label faced outward. The movements were familiar, mechanical, and distracting.

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I wiped my hands with the towel and pretended I didn't know what she was getting at. "We're all doing it for the same reason."

She didn't argue, just studied me with those dark, steady eyes. "We used to be. But you've lost touch with the guy you were before all this. The one who knew how to live for more than the job. Maybe it's time to take a step back."

"Not all of us have much to go back to, sweetheart," I said, tossing her a wink that pulled more like a grimace. "You're right, though. I probably could use a vacation. Somewhere with a beach, some good whiskey, and zero memories of the last decade."

The truth was, I wasn't ready to let go of this life, even if it was already killing me. I'd spent nearly two decades shedding everything about my past, getting as far away from Dorchester as possible. But Marie saw right through it, and the certainty in her eyes unsettled me.

"Joke all you want," she said, pinching the bridge of her nose. "I'm just saying...you might want to consider settling down."

I snorted at that. "Yeah? And what? Go back to the suburbs and play house? I'm not sure I'm cut out for domestic bliss."

"You'll never know until you try," she said wryly.

I'd just opened my mouth, but before I could tell her to stop pushing, the door swung open. I flicked a glance toward the door, wired to a hair-trigger every time I caught

the first creak of the hinges. It swung open on a blast of thick, muggy air, and Mason strode in, looking like he'd been running on fumes and willpower for so long that they'd finally called it quits.

Not just messy—wrecked.

My heart skipped a beat. This wasn't the man who'd spent all night in my bed a few days ago, the one I'd spent hours mapping with my tongue, just to make sure I could find my way back. That Mason was open and vulnerable, breath warm against my throat, clinging like he didn't want to let go.

This man had burnt himself down to the wick.

His suit was wrinkled beyond saving, the jacket was creased like he'd used it as a pillow, and his crushed tie hung loose around his collar. His hair was flat and sweaty at the temples, a telltale sign of long hours under a helmet, and a day's worth of dark scruff shaded his jaw. He wasn't wearing his glasses, and his eyes were red-rimmed from fatigue and too much time in contact lenses.

He stumbled toward the bar in a barely straight line, but he wasn't drunk. That was the real kicker. I'd never seen him drink. He refused to touch anything that risked loosening up the chokehold he kept on himself. If this were a bender, I could've chalked it up to one bad night, but these were days of wear and tear and exhaustion ground deep into his bones. The kind of night he locked himself in my back room and slept like the dead.

"Room's free if you need it," I said, nodding toward the storage room, even though all I wanted was to haul him over my shoulder and carry him upstairs to my apartment. He needed to get between my sheets and stay there until his eyes lost that glassy, overstimulated shine. "Rough night?"

He groaned low in his throat, dragging his tie the rest of the way off and stuffing it into his pocket with agitated fingers. Like the fabric itself had personally wronged him.

"Rough few days," he muttered in a voice shot to hell.

Marie watched the two of us with interest, then drained her glass and set it down with a precise clink.

"Thanks for the drink, cutie," she said, dripping with that mock sweetness that only she could pull off without sounding forced. Her eyes glinted as she slid off the bar stool and grabbed her purse. "But I'd better hit the road."

I let her get a few steps before calling, "Don't be a stranger, Marie."

She glanced over her shoulder with a warning look and was gone. The door clicked shut behind her with a soft echo.

I slid a banana and a glass of water into Mason's hand before he could argue. He blinked at it like he'd been handed a dead rat. His nose wrinkled, but then he sighed and reluctantly peeled the fruit, as if forcing himself through the motions. He took a bite like it physically pained him, chewing with the kind of grim determination of a man doing penance.

I watched him choke down another mouthful before asking, "Long day?"

He swallowed hard, grimacing. "Long week. Long fucking month."

I leaned back against the counter, keeping my distance but not letting the silence stretch too long. "Too many balls in the air, huh?"

He didn't bother to reply; he just kept chewing slowly, his jaw working like he was trying to swallow something more than just the food. I could read the exhaustion and frustration in his face, the kind that settled into the skin after too many hours of noise.

Mason always carried more than he should. More than anyone should, really. He'd nominated himself his brothers' keeper, clearing Ben's name, handling the estate for Gideon, and keeping Gage and Dominic out of prison. That was more than enough, but he topped it with a seat on the task force he thought he'd managed to hide from me. And the real kicker? He pretended none of it was eating him alive. I could see it now, though, the slow collapse behind his eyes.

I reached out to touch him, barely stroking his cheek with my fingertips, just to watch the flare in those bright blue eyes as they lifted to mine.

"Get some sleep," I said softly. "I'll finish cleaning up, and then I'll join you."

The flicker of a genuine smile on his lips felt like a reward. I didn't know why it mattered. Maybe Marie was right, and I'd lost all sense of myself, grasping blindly for any touchstone that made me feel human.

Or maybe I just wanted to see him happy.

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As he slowly sank forward and buried his face against my neck, that was a thought I wasn't ready to examine too hard. I just cupped the back of his neck and pressed a kiss against his temple.

"Go on, sweetheart," I murmured into his ear. "I'm right behind you."

I didn't watch him go. Instead, I picked up his empty water glass, running my thumb over the condensation ring it left behind. I let the water run hot over my hands as I washed the glass, but it didn't do a damn thing to burn away the conflict inside me. I stood there, staring at the water swirling down the sink drain, trying to unstick Marie's words from where they'd lodged inside the hole in my heart. But I couldn't seem to pry them loose.

You might want to consider settling down.

I hadn't had a place I could call my own in years. Maybe ever. Home was just four walls and a name I wore like a jacket that never quite fit. Once an op was finished, there was no one waiting for me. I lived in borrowed spaces, slept in other men's lives, and wore names that weren't my own.

It felt different with Mason. Ifelt different. The way he looked at me in vulnerable moments, those blue eyes blazing with heat and appreciation and a connection that came from a place neither of us understood. It was the closest thing to real I'd ever had.

I gritted my teeth and snapped off the faucet with so much force I was surprised the handle didn't disintegrate in my hand.

He's in love with you.

I knew liars—I was one. Dominic hadn't been lying. I told myself it didn't matter. I pretended I wasn't standing there straining to hear any sign of him tossing and turning on that rickety old mattress. But I'd counted every second since he shut that door. I wiped down the counter, stacked glasses, and flipped a bar rag over my shoulder. Anything to keep my hands busy and my feet planted behind this bar where I was supposed to be.

Five minutes.

Ten.

Fifteen, and I was done pretending.

I scanned the room, taking in the empty tables and freshly swept floor, and headed over to lock the door?—

—and that's when it swung open.

Chapter Twenty-One

SILAS

Gator strolled in like he owned the place, the picture of easy southern charm wrapped around a coiled rattlesnake. His grin was as wide and lazy as a man passing time on a porch swing, but those dead, flint-chip eyes were ice cold when they locked on me.

“We’re using the parking lot for a while,” he announced in a tone that brooked no questions. “Send the regulars out the back way when they leave.”

I tried to catch a glimpse of the parking lot over his shoulder when the door swung open again, but my view was blocked by Cruz and Grady, two of his meanest and most loyal, hard men with harder hands and razorblade smiles. Sylvia stumbled between them, drunk or high, and hanging off them both like a decorative scarf. The second she laid eyes on me, her face lit up like Christmas morning.

“Well, hey there, sugar,” she purred, all drunken seduction and red-lipped smiles. She untangled herself from Cruz just enough to run a hand down the front of my shirt, dragging her nails over the fabric like she was testing the quality of the muscle beneath. “If I’d known we were stopping by, I’d have worn something easier to take off.”

Gator’s smile didn’t slip, but there was a flicker of distaste beneath it as he watched his girl pour herself all over me like she had every intention of making a home here. He let her have her moment, then clicked his tongue against his teeth and shook his head.

“Sylvia, sweetheart,” he drawled, eyes glinting dangerously. “If I wanted to watch you throw yourself at every man in your path, I’d take you back to Bourbon Street.”

Sylvia ignored Gator completely, pressing herself against me with all the practiced flirtation she knew would get under my skin. Her fingers wandered where they shouldn’t, testing boundaries, but Gator wasn’t bothered by it. He used her as easily as everyone else, playing on her need for attention to keep his men in line. She was a tool, nothing more.

“Grab us a round, McKenna,” Gator commanded, spinning a chair around and slinging himself into it like the place was his personal throne. “And pour yourself one while you’re at it. You’re drinkin’ with us tonight.”

It was framed like an invitation, but we both knew better.

My stomach churned, but not because of Sylvia's game. It wasn't because Gator was any more dangerous than usual, either. I could feel the seconds ticking away and my window closing. Dominic's intel was good, and we were closing in on the drop sites in Mississippi. But he was no closer than I was to learning who was pulling Gator's strings. If I couldn't arrange a meeting within the next twenty-four hours, this entire operation wastoast...and the guilt of all the girls who'd slipped through my fingers would eat me alive.

Gator didn't waste top-shelf whiskey on casual drinking, but he didn't have the taste of a broke teenager either. So, I grabbed a bottle of Old Forester, poured a couple of glasses, and carried them over to the table, positioning myself so my back was against the wall. Not that it did much good. It was just the four of us, the occasional click of Sylvia feeding the jukebox, and the low pulse of the music.

The bourbon burned on the way down, glowing like a hot coal in my gut, but I barely tasted it. Crazy high tolerance ran in my blood, and I'd trained it even higher over the years. I could snort a line of coke and then throw someone in cuffs while barely feeling the buzz. The glass was just a prop, same as my lazy slouch and ripped jeans, same as the half-lidded look of a man who had all the time in the world to sit and drink with the type of criminals who'd tried to kidnap Ivy.

It was a slow game that required patience, confidence, and just enough recklessness to sell the lie. Eagerness got men killed, but I couldn't be so cautious that I made them look twice. The trick was to sit just deep enough in the filth to make them believe I reluctantly belonged there, just like the rest of them.

But time wasn't on my side.

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I tilted the glass in my hand, watching the amber liquid catch sparks off the dim bar lights. “Quiet in here tonight,” I mused, letting the words float like idle conversation. “Guess all the action’s outside.”

Gator chuckled and settled deeper into his chair, lacing his fingers over his stomach and grinning like he didn’t realize I was fishing. “You know how it is, McKenna. Law of the jungle out there.” He tipped his glass in my direction and swallowed, his gaze flicking to the ceiling, dead and flat. “Just blowing off steam before we move some product.”

I let the vague answer pass, taking another drink. Cruz and Grady had gone still, just enough to make me notice. I kept my tone neutral. “So long as you’re not moving any product that breathes on my property, we won’t have a problem.”

Gator’s grin held steady, filled with the easy charm that made men underestimate him...right up until they felt a knife slip between their ribs. Behind the cleft chin and straight white teeth lurked something cold and bloodthirsty, a predator weighing whether it was worth the chase or just letting his prey squirm. He wasn’t completely fooled; he was just deciding how much of this conversation he wanted to indulge.

“You let me worry about my business,” he said, leaning forward and grabbing the half-empty bottle to tip some more into my glass. “You’ve got enough on your plate already.”

I met his gaze dead-on and pressed harder. “I’ve already got cops sniffing around my bar.”

“Not cops,” he said, shaking his head and propping one boot on an empty chair. “You’ve got state investigators up your ass. But it’s a fishing expedition. They’ve got no idea what they’re looking for, just casting bait and hoping it’ll lead to bigger fish than you or me. Our man in the sheriff’s department has been watching them.”

“That’d be real reassuring if I knew the man,” I said wryly, “but for all I know, he’s blind.”

He reached for the bowl of pretzels in the center of the table and tossed a few into his mouth. “Relax, McKenna,” he drawled, brushing the salt from his fingers onto his jeans. “Our guy’s on his way right now to help us tidy up the details. You’ll get your meeting, and you’ll see there’s nothing to worry about.”

A thrill of satisfaction slithered through my blood. Finally. Months of work, threading the needle between pushing too hard and losing my leads completely, and it all led to this. A name and a face that we could use. I was rarely the one slapping cuffs on anyone, but Marie would be dancing a fucking jig.

“I’ll drink to that,” I said, tapping my glass against his and knocking back a swallow of whiskey.

Mason was still sleeping in my back room. I felt him there, a center of gravity I couldn’t ignore, tugging me painfully toward him. But I shoved it down. What I wanted didn’t matter right now. Only the men at this table who needed to believe I was just like them mattered.

So, I played the part, entertaining them with half-truths and war stories built from the patchwork of other men’s experiences. I painted pictures with just enough detail to make them believe I knew what it was like to be caged in prison and come out meaner than when I went in. They ate it up like always, especially once the whiskey and laughter hit their bloodstream.

Sylvia though—she was a fucking problem.

She'd slithered onto my lap once the serious talk was finished, like I hadn't already made it clear that I wasn't playing that game.

Her body pressed against mine, all fruity perfume and wandering hands, and her breath was hot and tart with liquor as she nibbled at my jaw. I kept it casual, looping one arm around her waist and keeping it friendly while I worked to stop her squirming. Cruz and Grady were laughing over a bawdy joke, but Gator didn't say a word. He didn't even blink, just sat back watching with those unreadable eyes as his girl practically gave me a goddamn lap dance in front of him.

It was that nonreactivity that made him dangerous.

I stared past her shoulder while she sucked at my throat, but every time my focus strayed, she grabbed my chin, forcing me to meet her eyes. She wanted something. Attention, maybe. But I wasn't sure if it was mine or Gator's she was after. It didn't matter. Pushing her away would've been a clear insult, and Silas McKenna didn't make enemies if he could help it. If I wanted to stay alive, I had to be one of them.

So, I let it happen. I played the game and let my hands drift appreciatively over her body, fighting the urge to shove her away.

She clutched at my jaw, turning my face toward her as she kissed me. Whiskey tasted different in her mouth, sour with bad decisions, and her perfume was thick and cloying in my nose. Her mouth was warm, wet, and insistent, nipping at my bottom lip like she was fishing for control. She needed a reaction from me.

I gave it to her, but not because I wanted it. I'd spent most of my adult life learning to subvert my own needs for the job. It was muscle memory at this point. I just let the charade roll while she took what she wanted.

But my eyes stayed open.

And that was how I saw him.

Mason, emerging like a spirit from the dark hall. Sexy as sin. Without his glasses, those bright eyes burned through the space between us without a hint of grogginess.

He was fully fucking awake and frozen in the doorway, watching the tableau with slowly building anger.

My stomach churned sickly.

We'd made no promises, and I had no reason to feel guilty. But the wrongness of the moment was something I couldn't shake—not when he was staring at me like I was suddenly a stranger. Like he could no longer be sure what kind of man he was looking at.

My fingers tightened on Sylvia's hips. My first instinct was to get her off my lap, but my second was to double down. Neither felt like the right move. Fight or flight. But there was a third option—I stayed and waited for him.

Just like I always did whenever Mason Beaufort walked into a room.

The low rumble of conversation flattened as the others noticed. Gator glanced between us and chuckled into the rim of his glass. "One of these days, McKenna, you're gonna have to explain that pet you keep in the back room."

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I ran my tongue over my teeth, not breaking eye contact with Mason. For a fleeting second, I hoped he'd take the hint. I was giving him an out; all he had to do was walk his ass back to bed before this got any more complicated. I'd clear the air later. But no, complicated was Mason's middle name. So, he pulled out an empty chair and seated himself at the table.

He didn't look at me, and he sure as hell didn't look at Sylvia hanging off me like a damn ornament. Instead, he reached for the bottle and turned it once between his fingers to check the label. Like the brand mattered at all.

"Yeah, well, he feeds me," he said dryly, taking a long, unapologetic gulp straight from the bottle. "Jury's still out on whether I'm staying."

To anyone else, he probably looked posh and relaxed, even in his wrinkled dress shirt. But I wasn't anyone else. I knew him—and I knew he didn't drink. But here he was, tipping back a bottle, and fury was eating him up from the inside. His shoulders were locked, rigid with tension, and though his mouth stayed neutral, his jaw was wired tight like he was fighting to keep from saying something he'd regret.

He still hadn't looked directly at me, and I didn't push for it. I had a sinking feeling that once he did, I'd find out exactly how much damage I'd done.

He was out to prove himself, or maybe to punish himself for ever falling for an asshole like me.

Gator's eyes twinkled with amusement, and I clocked the exact instant he decided to toy with us. He leaned forward, grinning wolfishly, like we were all just a bunch of

good ol' boys swapping stories.

“Now, this is interesting,” he drawled, plucking the bottle from Mason’s grasp and pouring it into an extra glass. He slid the glass across the table. Mason stopped it without breaking eye contact. “You don’t strike me as the type to drink with the likes of us, Beaufort. Thought y’all preferred the finer things. Countryclubs, offshore accounts, getting away with murder. Oh—wait. Strike that. One of you did hard time, right?”

Laughter rippled around the table, but I didn’t join in. An ugly undercurrent ran beneath it, an energy that reminded me of a wolfpack catching the scent of something they’d tear apart just for fun.

“Come on, Beaufort,” Gator pressed, grinning like he was starting to enjoy himself for the first time tonight. “What’s it like being the only one of your brothers who still pretends to give a damn about the law?”

I couldn’t take my eyes off Mason. Gator was testing him, and I wanted to see if he had any goddamn sense at all—or if he was about to make this night worse.

Mason took the glass, his eyes locked on Gator’s, not bothering to look my way. He didn’t rush to answer, letting the silence stretch as he took a slow sip. Setting the glass down, he finally spoke, his tone steady. “I don’t pretend to be something I’m not. But you already knew that. You’re better off worrying about the ones who do.”

Was that a jibe at me? I tilted my head, wondering if he was trying to slide one past me, but he wasn’t giving me a damn thing. No change in his face, no flicker in those eyes, just that steady, cool mask he always wore. Whatever game he was playing, it wasn’t one I could read. And that left me with a prickling discomfort I didn’t like.

Sylvia was still taking up space on my lap, but her arms around my neck had

loosened, and there was a greedy gleam in her eyes as she watched Mason. He cut her a scathing glance...and she practically melted.

“Oh, honey,” she purred, leaning forward just enough that her tits spilled over the edge of her push-up bra. “You are a treat. Nobody’s talked to Gator like that in years.”

Gator crooked a dark brow at Sylvia, more amused than insulted by her antics. “Jesus, Syl. You gonna flirt with every man who pisses me off or just the pretty ones?”

“Oh, let me keep him,” she pouted, fixing her smeared red lipstick with the tip of her acrylic nail.

“They say Boone Beaufort only adopted fags,” Gator remarked, hiding his smirk behind his hand as he rubbed his chin.

“So? I like a challenge.” She gave my chest one lingering stroke before hopping off my lap and slipping like silk onto Mason’s. She draped herself over him like a cat in heat, legs slung over his thighs, arms around his neck like she was confident in her reception. “Mmm,” she hummed, brushing her nose against his collar. “He smells nice, too.”

Yeah, goddammit, he did.

Mason didn’t push her off him. Hell, he didn’t even stiffen up, not like he used to do with me every time I touched him. Instead, he played into the part, reclining like an indolent rich boy beneath her attention. His fingers were curled loosely around his glass, but his other arm wrapped around her waist, fingers splayed like a casual afterthought, as if he were a man used to women throwing themselves at him.

I should’ve looked away. But I couldn’t. I watched the way Mason’s lips met the rim

of the glass, tracked the shift of his Adam's apple when he swallowed, listened to the faint hitch of his breath when Sylvia took his earlobe between her teeth.

At first, I didn't recognize the emotion taking over. It wasn't jealousy; it was darker than that, possessive, a wire tightening around my throat, choking me, making every breath feel wrong. It refused to ease up, no matter how hard I swallowed.

He was too damn pretty for a place like this, too clean-cut and pristine to be surrounded by criminals who made their livings off the backs of people like him. He shouldn't be sitting there so politely, letting her touch him like she had the right. I was the one who knew what he felt like beneath my hands. I knew the strength of the muscles under that perfect, tailored exterior, and I knew how much fucking heat his body put off when he was wound up.

My body was already reacting like some dumb fucking animal. I wanted to drag him away, press him against something solid, and make him forget he'd ever been touched by anyone else.

Mason must have felt my stare burning into the side of his head, but he didn't even glance my way. I knew the game he was playing, and I hated it. Even though I knew he was screwing with me on purpose, it took everything I had not to break the glass in my hand.

Gator pulled his phone from his pocket and lazily tapped out a message with one thumb. Then he tucked it back in his pocket and slid me a crooked smirk. "Told our friend not to bother tonight," he said smoothly. "Looks like you've got enough on your hands already."

Rage licked up my spine, a sharp pressure at the base of my skull, burning through the last thread of patience I had left.

That was my last chance—gone. More than a fucking year of painstakingly crawling through the filth of this place. Hourssacrificing my conscience and my dignity, stitching lies together and hoping they were believable enough to keep my head from getting caved in. Just when I'd finally gotten close to a solid lead, Mason walked in here, poured himself a drink, and ruined my goddamn night.

And he knew it.

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He sat there like a king on his throne, Sylvia draped over his lap like a careless indulgence, one hand idly stroking the curve of her hip. But she wasn't the one he was thinking about. Not even close. Because for the first time that night, he looked at me, and his eyes were glittering with deliberate malice. He had no clue what kind of mess he'd just made, but he knew he'd fucked up whatever plans I had, and he was enjoying it.

Whether he meant to or not, he'd just destroyed my career—and he wasn't going to fix it.

That was on me.

Chapter Twenty-Two

MASON

Whiskey sat like poison on my tongue, acrid and bitter all the way down. I hated the taste of it, but more than that, I hated the slow, creeping warmth that dulled my thoughts. The quickness of my brain was how I survived; I never willingly slowed it down. But I swallowed the booze anyway, forcing myself to stay hyper-aware despite the buzz: the low hum of a jukebox playing to a missing audience, the uneven scrape of a chair leg as one of the thugs at the table shifted his weight, the oily, lotion-slick on the arms of the woman in my lap.

And Silas at the edge of my vision: the stretch of his long, denim-clad legs and the lazy way he regarded the conversation, like there wasn't a single thing in this world that could unsettle him.

Like I hadn't walked in on him with his tongue down a woman's throat.

I'd been a lawyer long enough to know better than to judge a man by his record. Silas had never been shy about his criminal record, but despite that, I'd always believed he was one of the good ones. He was flirtatious, elusive, and impossible to pin down, but there was a reason I felt so safe with him. Whatever bad habits he couldn't shake, his core had always been solid as a rock.

But sitting here now, at a table stinking of sweat and cheap perfume, I felt like I'd been duped. I'd let myself be blinded by lust, by the way he touched me, and the way he could strip me with a single glance. He looked at me like he saw through my defenses, marked everything I tried to hide, and somehow liked me better for it.

How much of that was an act, I wondered. Silas lied effortlessly, not just with his words but his silences and omissions. He allowed criminals to operate from his bar, laughed freely with them, and behaved just like them. The way he moved through life, through this town, through me—it was calculated. He knew exactly what to say and where to push, when to let that gravel-edged voice go low and rough to pull a reaction out of me.

He played me every time he saw me...and I let him.

And yet, despite everything, I still couldn't stop myself from turning my head to watch him.

To see if he was already looking at me.

He was angry. It was subtle, but I'd spent too long watching him not to notice. I felt it the way I knew a storm was coming before I felt the first drop of rain. He was sprawled back in his chair, shoulders loose, one hand casually draped over his thigh, but that was just the packaging. His body was unnaturally still, and his breathing was

measured, but I caught the faintest twitch in his nostrils, like he was fighting to keep it that way. But his mouth was the dead giveaway. Silas liked to smirk, loved to talk, and habitually bit the edge of his thumb when he was thinking. But now, his lips were pressed together in a thin, bloodless line as if he were resisting the urge to grind his molars down to dust.

It wasn't just about the woman tracing the edge of my collar and slipping the top button free with the tip of her finger. This was bigger than that. I'd interrupted something, shoved myself into business that wasn't mine, and he was furious. Out of nothing but spite, I'd stomped all over rule number one—and for what? Because I couldn't handle the terms we'd agreed on? Because as soon as I'd allowed him inside me, I'd started to imagine we had some sort of hold on each other? He could kiss or even fuck whoever the hell he wanted, and I had no right to care.

So why did it feel like I was choking on it?

I was watching so closely that I caught it in real time: the exact moment his patience broke.

He tossed back the last of his whiskey and shoved his chair out like a man with something to prove. That was the only warning I got before he leaned in and slapped a hand flat against my chest, cutting off the woman mid-performance. The conversation stalled. A display—for the men watching.

“You’ve had enough for one night, counselor,” he drawled, fingers flexing like he was debating grabbing a fistful of my shirt. “Let’s go.”

I was tempted to make him work for it. Resisting, just to be difficult and punish him for making me feel this way, almost seemed like the thing to do. But in the end, I didn't. His hand found my bicep, and in an instant, he practically lifted me out of my chair.

Sylvia gave a protesting giggle and slid off my lap, the pout on her lips making it clear she wasn't used to being dismissed so easily. "Aw," she cooed, clutching her midriff as if she didn't know what to do with her hands when they weren't all over someone else's body. "Taking my new toy already?"

"Sweetheart," Silas rasped in a dark voice, "he was never yours to play with."

Before I could react, he was slamming through the emergency exit and dragging me out into the empty parking lot.

The heat of the day still clung to the ground, rising in waves that carried the stink of something rank—piss or bile or blood. The lot was mostly empty, save for a few trucks and bikes scattered about like abandoned pieces after a game, but with a close look, signs of a struggle were evident: drag marks and a dark, wet patch glistening under the weak glow of the Dead End's flickering neon.

Whatever had gone down here tonight, it hadn't ended well for someone...and Silas had gone along with it.

It turned my stomach.

Silas didn't slow down. One second, I was finding my footing; the next, my back hit the side of the building with enough force to shock the breath from my lungs. Warm bricks radiated through my shirt, but it was nothing compared to the heat rolling off him. His hand bracketed the base of my throat, pinning me in place, holding me still with barely any pressure at all.

Just one touch and the will to fight drained out of me.

"What the hell was that?" he rasped.

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His fingers were curled loosely around my neck, strong and callused and impossible to ignore. Not squeezing—just a reminder. His weight trapping me, the scent of smoke and leather, and the glittering dark of his eyes...it all left my body primed for sex.

I hated this. Hated him.

But most of all, I hated how betrayed I felt when we'd made no promises.

His gaze was fixed on the pulse pounding beneath my jaw, and I forced myself to swallow. "You were having so much fun with that woman's tongue down your throat," I said flatly. "Figured I'd try playing around myself."

When Silas looked at me, it wasn't with his usual half-lidded amusement. His gaze was colder and flatter than I'd ever seen, as if I were a problem he hadn't decided how to solve.

"Have you forgotten the rules already?" he asked softly. "We agreed to keep this simple. No interference. No pretending either of us gives a damn what the other does when we're not fucking." His thumb brushed against the bottom of my jaw, tilting my head back just enough to remind me who was in control. "Unless you're looking to change that."

I didn't move, not out of stubbornness, but because I was so damn tired. My body ached from a constant barrage of work and stress. It had all drained me more than I'd realized. I was running on fumes, and I didn't have the energy to fight the one thing I wanted more than anything.

Stupidly, what I wanted most...was Silas.

Not just the sex. I wanted that desperately, but it was just a distraction. I needed more than that, even if I didn't know how to name it yet. It was his steadiness, his confidence in the chaos. I craved something that felt solid. Something real. Something that couldn't slip through my fingers like everything else in my life. I wanted to reach for him and not feel like an idiot for doing it.

But that wasn't how this worked.

Because, in the end, I didn't trust him. I trusted only my brothers, a trust earned through blood and years of proven loyalty. Silas had never earned that from me. All that charm only told me he was a master manipulator, a man who could make anyone bend to his will with a well-timed grin and a few carefully chosen words. And I'd walked right into it, signing myself up for a contract with no strings or expectations. Just relief.

It should have worked.

Rules always made sense. They were the framework I needed to keep from losing myself in things never meant to last. But here I was, wedged between Silas and the wall, seething with silent fury because I'd dared to want something more.

The problem wasn't the rules.

The problem was that I'd been naïve enough to think they'd be sufficient.

"I remember exactly what we agreed," I said hoarsely. "I just didn't think it would feel like this."

The air between us changed the moment the words left my mouth—and still, I didn't

take them back.

Silas searched my face with those dark, unreadable eyes. His fingers loosened, and he stopped touching me, resting his palm against the brick beside my head. He hung his head and chuckled, as if he'd finally gotten the punchline to some long, drawn-out joke at his own expense.

"Yeah," he rasped, mouth curving in the ghost of a smile. "Tell me about it."

When he raised his eyes to mine, it knocked the breath out of me. The teasing gleam I'd come to anticipate was gone. There was nothing slick or practiced about those dark, heavy-lidded eyes now, just something raw and reckless that made my stomach clench.

"Why her?" I forced out between clenched teeth. "Why now? With me in the back room."

A muscle ticked in Silas's cheek. His jaw flexed, like he was carefully picking through his words, as if the honest answer was on the back of his tongue, but he couldn't offer it.

"You're the only one I want, blue eyes," he said gruffly. "But it's not about what I want."

What else could it be about?

"I want to kiss you," I admitted hoarsely, squeezing the words out of my tight throat. "But I'm afraid you'll taste like her."

Silas took a slow breath, his chest rising and falling just enough to pull my focus there. Even without touching me, he felt too close. I could taste the whiskey on his

breath, smoky and sharp, mixing with the scent of leather and motor oil. He smelled like late nights and bad decisions, like a man who lived in places most people only passed through.

It hurt, wanting someone like this.

He brushed his fingers across my jaw, tilting my chin up. His gaze never left mine, tracking every flicker in my expression, watching each reaction before he laid a hand on me, as if the wait was part of the pleasure.

At first, his kiss barely touched my lips, featherlight, and gone before I could chase it. Then again, a fleeting touch, softer than the first. With every touch-and-go sweep of his mouth, my stomach tightened.

My hands twitched at my sides, aching to touch him, but fear had me in a chokehold. A quiet, wrecked sound slipped free before I could swallow it.

That was all it took.

Silas caught my mouth in a deep, relentless kiss, prying my lips apart and slipping his tongue between them, feeding me his taste. Then he eased up just enough for me to take from him, stealing the heat of his tongue, blending what was his and what was mine until there was no difference.

When he finally pulled back, it was only to let me breathe. His thumb stayed at the hinge of my jaw, his breath warm on my lips.

“Well?”

I licked my lips, chasing the lingering heat of him, and drew a breath that did nothing to steady my hammering heart. My mouth was open before I’d even decided what to say, but before I could speak, the crunch of distant tires caught my attention.

Silas tensed—not much, just a subtle squaring of his shoulders to better cover me—and subtly turned his head to glance over his shoulder.

A vehicle eased into the shadows on the far side of the empty lot. It was large, maybe a truck or an SUV, but I only caught a faint impression of the driver behind the sudden glare of a set of super-bright high beams that blasted us head-on. I threw up a hand against the blinding glare?—

Pop.

For half a second, my brain refused to place the sound. It sounded like fireworks. A

flicker of memory: smoke curling over the cane fields, the sky lighting up in bursts of red and gold, the sulfur smell of gunpowder as Ben and I threw back our heads and laughed?—

As if he'd been shoved from behind, Silas's body suddenly slammed into mine. He let out a sharp hiss, and before I could react, his arm hooked around my neck and a boot swept my legs out from under me. I barely had time to register the ground rushing up before I hit the ground. Silas followed me down, throwing his weight on top of me. One hand pressed my head down, damn near grinding my face into the gravel while he shielded me with his whole body.

Bullets struck the building where he'd been standing, raining chips of brick dust on our heads.

"Stay down." Silas's breath was hot against my ear.

He shifted, a solid wall of muscle on top of me, and a gun appeared like magic in his hand. I'd been too busy eating gravel to catch him reaching for it. Guns were Dominic's domain, whether the rest of us liked it or not, so I didn't recognize the make or model. But I knew a semi-automatic, black and chrome and deadly under the spill of neon, when I saw one.

Felons couldn't carry. I knew that, and Silas sure as hell did too, but the law didn't seem to matter much with bullets slamming into the ground and pinging against the building where we'd been standing seconds ago.

Silas was breathing like he was in pain, short gasps between clenched teeth, but his focus was locked on the vehicle lighting us up. His eyes narrowed as he lifted the weapon to take a shot.

Something struck the ground an inch from my skull, sending up a violent spray of

gravel that bit into my cheek. My body seized on instinct. I was dead. I couldn't breathe, so I must be dead, but my fingers twitched toward my head just to double-check.

"Fuck!" Silas's voice was all grit and fury, and before I could react, he tucked me tight against his chest and twisted. The world flipped, a sick rush of momentum pulling my stomach into my throat as he rolled, taking me with him seconds before another round of gunfire tore through the space where we'd been lying.

We were sitting ducks, but more gunfire didn't follow, only the roar of a V-8 engine burning rubber. For several long moments, the only sounds were the sharp ringing in my skull and the rasp of Silas's breath against the back of my neck. He was still shielding me, but the night had gone quiet. The vehicle was already disappearing down the highway, taillights swallowed by the dark stretch of asphalt leading out of town.

It took me a second to pull in a full breath. Another to let it out. The stink of burnt gunpowder hung thick in the air. Gravel was digging into my back, and I shifted—or tried. Silas was rigid and motionless like a weighted blanket on top of me.

That's when I felt it. Wetness. It wasn't sweat, and it sure as hell wasn't just the sticky humidity clinging to our skin. It was warmer and thicker, spreading between us where our bodies met and soaking into my shirt.

My stomach sank.

"Silas," I said urgently. "Move."

There was a beat of hesitation that told me he already knew what I'd just figured out. I shoved at his shoulder, hard enough to rock him, and he let out a breath that almost sounded like a laugh. Thin and strained, but real laughter. That was a good sign. But

when he finally shifted, pushing up just enough to put some space between us, I felt the drag of wet fabric peeling away from my side.

Dark fabric. Darker stain. His shirt was soaked with blood, but it wasn't mine.

It was his.

Chapter Twenty-Three

MASON

The phone was in my hand before I'd made a conscious decision to reach for it. Except for the ragged pace of Silas's breathing, the lot was dead silent. Even the crickets were quiet. Silas was bleeding, slumped against the building as if he just needed a second to catch his breath, but the darkness couldn't hide the slick, wet sheen soaking through his shirt, or the way his fingers were pressed against his side, as if sheer force of will alone could keep the blood inside him.

I had 911 pulled up and my thumb hovering over the call button when his hand shot out and clamped around my wrist.

"No."

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The strength in his grip should have been reassuring, but there was an edge in his voice that bordered dangerously close to desperation.

I searched his expression, waiting for an explanation, but he didn't offer one. He was pale beneath the dim glow of the neon sign. Sweat slicked his dark hair against his temples and gleamed in the hollow of his throat. He was making an effort to control his breathing, but control only went so far when a man was actively bleeding out.

"Silas, you need a hospital."

He gave a slow shake of his head. Not even a grimace, just a set jaw and a look in his eyes that dared me to argue. "Not happening."

I didn't take my thumb off the screen. Not yet. My pulse was pounding like a jackhammer at the back of my skull, my mind instinctively slotting pieces together faster than I could follow. A man might refuse medical attention out of pride, but not when a bullet hole was leaking through his shirt. He did it because he had something to hide.

And that slow, mercurial smile of Silas McKenna's always had so much to hide.

I clenched my teeth, forcing down the urge to demand answers that wouldn't come. Later. I could pick him apart later.

I let out a shaky breath. "You're bleeding all over the fucking ground, and you're telling me you'd rather sit here and wait to pass out than call an ambulance?"

“Not gonna pass out.”

That wasn't an answer—and it was a damn lie. He was sagging against the brick, stiff-arming it to keep from collapsing. His fingers were curled in a white-knuckled fist over the wound, but blood was oozing between his fingers with every breath, black and wet-looking in the darkness.

“Silas.” His name came out deathly calm despite the fear crawling through me. “Why don't you want the cops involved?”

A shadow passed across his face, barely a fraction of a second, but I caught it. It vanished instantly, so quickly I might've doubted it was ever there. But I wasn't in the habit of doubting myself.

“You ever met a man like me who wanted cops in his business?” He tried to smirk, but it morphed into a pained twist. “I've had enough run-ins with badges. Can't say any of them ever went in my favor. We just need to get out of here.”

Deflection, and a shit one at that, but I let it slide. All I cared about was getting him safe.

It felt like an eternity since the bullets started flying, but it must have been less than sixty seconds. The muffled strains of the jukebox threaded through the seams of the walls, and the low murmur of conversation drifted with it, barely audible. Even with the music, there was no way they hadn't heard the gunshots, yet there was no rush of footsteps and no cry of alarm. Not even a whisper of curiosity.

A slow, creeping certainty settled over me. Gator had known before the first shot was fired, and he hadn't even glanced out the window to see how it played out.

Silas tracked my gaze. “You think any of them are stupid enough to stick their heads

out?” he asked, darkly amused despite the pain grinding his teeth together.

I twisted and swept the parking lot, thinking quickly. There weren't many places to hide in a town like Devil's Garden. Eden wasn't an option. Gideon defended the foster kids, tooth and nail. I'd never bring danger to his door. Colton and Ben had enough to deal with, and even if they welcomed us with open arms, the last thing I needed was a state investigator asking questions Silas refused to answer.

That left one person.

Dominic.

“Can you ride?” I asked, tucking the phone into my pocket and climbing to my feet.

“Depends.” Silas studied me through half-lidded eyes. “You gonna let me drive?”

Before he could protest, I grabbed his arm and hauled him to his feet. He'd been on top of me, inside me, and still, he was heavier than I remembered. Pure muscle.

His breath stuttered, hissing through his teeth as I hooked an arm around his waist, high enough to avoid the soggy part of his shirt, and steered him toward my Ducati. Silas swayed with his first step and caught me by the shoulder, bracing himself as he shoved one leg over the pillion seat.

A shiver crept down my spine.

“Hold on tight,” I said grimly, twisting the throttle and tearing out of the parking lot.

The highway was a blur of dark asphalt, and the wind bit through my thin clothes, but I barely felt it. All I felt was the heat of him against my back and the slow, insidious damp seeping through the fabric of my shirt too quickly. There was no end to it.

I knew this bike like the back of my hand and was used to pushing it to the limit, but panic had me cornering harder than I should. His grip weakened, and he slumped, head dipping so low I could feel his hot breath against the back of my neck. Gravity was pulling him down, and he didn't have the strength to fight it.

Panic slithered under my ribs until I felt like I was about to puke. I tried to convince myself I'd survived worse, that I'd lost more, but it didn't feel the same. This wasn't about something I'd already lost—it was watching it slip away while I was still reaching for it. And I didn't know how to stop it.

Unlike the rest of us, Dominic had exited Eden the moment Boone died. His crown jewel was Saxa Fracta, a sleek, upscale restaurant in the heart of Devil's Garden. Imported tile, low lighting, and a wine list so expensive it could bankrupt a man with a wrong sip. It was a haven for the elite and untouchable, where deals were made over rare steak and aged whiskey at a steep price.

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Across the street stood the only high-rise in town, cold and unwelcoming. Seven floors wasn't much, but Dominic kept his apartment at the top, so he could survey his kingdom from above. He owned the entire block, every inch of it. Some buildings were legitimate businesses, but the rest were facades—laundromats that never closed, offices with no listed services, and bars where more transactions happened in the back room than at the counter. Every lease, permit, and dollar passed through Dominic's hands first. Nothing happened without his say-so.

Corrupt city officials had played king in Devil's Garden for too long, so Dominic ensured they were playing on his gameboard.

We each had a private elevator key leading to Dominic's apartment, a rare sign of trust from my most paranoid brother. Silas stumbled beside me, sluggish and disoriented. When his back hit the mirrored wall, he groaned, tilting his head back against the glass. The stench of blood flooded the small space, drowning out the usual mix of cologne and floor polish. His eyes were unfocused, heavy-lidded, and his breath came too fast.

I braced him with one hand pressed to his chest, but it wasn't enough. His knees buckled, body slackening in a way that sent cold panic lancing through my heart.

"No, no, no—hey, I got you." I moved quickly, grunting under his dead weight as I caught him. "Don't do this to me."

"I'm fine," he rasped, gripping the safety rail with an arm that shook. Somewhere along the way, the elastic tie had snapped, and his hair fell over his face in a dark, tangled curtain.

“Come on, Silas.” I tapped his cheek, wincing at how cold and clammy his skin felt. “Stay with me, yeah?”

His lips parted on a rough breath, and for a moment, there was nothing to stop my spiraling thoughts. Then his lashes fluttered, and his eyes lifted to mine.

There.

There you are.

His gaze was still sharp, full of that familiar humor and intelligence. His mouth curved, just slightly. “Relax, blue eyes. I’m not leaving you yet.”

He wanted me to smile, but I wasn’t that good at pretending. Not with him bleeding out beneath my hands.

“Did you know... you’ve never called me by my name?” I rasped.

His brows lifted, just the faintest flicker of reaction, but his face didn’t change. It rarely did, I realized, except when he wanted it to. He had the best poker face I’d ever seen.

“Not even once,” I added, trying for levity, but failing miserably when my breath hitched. “It’s always ‘blue eyes,’ or ‘sweetheart,’ or ‘counselor’... but never my name.”

His pupils flared with realization, and his tongue swiped across his dry lips. “Didn’t want to get too attached,” he said quietly.

My heart clenched so tight it hurt. I stared at him, taking in the tightness of his face and the exhaustion behind his eyes. He looked like he was waiting to regret saying it.

Maybe he already did, but it was too late.

I heard him. Loud and clear.

His breath ghosted across my jaw as I leaned in, pressing my forehead to his, trying to anchor us both. Trying to hold him here.

With me.

Then the elevator glided to a stop, and the doors slid open to reveal my older brother.

Dominic stood at the elevator's entrance, a sleek, predatory outline against the warm glow of his apartment. His dark hair was combed neatly back, not a strand out of place, and the sleeves of his dress shirt were rolled with meticulous precision. Despite the late hour, he was wide awake, and if he was surprised, he didn't show it.

His gaze shifted from my face—and whatever terror he saw there—to Silas's head lolling on my shoulder and the blood soaking us both. His jaw ticked, but all he said was, "Well, this is a fucking twist."

"You gonna let us in?" I demanded, adjusting my grip on Silas before it slipped.

He made me wait a beat, as if considering saying no, but those games had never worked on me. With a sigh that barely qualified as exasperated, he stepped back and gestured us inside. "Don't bleed all over my floor."

"Thanks," I said, shooting for dry, but the tremor in my voice gave me away.

Dominic took one long look at me, and I knew I wasn't hiding a thing. The way he saw through everyone was infuriating. He knew I was barely keeping my panic at bay.

He knew, and as always, he was three steps ahead.

“Get his legs,” he instructed, smooth as silk, catching Silas under the other arm and powering us both toward the sofa. Between us, we lowered him onto the long stretch of buttery-soft leather.

By the time we got him horizontal, Silas was already unconscious. I fished around his jeans for the pocketknife I knew he carried, ignoring how my fingers shook as I cut the ruined t-shirt down the center.

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The soaked cotton peeled back in damp strips beneath the edge of my knife, and I got my first good look at the wound. My ears started ringing. The bullet had torn through the muscle just above his hip, leaving a raw, mangled cavity of flesh ringed in angry red. Blood dripped sluggishly over the torn tissue before spilling over, streaking the sharp cut of his abs in glossy red. I'd expected a neat little bullet hole, but this was a jagged, cruel mess that would scar ugly if it didn't get infected first.

I was so focused on the wound that I didn't notice the phone in Dominic's hand until it was too late.

"No hospitals!" I snapped, latching onto his wrist before he could lift the phone to his ear.

Dominic didn't startle, and he didn't lower the phone. He ignored me, speaking in a tone that sounded almost bored. "Gunshot. Through the side. Not clean, but it missed the important shit."

There was a beat of silence as he listened to whoever the hell it was on the other end, and then he released a slow, irritated breath through his nose. "I don't care if it's your grandmother's funeral. This is what I pay you for. Just bring what you need and don't make me wait."

He disconnected the call with a careless flick of his thumb and leveled me with a disgusted look. Like he was thankful we only shared a name and not actual blood.

"Don't insult my intelligence, Mason." He said it with enough bite to let me know I was walking a fine fucking line. "Nobody comes to me when they want something

done legally.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

SILAS

Waking up in an unfamiliar place wasn't new—hell, it came with the territory. A side effect of living the lives of a dozen different men over the years. I'd cracked my eyes open in roach motels, backseats of cars that weren't mine, and once, an abandoned church with a bloodstain on the altar. I'd learned to keep my head down and get my bearings before signaling I was awake.

That's the way to survive.

I was on a cushion, at least. Soft sheets brushed against my shirtless skin, a luxury I wasn't used to. The faint smells of leather, wood polish, and something else—something distinctly Mason—drifted through the air. His cologne, that fucking expensive scent. It soothed the uneasy twist in my gut.

I cracked an eye open.

Dim light. Either the room was sealed off from the sun by some damn good blackout curtains, or I hadn't been out long. I lifted my hand, staring at the vaulted ceiling through my spread fingers. No tremor, no weakness. That was something.

I wasn't waking up in a safe house, a holding cell, or the back of some stolen truck with my hands zip-tied. But I still didn't know how I'd gotten here, and it gnawed at me.

Pain slithered up my side, dull at first, then sharp enough to cut through the fog in my brain as I shifted onto my side. My breath caught. A white bandage wrapped around

my torso, and the memories clicked back into place like a slideshow: the rapid crack of a semi-automatic, the bullet slamming into me and throwing me into Mason, and worst of all, the gut-wrenching terror of trying to shield him.

I'd been in my share of messes, shit that made me break out in a cold sweat just thinking about it, but nothing like that. Nothing like the fear I felt for him—and for myself, because I had something precious to lose for the first time.

The rest of it was a blur. I remembered the bike and Mason's hands gripping too tightly, like he could keep the blood inside me with nothing more than willpower. I'd told him it was just a scratch. A lie. But I'd stuck to it.

I propped myself up on one elbow, moving slower this time. The second I tried to push up, pain shot through my stomach. Fuck. That was gonna be a problem.

I gritted my teeth, sucked in a slow breath, and finally looked around.

The apartment screamed custom luxury. A gas fireplace was set into a dark slate accent wall, its mantel bare except for a heavy-faced antique clock. The couch beneath me was wide and deep and made from buttery soft leather. The kitchen gleamed with stainless steel, deep walnut cabinetry, and enough gadgets for a showroom. A half-empty whiskey decanter sat on the island, abandoned mid-pour.

It was all too spacious and comfortable. Not the kind of place you lived alone—or if you did, it wasn't because you wanted to. Like someone had built the life they thought they wanted, but at some point, quietly stopped trying to live it.

A change in the air caught my attention. Not a sound, or at least not one that registered in my conscious mind, but my hindbrain sensed movement.

Dominic watched me from the threshold of the balcony, remote and curious, head

tilted like a bird sizing up its next meal. “You’re still breathing,” he observed, dry as dust.

I licked my lips, but it took a couple tries before I could answer without sounding like I’d crawled from a grave. “Seems that way.”

His lips twitched—close to a smile, but not quite. “Good. I would’ve hated to waste an expensive favor. Maybe now he’ll take the bed.”

He gestured, and I followed his hand.

There he was, curled on the floor at the foot of the couch.

Mason.

One arm was pillowed under his head, the other hand resting loose over his stomach. He was wearing a borrowed sweater, too baggy in the shoulders, shoes off, and glasses nowhere to be found. The hollows under his eyes were dark and bruised-looking, and his face was tight, even in sleep.

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He looked like a man who'd fought sleep until it finally dragged him down right where he stood. At my side.

It shouldn't mean anything. But there he was, so fucking vulnerable—and damn it, I couldn't take my eyes off him. I didn't want to look away, even though it hurt in a way I couldn't name.

I'd never felt this before. Never for anyone. A gnawing sensation had settled in deep, tethered to something inside me I'd been too damn scared to face.

But I wasn't a fool. I may be a master liar, but I never lied to myself.

I loved him.

Everything about him, from his gentle breathing to the golden tint at the very tips of his black lashes, seemed... important. Small things, and yet they made me feel so much smaller. I hated how inescapable it felt, as if from the very beginning, I'd had no choice. Every tiny detail had become precious, like I was marking the moments I wanted to hold on to forever.

I wasn't supposed to need anyone. Hell, I'd spent my life avoiding it. But with him? I couldn't help myself. Without my permission, he'd come to mean everything to me—and God, the thought of walking away, of losing him, made it hard to breathe.

I braced my hand on the armrest and swung my legs over the side of the couch, trying to sit up, but the second I engaged my core, pain flared white-hot through my stomach, like someone had shoved an iron poker into my side. A grunt slipped out

before I could stop it.

Mason bolted awake. In an instant, he was kneeling beside me, wide-eyed and wired, his bloodshot eyes locked on me like I was the only thing in the room. His hair was sticking up on one side and flattened to the side of his head on the other. No glasses. Just that raw, intense focus.

“Stop moving,” he ordered, voice rough with sleep. His hands, steady and careful, pressed against my shoulder, easing me back onto the cushions. “You’ll bust your stitches.”

I ignored him. “Where’s my gun?”

Mason’s lips tightened, like I’d crossed some line, but Dominic spoke up before he could reply.

“In the safe. I don’t allow weapons in my home.” He tucked his hands into the pockets of his loose, expensive-looking slacks, smiling thinly. “Unless they’re mine.”

I didn’t do vulnerable. It made my skin crawl. But here I was, unarmed and half-naked in an unfamiliar space, stripped down to a pair of boxers that weren’t even mine. Every breath felt like a knife to the gut.

Mason’s touch was the only thing keeping me from breaking out in a nervous sweat. His hands roamed my chest and shoulders, gentle and soothing, like he needed to reassure himself that I was whole.

“We’re at Dom’s place,” Mason murmured. “I didn’t know where else to take you.”

My brain felt like soft pudding, cloudy at the edges.

“What’d you give me?” I grunted, pinching the bridge of my nose.

“Just something to take the edge off the worst of it,” Mason explained, guiding me down onto the pillows. I had no core strength to fight it, and the truth was, I didn’t want to.

I trusted Mason’s judgment.

And that scared the hell out of me.

I sank back into the cushions, letting gravity take more of my weight. My limbs felt like dead weight, and my throat was raw and dry as hell. Swallowing didn’t help much, but Mason must have sensed it. His hands moved to the knotted muscles at the base of my throat, rubbing gently, trying to work out the tension.

He looked wrecked.

My job had almost gotten him killed.

I’d kissed Mason Beaufort with a gun in my hand and a target on my back, knowing exactly what it would cost me, and I’d still taken the risk. Because he needed me, and goddammit, I needed him just as much.

Before I could talk myself out of it, my fingers brushed lightly against the sharp line of his cheekbone. Rough. Warm. Alive.

Thank God.

“You okay?” I whispered.

His breath stuttered, soft enough to miss if I weren’t already hanging on to every

move he made.

“I almost—” He shook his head, exhaling hard through his nose, trying to shut it all down like he always did. A flicker of misery flashed across his face, and without thinking, I cupped the back of his neck, pulling him into my arms.

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He resisted for a second. Maybe two. Long enough for his pride to make a fight. Then his hands fisted in the sheet, and with a sharp, shaky breath, he gave in. His elbows stayed braced, keeping his weight off me, but his body curled into mine, forehead pressed against my neck.

“God,” he whispered. Just that, a single, gutted syllable pulled from somewhere deep and broken.

“Mason,” I whispered, turning my face into his hair and breathing him in.

He shuddered at the sound of his name.

“Mason, look at me.”

He ignored me, breathing hot against my skin. “I just found you, goddammit. It felt like you were slipping through my fingers, and there was nothing... n-nothing I could?—”

His jaw tensed where it pressed against my collarbone, but he couldn’t swallow the aborted gasps. He was close to losing it, and no matter how much I wanted to let him, I couldn’t allow it. Not in front of Dominic. We were too exposed.

I stroked his nape, brushing my thumb over the ridge of bone, and turned my lips to his ear so Dominic couldn’t overhear. This was ours. “I know, baby. I know. It’s the loss of control that eats at you. But I’m here. I’m not going anywhere. You’ll have time to fall apart, and when you do, I’ll be the one to catch the pieces. But right now, all you need to do is breathe.”

A door clicked somewhere in the apartment, then the soft chime of the elevator as Dominic left. Probably trying to avoid a messy scene, but it didn't matter. My world was all Mason.

"You scared the shit out of me," he gasped, voice ragged with fear and frustration. "You can't—Silas, you can't fucking do that to me."

I kept my palm at the nape of his neck, fingers sliding through his hair, grounding him in the only way I knew. "I know," I admitted, barely above a whisper. "I'm sorry."

But his breath hitched again, and I could feel his struggle. He wanted to give in and let himself feel, but he couldn't. He was too afraid of what would happen if he did.

I wasn't like that, never had been, and now, with everything between us laid bare, I realized he needed me to unlock it for him. He wanted it—needed it—but he couldn't force himself to ask for it.

He needed me to give him the key.

I pulled back slightly, just enough to catch his eyes, and held him there. "What do you need, Mason?" I asked, steeling myself to push him. "Tell me."

He flinched, eyes flickering to mine, and then quickly darting away. "You," he said, voice cracking. "I tried to fight it, but I can't anymore. You make me feel alive in a way I haven't felt in years. Maybe ever."

I grabbed his chin and held him still, forcing him to meet my eyes. We both needed this. We needed to let go.

"Say it," I demanded, not giving him a choice.

His lips thinned, and his expression turned mutinous. He hated this, but I wasn't going to back down. He didn't get an out, not when I needed to hear it as badly as he needed to say it.

"I need to hear it," I growled, leaning in to ghost my breath across his lips. "Say it."

Mason swallowed hard and finally met my eyes. He was close—so close to breaking.

"Please," I added softly.

His voice was barely above a whisper, thick with emotion. "I love you, Silas McKenna."

The name hit me with a brutal clarity. The pleasure of hearing it was eclipsed by a knot of guilt I couldn't ease. Mason's love was a gift, but it was built on a lie, and now I had no idea how to untangle myself from it.

The mess I'd made of us wasn't something I knew how to fix.

"I love you too," I said fiercely. "So goddamn much, Mason. You've got no idea what you've done to me."

Whatever happened next, this was real. This was us.

And I'd fight to the death for it.

Chapter Twenty-Five

SILAS

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:52 am

The apartment was quiet now, save for the rhythmic tick of the clock on the mantel and the distant hum of the city outside. Dominic had left, and the silence soothed the hunted feeling I'd had since waking up. I was lying on the couch, body aching, but it was nothing compared to the ache I felt when I looked into Mason's eyes.

That bright blue had gone dark and rimmed with exhaustion. His anguish was a tangible thing, and I couldn't stand it.

I cupped his face gently with one hand, lifting his chin just enough to tilt his face toward mine. His eyes fluttered shut as if he couldn't bear to look at me, so I kissed his closed lashes, lingering for a moment before slowly moving to his cheekbone. His skin was warm and soft beneath my lips, and I felt him shudder as the tension left him.

So, I kept going. I kissed the curve of his jaw next, rubbing my lips over the stubble and tasting the salt of his skin, feeling his heartbeat beneath it. I paused when I reached his chin, holding him there until his breath hitched.

That's when I kissed him.

It was gentle as a raindrop at first, communication that had nothing to do with words, but then Mason's hands were on me. His fingers threaded through my hair, grabbing fistfuls of it and tugging me closer.

His lips moved with sudden urgency, but I welcomed it. His need, his hunger, was a mirror of mine. I'd always been the one to take control, but right now, all I wanted was to give. I let go, sinking against the pillow and letting Mason rise over me to

deepen the kiss.

“I need you,” he whispered into my mouth. “More than I’ve ever needed anyone.”

“I’m here,” I whispered, pulling him back toward me. “Take what you need. I’m not going anywhere, counse—Mason.”

He froze for a second, then laughed softly, a breathy, almost incredulous sound that made my pulse trip. His grin was slow and sexy, different from anything he’d given me before. More relaxed and genuine than I’d ever seen.

“Gotta say, I like the sound of that,” he said, warmth filling his eyes. “I want to hear my name on your lips when you come.”

My breath hitched, but I held his gaze, smiling despite myself. He knew exactly what he was doing to me—what he always did. I’d spent so much time taunting him, pulling his strings, watching him twitch and react, but the truth was, he’d set my blood on fire the moment he walked into my bar.

“Mason,” I repeated, brushing my lips over his forehead and back to his ear, where I whispered, “All you, baby.”

“I like the sound of that, too,” he murmured between kisses, pressing me into the couch.

He kissed my neck gently, steadying my bare shoulders with his hands, but I could feel him fighting his thoughts. When he pulled back slightly, there was a pain in his eyes, and a flicker of concern crossed his face. The stitches in my side were raw and painful, and I could feel his worry, but I refused to let it stop us.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked. His hand hovered over my side, careful but

uncertain, like he was afraid to hurt me by touching me too much.

“I’m fine,” I murmured, taking his wrist gently and moving his hand away from my bandage. I pressed his palm against my belly, then guided it lower, down to the bulge straining against my cotton boxers. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

I let his hand wander lower, felt him hesitate for just a beat before his fingers began to move, tracing the outline of my cock through the cotton. Then, he gripped me, and I let my head fall back against the pillow as he began to knead, slow at first, but with a certain precision that made the back of my neck tighten.

The cotton of my boxers was growing damp, the material sticking to me with every stroke, as I got harder under his hand. I spread my thighs a little, giving him room. For once, I didn’t need to lead. This moment was mine to surrender to, and it felt right to let him have it, to let him work me as he pleased. I could just be here, feel his touch, and let the world outside fade to nothing.

Mason didn’t hesitate. His fingers slid down, and without a word, he flipped the waistband of my boxers down, exposing me to the cool apartment air. The contrast of the chill on my heated flesh made me gasp, and before I could process it, Mason was leaning in. His hot breath washed over my cock, sending a shiver through me that had me gripping the leather cushions.

His grip tightened and loosened, shifting, and I could feel myself growing harder under his hand. We didn’t speak. Didn’t need to. I just breathed through it, giving up control and letting him have his way.

His touch was so careful, letting me decide how much I could take, but I didn’t want to hold back anymore. The vulnerability of it—that he was doing this for me, playing with me like I was something worth having, someone worth appreciating—had a surge of love and gratitude swelling through my heart. For once, it wasn’t about what

I could do for him. It was about what I needed, and realizing that he offered it freely, without hesitation.

Mason shifted on the couch, leaning down to press a kiss against my bare hip. His breath was hot on my sensitive skin as he trailed his lips lower, teasing me. I tensed in anticipation, fingers digging into the leather cushions beneath me. When I felt the first velvet swipe of his tongue along my length, I couldn't hold back a groan.

"That's it," he murmured in a low voice that rumbled through my cock. His tongue continued its languid exploration as I trembled under the onslaught of sensation. I threaded my fingers into his hair, gripping the silken strands to feel his head bobbing.

Just when I started to climb toward the peak, desperate for release, Mason pulled away, leaving me wet and exposed in the chilly apartment air. My cock was aching, slick and sensitive and throbbing with need, but I bit back my frustration when he reared back and began to strip in front of me.

His body was so lithe and powerful—God, he could've been carved from marble.

He didn't even give me a chance to help before tugging my boxers down to my ankles and climbing on top of me to straddle my hips. So very careful, tucking his knees at the sides of my pelvis and taking most of his weight on his thighs to keep from putting any strain on my torso.

He paused, just above me, eyes dark with desire. The heat his body was radiating felt like it could scorch me, and I couldn't resist twitching my hips upward, just a little, until my shaft nudged against his balls.

Mason lowered his head to kiss my chest, directly above my heart.

"We've always been cautious," he said roughly. "We used protection. But...this is

different.”

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Gently, I cupped his face with my hands, feeling the roughness of his stubble against my palms. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.” His hands were already trembling with anticipation. “This is it for me, Silas.”

I swallowed hard. Part of me—hell, most of me—wanted to ignore everything else and just let this be ours. No strings. No complications.

But my nagging conscience pulled me back, reminding me of the mess I’d made between us. This wasn’t just about offering my body. It was about giving him something more. Something that mattered.

“Mason,” I croaked, stroking the shadows beneath his eyes with my thumbs. “I need to tell you something...about me.”

“No.” Mason’s fingers circled my wrists, stopping me gently but firmly. His gaze softened, like he was reading me in a way only he could. “Not now, Silas. I’m not a fool. I know you’ve been keeping secrets, but I don’t need them right now. I already trust you. I just need you, with me, right now.”

I froze, stunned by the simplicity and depth of his trust. I needed to come clean, but Mason didn’t need that now. All he needed was me, present, with him.

The walls I’d built up so carefully over a lifetime of lies crumbled. With Mason, I wasn’t a man with secrets. I was a man finally giving all of himself.

“I’m here,” I whispered, cradling his hips. “All of me. Just for you.”

I reached down, my hand trembling slightly, and grasped the base of my cock to stand it up between us. Mason’s eyes locked with mine as he shifted, lining up and sinking slowly down on top of me. He wasn’t rushing—no, he was savoring this, throwing his head back and easing down, inch by slow inch, until he was fully seated. When he’d settled fully, warm and tight around me, he paused and blew out a shaking breath.

“You good, sweetheart?” I asked, stroking his quivering thighs.

His eyes were glassy with pleasure, and his smile was sweet. “Better than I’ve ever been.”

His rhythm was slow at first, rocking with careful grace. The way his body swayed over me, his hips rolling in gentle arcs, made everything in me tighten with need.

I planted my feet on the couch and canted my hips, but I couldn’t help much. I knew that. I couldn’t even thrust. Every movement sent a sharp pain slicing through my abdomen. I could only lie there, helpless, caught between the intensity of the pain and the overwhelming urge to give him everything he needed. But Mason didn’t seem to mind. His hands rested on my chest for balance as he set his pace. He was owning this, taking what he wanted—and I couldn’t stop him even if I wanted to.

His head tipped back, exposing the pale column of his throat and the pulse flickering beneath his jaw. His breath came faster, more erratic as he built up the pace, every movement of his hips taking him closer to that edge.

He was so fucking beautiful.

“God, Silas,” he breathed, voice hoarse and thick with desire. “You feel so good. So

fucking good.”

I groaned, gripping Mason’s hips tighter as he rode me. His words fueled my desire, and I wanted nothing more than to please him.

“That’s it, baby,” I rasped. “Take what you need.”

Mason’s movements grew more urgent, his thighs tensing as he bounced up and down my length. His cock lay rigid against his belly, leaking precum that dripped onto my skin. I reached between us to stroke him in time with his frantic pace, eliciting a deep moan.

“Faster,” I growled between clenched teeth. “Mason, fuck me.”

His hands left my chest, gripping the back of the couch, and his elbows locked as he bore down on me. Faster, harder, he impaled himself without mercy, his breath coming in pants. It was exhilarating, watching this man—who’d never willingly relinquished control—drown in the pleasure he’d always been afraid to embrace.

The leather beneath us creaked with each powerful thrust, and the slap of his skin against mine sent a shiver down my spine. Sweat drenched his body, dripping from his temples, gleaming in the dim light.

Part of me expected to hear the elevator chime any minute, but even if Dominic walked in right then, I didn’t care. Nothing else existed but this connection. This surrender. This bond.

“That’s it, baby,” I purred, reveling in my power over him. “Ride me like you own me.”

His laugh was breathless and filled with delight. “I do.”

And damn it, he was right. In this moment, he did own me. All of me. Every part of me—heart, body, and soul—was his. Unconditionally.

My climax built steadily as Mason increased his pace, taking me so deep, I swore I could see it in his belly. He was glistening above me, gripping my hips with those strong, runner thighs. I stroked his length firmly, fingers slick with precum, glorying in the way he began to pulse and throb.

“Silas,” he gasped, “I’m close?—”

“Let go, Mason,” I said hoarsely. “Come for me.”

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He cried out, back arching as his release spilled over my hand and onto my stomach. The sight of him coming undone pushed me over the edge.

I couldn't hold back anymore. The tension built within me like a coil wound too tight, and my vision went white. It was all for him—every part of me giving in, every bit of control slipping away. And when I came, it wasn't just my body that broke.

I held Mason tightly as we rode out our highs together.

Mason slumped against the back of the couch, chest heaving as he caught his breath. I lay beneath his weight, so limp and satisfied that I barely felt the ache of my stitches.

After a long moment, Mason shifted, gently easing himself off me, and I let my body relax into the cushions. The cool air of the apartment brushed over my skin, but I was too spent to move. I stared at the ceiling, trying to wrap my mind around what had just happened.

Whatever my old world had been...it was gone. I couldn't go back.

"You good?" Mason's voice was still raspy from his release.

I couldn't answer, but he seemed to understand. His hand found mine, fingers brushing over my skin in the quietest, most intimate way, and I laced mine between his and squeezed.

For now, that was enough.

Chapter Twenty-Six

SILAS

I was drifting in a light catnap when the elevator chimed. Mason was asleep on the floor, reaching up to keep his hand wrapped around mine, the stubborn bastard. My palm was sticky with sweat, but I didn't feel the need to move.

I cracked one eye open as a tired-looking Dominic stepped through the door, paper coffee cup in hand. He paused at the entrance, taking in the scene with a disgusted curl to his lips, like he'd just discovered a piece of shit on his shoe.

"Smells like sex in here," he muttered into the rim of his coffee cup as he took a sip. "Don't know why I even bother. Nobody listens to me anyway."

"You want me to clean the leather?" I asked dryly, pitching my voice low to avoid waking Mason.

"I'd rather burn it," he replied, the edge of his smirk barely visible in the dim light leaking around the blackout curtains. But his eyes were grim when he looked at me. "We need to talk."

Dominic didn't waste a second. He pulled a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of his tailored shirt, flicked it open with practiced ease, and wordlessly headed toward the balcony, like he knew I'd follow without question.

Carefully, I pried my hand from Mason's, wincing as I braced my side with one hand and forced myself upright. The stitches pulled, but I'd taken enough damage to know when pain meant something more serious. The shot had gone straight through, carving a chunk out of the muscle in my side, but it had missed anything critical.

With less than twelve hours left before we lost our only lead on the trafficking ring, I couldn't afford to let it slow me down.

My head was swimming when I got to my feet, but the pre-dawn air cleared the fog as I stepped onto the balcony. I was still in my borrowed cotton boxers, and the morning washed over me like a fresh start, gentle and warm against my bare skin.

It was the first breath of peace I'd felt since all this started, and I took it deep.

It felt like a lifetime since everything went sideways, but when I thought about it, it couldn't have been more than a few hours. Dawn was just breaking, a crack of white light on the horizon, smearing the sleeping streets in blue and gray. The muffled thrum of distant traffic was starting to pick up, and the scent of exhaust and old fry grease tickled my nose.

I glanced at Dominic, leaning on the railing beside me with a cigarette dangling from his lips, taking in the view like he saw an entirely different town than I did. I couldn't help but wonder what had driven him to exchange Eden's green, open spaces for this—concrete and garbage and a sky that looked like it'd never seen a break.

Dominic glanced at me from the corner of his eye, squinting through a stream of smoke. "How you feeling?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Are you pretending you care?"

His chuckle was laced with genuine amusement, like that was the first good joke he'd heard. "I don't. But Mason does, and that matters."

I slid him a skeptical side-eye, but he wasn't looking at me. He stared into the distance, detached and isolated, like a king who'd grown bored of his kingdom. The top button of his collar was undone, sleeves rolled up to his elbows, but the weariness

in his posture didn't make him look weak. Even with the shadows under his eyes and the obvious lack of sleep from us barging in, he was poised to handle whatever came next. Guys like him were always ready, even when the hours stacked against them.

"All these investigations in my parish," he continued, flicking ash from his cigarette, "are wrecking my bottom line. I want you out of here, but not in a body bag. Mason would never recover from that."

"You know something."

It wasn't a question, but Dominic treated it as one. He finally turned his head, eyes flashing with that same cold, calculating certainty I'd seen when he nearly ran me off the road. "Oh, I do. You dodged a bullet—figuratively speaking." He took another drag of his cigarette, smiling grimly. "If you'd gone through with that meeting last night, you'd be gator food right now. Mason's interference saved your life."

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That's when it hit me—there was no way Dominic could've known about the meeting Mason interrupted unless he'd gotten the information from someone there. Someone close. And it wasn't Gator or his men. It wasn't any of the people I'd been keeping tabs on.

Sylvia.

The realization was so obvious, it felt like a slap in the face.

“Sylvia,” I muttered under my breath. My eyes snapped back to Dominic, and I caught the flicker of a smile tug at the corner of his mouth. “You’ve been using her, haven’t you?”

“No more than you,” he acknowledged, cold and a little too amused. “She only talks to people she trusts, or people who have the power to do something for her. You might be the former...but I’m the latter. She despises Gator, and I’m in the position to make him suffer. I’ve kept him around because he’s been useful in moving my product. But he’s brought too much heat into the parish. It’s time to clean house.”

I didn’t need to waste energy on the details—just the facts. So I pushed past it. “Did she give up who shot me?”

Dominic took a slow drag from his cigarette, the ember flaring with the movement, before he exhaled the smoke in a thick cloud. “I know who’s pulling the strings.”

He said it casually, dangling the information before me like taunting a cat with a piece of string. My jaw tightened. “You gonna tell me who it was or keep playing

games?”

Dominic didn't flinch as I stared him down. He crushed his cigarette against the rail and faced me. “I'm not here to babysit,” he said flatly. “I gave you information once, and you still fucked it up. You've got less than twelve hours now. Then the sting in Mississippi goes live, and everything you've built up in this investigation goes cold.”

“I won't let that happen,” I growled.

“You don't have a choice.” Before I could react, Dominic reached out and pressed the heel of his hand against my bandage—hard.

“Fuck!” I groaned and shoved him away, doubling over and clutching at my bandage. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“I'm proving a point,” he said harshly. “You're out of commission, Silas. You've been made, and I'm not letting you turn it over to more feds. They'll just fuck it all up like they always do, and those girls who've been slipping through your fingers for a goddamn year? They won't survive the night. This is my city, Silas. You want to get things done, you let me handle it.”

I belted out an incredulous laugh, straightening up, teeth grinding against the pain.

He leaned in slightly, making sure his words hit their mark. “It's the only way,” he said. “I'm getting rid of the head of the operation. I'll do it my way—clean, quick, no questions asked. You need to be ready for the fallout.”

I worked my teeth so hard my jaw creaked. Whoever was pulling Gator's strings was exactly who we needed. Dominic was right; if this fell apart, we wouldn't get another shot. And I knew myself well enough to know I'd lose sleep over it for the rest of my life.

“You’re not asking for my opinion,” I said slowly.

Dominic sighed. “I’m used to dealing with people who have different ethics. I know better than to give too many details. They’ll only put you in a tough spot. All you need to know is that I’m taking care of it. Call your handler and tell them the girls will be delivered on time, but the shot caller is in the wind.”

I shook my head, rejecting it automatically. “Out of the question,” I muttered, but it was a knee-jerk reaction. The job was all I had left. Without it, I was nothing. If I let Dominic take the reins, my career would be finished. After the disastrous end to the op in New Orleans, this was my last chance to redeem myself.

But then Marie’s words came back to me, uninvited: “You’re tired, Silas. You’ve lost track of what you’re doing it for. Who you’re doing it for.”

I had no idea when I’d stopped being able to separate the mission from my life. When did this all stop being about saving people and start being about... saving face? Hanging onto something because it was all I had left? All I’d built for myself?

The truth hit me, and it wasn’t pretty. I’d been empty all my life, and that had made it so easy to slip into other people’s lives, lie to hundreds of faces, and disappear without ever questioning the consequences. But the job wasn’t the thing keeping me grounded anymore. The moment Mason walked into my bar, my world shifted. I’d stopped faking my life and started feeling what it was like to be alive. I wanted more than just the constant pull of duty. I wanted... him.

What mattered now wasn’t my career. It was justice. I could force Dominic to hand over the information, and maybe we’d bring in the shot caller, but not without sacrifice. Some of those girls would never make it home. I’d do whatever it took, even if it meant working with the devil himself, to ensure that didn’t happen.

I let out a harsh breath and released the anchor that had been dragging me down for years.

I was done.

“You take care of this,” I said slowly, “and you make sure every girl who's still breathing stays breathing. You hear me? You don't walk away from this, Dominic. Not with blood on your hands.”

His expression darkened and shifted to something almost pitying. “You think I'm gonna leave those girls hanging?” he scoffed. “This is my parish. You're not the only one who's invested here.”

But he wasn't done. He leaned in close and said in a tone that felt like a deal being struck, “I'll handle this for you, but you owe me something in return. If I pull your ass out of the fire, you have to make a choice. You tell Mason the truth, or you get the hell out of his life.”

“Deal,” I said tightly.

“Good.” Dominic's smile was shark-like as he nodded toward the apartment. “Here's your chance.”

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I turned, following his gaze to the glass door. Mason sat on the couch, leaning forward, hands locked between his knees. His eyes were sharp, narrowed in that way he did when he was dissecting every damn thing I said. The grim set of his jaw told me he wasn't missing a single word, and my stomach dropped.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

MASON

The leather cushions were still warm from Silas's leftover body heat, but it was cooling fast. I had no idea how long he and Dominic had been outside, but it was long enough for me to feel the absence even in my sleep.

I sat on his discarded blanket, elbows on my knees, and silently watched the door. I wasn't a lip reader, but I'd picked up enough over the years to know when words mattered. This wasn't a casual conversation; their mouths moved too quickly, and their body language was strained. Silas's brow was furrowed, his jaw locked, and Dominic wore the same expression he'd worn when we were kids, back when he took the fall for me when I'd hotwired a motorcycle. The look of a man ready to do what was necessary.

I could only catch snippets of their exchange—words like risk and girls—but there was no mistaking the shift in Silas's posture when Dominic leaned close. A sign that the conversation was turning deadly. And me? I was sitting here with my thumb up my ass, a silent observer, while two of the most important people in my life played a dangerous game right in front of me.

It wasn't that I didn't know Silas was hiding things; I wasn't that naïve. But it had never felt important enough to dig up, not when we were playing at keeping it casual. I'd told myself I didn't need to know everything, and if it was essential, he'd be the one to fill me in. But he'd tried, hadn't he? No more than a few hours ago, when we were making love. I hadn't wanted to hear it. Instead, I'd chosen to ignore the pieces of his life that wouldn't fit into the tidy box I had in my head. But now, when my head was filled with the idea of building something real and permanent between us, I realized how short-sighted I'd been. Sitting here, watching him through the glass, he felt like a stranger...and I felt like a fool.

Just a few hours earlier, we'd been as close as two people could be, but when Silas stepped back inside, he watched me warily, like he wasn't sure how to bridge the space between us.

"You're awake," he said stiffly.

I twitched one eyebrow. "Too soon, it seems."

His eyes flicked to the bedroom door where Dominic had just disappeared, then back to me, and I could see him doing the calculations in real time about how to stall this conversation. Somewhere along the way, the man who'd always been so mysterious to me had become a tune I could hum by heart.

Before we could say much more, Dominic reappeared, looking like he'd just stepped out of some high-end catalog: tailored suit, blood-red tie, and the familiar bulge of a shoulder holster beneath his jacket. Dressed to kill—maybe literally.

"Where's the fire, Dom?" I asked, keeping it light.

He barely spared us a glance, his eyes cutting past us as he headed for the door. "Wait here," he said, putting enough growl into it to make it clear he wasn't asking. "The

doc's coming in a few hours to re-check your boy's stitches. Keep him from pushing too hard. I don't need him bleeding out all over my place."

And just like that, he was gone.

I shifted my gaze back to Silas. He stood there, vulnerable and barefoot, naked except for a pair of Dominic's boxers, and still, every inch of him radiated strength and control. The kind of build that made me itch to put my hands all over him even now: muscle, power, and raw magnetism. His hair was a tangled mess, wild and hanging down his back, and the scruff on his jaw only added to that damn sexiness.

The ache in my jeans was involuntary. Looking at him like this, I should've been used to it by now. But it still felt like getting hit with a truck.

But when his eyes met mine, something in me recoiled. Those laughing, devil-may-care eyes were guarded and distant, and for the first time, I barely recognized the man I'd fallen for. No matter how much I wanted to close the gap between us, facing him now felt like staring at a stranger.

I loved my brother, but I had no illusions about who he was or the violence he was capable of committing if crossed. The lawyer in me didn't want or need every detail of his life, just the facts I could defend in court when it mattered. Those were the boundaries I'd set, compartmentalizing the murky, dangerous depths of my brother's world.

But I couldn't compartmentalize Silas—I'd tried. He smashed through every line I'd drawn.

I pulled in a long, slow breath to steel myself, ignoring the panic trying to squirm through my careful mask. "Tell me you're not responsible for the girls who've been going missing."

Silas's expression hardened, but he didn't reply. Instead, he moved toward the kitchen, one hand subconsciously hovering at his side to cradle the pain he refused to show. His slow, cautious movements betrayed how much it was still hurting him. The doctor had called it a graze, but the rivet in his side was deep, and he'd lost so much blood before we got it stopped. He looked like a man worn thin and operating on fumes. I hated it.

He reached for the bottle of whiskey Dominic had left behind, and I didn't need to watch for long to know what he was doing. He was going to numb the pain, and I wasn't about to let him do it alone. I followed him into the kitchen and grabbed the tumbler before it touched his lips.

"You don't have enough blood left to be mixing it with booze," I said darkly, dumping the glass and filling it with water from the tap. "But if you're determined to do it, take this first."

I grabbed a bottle of Tylenol from the cabinet over the sink, shook out a few, and thrust them at him.

Silas swallowed the pills, throat working as he drained the glass and set it down with a snap. "I have nothing to do with hurting those girls," he said in a voice like gravel. He hesitated, then added reluctantly, "But I didn't stop it either. Not soon enough."

I hadn't felt like this since I was a kid, standing on the curb in front of the fire station with Ben, holding a trash bag full of my life while my whole world slipped through my fingers. My back molars crunched as I ground my teeth, but I smoothed the wrinkles out of my expression. I'd never been the type to let my emotions run the show, and I wasn't about to do it now, not when I had questions that needed answering.

"Explain," I snapped.

Silas took a deep breath, opened his mouth—and stopped. His gaze dropped to his hands, flat on the counter, fingers splayed wide. It was as if he was gathering strength to say something I didn't want to hear.

I looked down at his hands and mapped the thick and well-defined veins and the web of thin white scars across his knuckles. I knew those hands: the calluses on his palms, the rough scrape over my skin, the soft prickle of the hair running up his forearms. But I had no idea what they'd been through. What they'd built. What they'd destroyed.

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When he finally lifted his eyes, they were glassy with regret. “It’s not McKenna.”

My brows drew tight. “What?”

“My name,” he said hoarsely. “It isn’t McKenna. It’s Donnelly.”

It felt like he’d just upended a box of puzzle pieces before me, stirred them around for good measure, and then asked me to describe what I was looking at. No matter what contortions I put my brain through to make the pieces fit, they refused to make sense.

It’s Donnelly.

I stared at him, fighting the impulse to shake my head, as if that would make it clearer. It didn’t. It made it worse.

“What the hell does that mean?” The words came out sharp and angry, but even I could hear the tremble behind them.

Silas’s breath hitched, but his gaze didn’t falter. We were so close, but he didn’t reach for me, and I was thankful. I couldn’t have handled that right now.

“I’m still the man you know,” he said slowly, like he was working it out in his head. Like he’d never considered it before. “I really did grow up in Boston. Big family. I’m still the asshole who can’t be bothered to call home for Christmas. I’m allergic to kiwi. I love bikes and old rock—and you. I’m desperately fucking in love with you.” He paused, swallowing thickly, and his gaze bored into me. “But I’ve been lying to

you. I'm not some ex-con looking for a fresh start. I'm a federal agent."

The room didn't just shift—it felt like it collapsed, forcing the air out of my lungs. For a long moment, all I could do was stare. He was still Silas. My Silas. The man I knew, the man I couldn't stop wanting, the man who untangled the mess inside my head. But it suddenly felt like I'd only ever seen him through a funhouse mirror. The man was the same, but the reflection he cast was so distorted, I couldn't be sure what was real.

I should have felt relieved. He'd never spent time in jail, never made the kind of mistakes that would haunt him for the rest of his life. The solid core of goodness I'd sensed in him was true and intact. But the truth was...I felt betrayed.

It was harder than it should have been to look at him and not see a man who'd been deceiving me for months. I'd let myself trust him, let him all the way in, when I should've known better.

I'd always prided myself on my intellect and ability to discern the truth, peel back the layers, and see what people were hiding. I'd been so sure I could see through the layers of bullshit Silas had wrapped around himself. But he'd played me. Every flirtatious tease and taunt was designed to manipulate me into thinking he was just a guy with a rough past, a little too much charm, and a wild streak. And I'd swallowed it: hook, line, and sinker.

God, I'd made it so easy for him. So fucking easy to let those sweet lies slip under my guard.

He'd done it without even trying.

I swallowed hard, forcing the most critical question past the catch in my throat, but it came out ice cold. "Are you here to investigate my brothers, Silas?"

He shook his head, but something in his eyes didn't sit right with me. "No. I'm here to investigate interstate trafficking."

It sounded rehearsed—and I snapped.

I was the calm twin. The orator. The one who didn't need to resort to violence. But for the first time in my life, I reacted body first, grabbing him by the shoulders and slamming him back against the fridge so hard the metal thudded against the wall. My breath was coming in short bursts, like I'd just run ten laps around the estate, but his own breath rushed out in a pained groan.

"Cut the shit," I snapped furiously. "You and I both know Dom's neck-deep in the drug trade. If you're looking at trafficking, he's the center of it."

His face went pale, color draining as he stifled a gasp. But his eyes never left mine. The fight was still there, even if he was caught off guard by the move. I could feel it in the thrum of his pulse under my grip.

"He was a possible target at first," Silas acknowledged reluctantly. "Made it all the more important to keep you coming back to me at the start?—"

I sucked in a sharp breath.

"—but my focus shifted to the human side of things pretty quick," he continued, cutting me a warning glance so I wouldn't interrupt. "I'm not gonna lie to you, Mason. Your brother is mixed up in some bad shit, and it'll snap back on him sooner or later. He thinks being the lesser of two evils makes it okay. But he's still hurting people. Ruining lives. He needs to be stopped."

"Not by you," I spat between clenched teeth.

Silas didn't fight me. His hands came up to loosely wrap around my wrists, but he didn't try to force me to let go.

"No," he agreed softly. "Not by me. Not once I realized what it would do to you."

His breath had steadied, but mine remained shallow. Anger still crackled in my veins. My hands were trembling when I released him and stepped back, and I forced a slow, steadying breath through my nose to regain control.

"So, what happens now?" I asked, pinching the bridge of my nose.

Silas didn't move. He stood motionless, back to the fridge, tracking my movements like I was an unpredictable animal. "My cover's been blown," he said curtly. "It's the only explanation for whoever tried to take us out last night. I've made enough connections to tighten the net on a dozen low-tier grunts, but the mastermind will be in the wind if we don't move fast. He'll try liquidating the girls and anyone who can flip on him for a lighter sentence. Your brother's the only one in a position to stop it."

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“You’re just letting him walk on the drugs, then?” I asked incredulously.

Silas didn’t flinch, but the lines of his face tightened. “I’m making sure we get the girls out before they disappear. I’ve seen those girls. Runaways who would hang out at my bar until one by one they stopped showing up. Just like that girl in Eden’s foster program—Ivy, right? They’re my focus. Nothing else matters.”

“What is Dominic going to do?” I demanded.

“I don’t know.” His eyes turned hard. “I don’t want to know—and you don’t either.”

“You’ve got no fucking clue what I want to know!” I exploded. “I want to know exactly what mess I’m going to be stuck cleaning up when this is all over! Don’t make it worse by lying to me, Silas.”

The faintest flicker of something—regret, maybe—passed through his eyes. “You already know, Mason. We both know what your brother is capable of.”

I shook my head, but there was no denying the truth. Dominic wasn’t built like the rest of us. He didn’t feel like the rest of us, and he didn’t care about playing by anyone else’s rules. He made choices every day that would keep me up at night. But even as ruthless as he was, there was one line I was sure he’d never crossed. Murder. He’d never killed anyone, and I sure as hell didn’t want him to start now. Not when we had so much to lose, and men like Sheriff Vanderhoff were looking for any excuse to destroy what we had left of the Beaufort name.

We were a family built on broken pieces, but we always found a way to hold it

together, and we'd never committed a sin so bad we couldn't confess it to Gideon.

I wasn't about to let Dominic take it that far.

"Mason—" Silas started, but I didn't let him finish.

I took a breath and returned to the living area, scooping my wallet and bike key off the end table, but I hadn't even gotten halfway across the room when I felt Silas moving behind me. Before I knew it, he had me by the bicep and spun me around to face him.

"Let it go, Mason," he warned, deadly serious. "This isn't a game."

I looked down at his fingers biting into my arm, then slowly met his eyes. The words that came out of my mouth were weapons, and I used them that way. "You don't get to tell me what to do, SilasDonnelly. You don't have the right."

He flinched, but I wasn't done. "No interference...remember? You made the rules."

His grip loosened, but his gaze didn't falter. "I'm not stopping you, Mason. But we need to talk about this. You can't just?—"

"I need to clear my head," I cut him off, not wanting to get into it. I turned back toward the door, hand on the handle. "You, on the other hand, need to sit down before you pass out. Wait for the doc."

He didn't move immediately, and for a split second, I thought he might push further. I almost wanted him to—if only so I could finally see the man behind all this calm bullshit. But Silas stayed still, watching me with that same unblinking intensity, his jaw tight.

“Fine,” he bit out with frustrated calm. “But don’t think this is over. We’re going to talk about this—whether you’re ready or not.”

I didn’t respond, just viciously punched the elevator button and waited for the doors to slide open.

“I’ll be back,” I muttered over my shoulder, flat and dismissive. “Don’t wait up.”

I didn’t look back.

In the end, this wasn’t about him and me. It was about keeping Dominic from crossing a line he couldn’t return from. We were family. I’d always be the one who would be there when he needed pulling back.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

MASON

The sky had cracked open twenty minutes ago, unleashing one of those punishing southern downpours that hit like judgment—loud, sudden, and mean. Heat still rolled off the pavement in waves, but now it tangled with steam and the sharp, greasy stink of oil bleeding up from the asphalt—days of buildup turned slick and deadly the second the rain hit.

Visibility had gone to hell, but I kept the throttle steady and my eyes forward, chasing the storm like I had a score to settle.

My calls to Dom went straight to voicemail, so the next call I made was to Colton. If anyone had a lead on the shitshow going down in the parish tonight, it was him. He picked up on the third ring, muttering something under his breath to someone in the background. Ben’s voice came through low and muffled, a quiet rumble that didn’t

quite reach words—just enough to remind me it wasn't a private line.

When I'd pumped him for information, all he'd given me was a heavy, exhausted breath. "I've been circling the Dead End for a month, trying to pin down who's moving what. Gator Hollis is the common thread. He's been running product for Dominic—small-scale, likely local distribution. But the other side of it?" His tone was filled with disgust. "Girls. And that pipeline's not Beaufort's."

I'd gripped the throttle hard enough for my knuckles to peak white. "You sure?"

"No. That's the problem. Whoever's behind it knows how to keep their name off paper and their hands off the scene. No texts. No calls. Gator runs his mouth just enough to confirm what he's doing, but not who's pulling the strings."

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I'd asked him if he had any names, even soft leads.

"Couple," he'd said. "But nothing I'd bet your life on."

I cursed. If I wanted answers, I would need to get them straight from Gator's mouth.

The address Colton gave me belonged to a shotgun house on the edge of the parish, not far from Eden itself. But it might as well have been a different world. The house came into view through sheets of water, sagging under its own weight and barely holding off the storm. Rain hammered the tin-roofed porch like a war drum, drowning out everything except the low snarl of my engine and the distant roll of thunder bleeding through the sky. The stench of mildew and something rotting hit me before I'd even cut the throttle.

I stepped down into ankle-deep mud, gravel giving way beneath my boots as I moved toward the warped screen door. This was Gator's kingdom—half junkyard, half grave—and every inch of it reeked of bad decision.

I saw no working vehicles out front—just the overgrown yard and a rusted-out pickup missing two wheels. But Gator's place had a gravel loop that dipped around back, and it wouldn't be the first time someone tucked a car behind the tree line to avoid attention.

The porch steps groaned under my weight, half-rotted and slick with algae. I tested each one like it might give way beneath me, rainwater sloshing in the treads of my boots. There were no lights inside, not even the glow of a TV or a lamp left burning to fake company. Just that relentless percussion of rain and the eerie stillness of a

house that should've been humming with some sign of life.

Something was wrong.

I paused near the top step, the back of my neck prickling. Not from the cold—the rain was warm, practically steaming off my skin—but from how the world had gone too quiet. No radio. No voices. No movement inside. Just the creak of the porch swing drifting in the wind and a half-smoked cigarette guttering in an ashtray by the door, still curling smoke like somebody had just been there and gotten up fast. The screen door hung open an inch too wide, caught on the frame like it hadn't been pulled shut.

None of it screamed danger on its own. But it felt wrong.

Crazily, I wished Silas were here. This was his world, not mine. My world was paperwork, courthouses, clean sheets, and early runs through magnolia-lined streets. Silas's world was darker: roadhouse fights, backdoor deals, and rusted-out safehouses. He'd know how to read this. He wouldn't hesitate or second-guess the silence.

Me? I didn't even own a gun.

I pushed the door open cautiously, but the hinges groaned loud enough to act as a warning shot.

Then I saw it.

The barrel of a gun was leveled at my face.

I froze. Everything in me just...stopped. My breath. My thoughts. Even the rain seemed to hush. I couldn't move. Couldn't think past the fact that the last thing I saw might be the black void of that muzzle...and the last words I spoke to Silas were to

hurt him.

When a bullet didn't instantly enter my brain, it managed to kick in, and my eyes finally slid past the barrel. Past the finger on the trigger, steady as stone. Up an expensively tailored sleeve. Over the sharp line of a shoulder I knew like my own. And finally, into the ice-cold stare of my brother.

Dominic didn't flinch, and he didn't lower the gun.

Behind him, Gator Hollis lay sprawled on the floor, one leg bent at a wrong angle, eyes wide open and glassy. Blood pooled beneath his head like it had been leaking for a while.

I didn't know what I found more disturbing—the gun in Dominic's hand, or the dead, emotionless expression on his face.

“Why?” It sounded like a stranger speaking. My voice echoed strangely in my head, hollow with shock. “Why'd you do it?”

Dominic didn't answer.

The door creaked shut behind me as I stepped further into the house, leaving us in the gloom of stormy afternoon light leaking through the dirty windows. Dominic's gun followed me the whole way, unwavering, like he hadn't yet ruled out the possibility of needing it.

The living room air was thick with mildew and the copper tang of blood starting to settle into the floorboards.

“You could've turned him in,” I said. “We could've flipped him and gotten so many names. So much leverage. Now it's just...gone.”

Still nothing from Dominic.

He looked down at Gator's body, the slack jaw and blood-matted hair of a once handsome face. The faded tattoo on the side of the man's neck had already started to wrinkle into the first signs of death. Then, without a word, he nudged the body with the toe of one gleaming leather boot. Not cruelly. Not even curiously. Just...testing.

Then he looked up again with eyes so cold I felt like I should check for frostbite.

"I didn't do this," he said.

That was it. No explanation. No shift in expression. Just a flat line of a voice, as calm and composed as if I'd asked him when the rain would clear.

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“Bullshit!” I jabbed a finger hard into the center of his chest. Felt the give of muscle beneath the fabric, the steady rhythm of a heart that didn’t seem rattled by the corpse cooling behind him. Rage was building in my chest like a storm surge. “I’m your lawyer. You’ve never lied to me before. Don’t you dare fucking start now.”

He didn’t blink. Dominic never reacted like a normal man. Anger rolled off him like water. Disgust barely registered. He’d been trained too young to keep himself sealed tight, and what was left was this—clean lines, calm decisions, and weaponized silence.

Instead of answering, he lowered the gun in his left hand and lifted his right. It took me a second to realize he was holding something, and even longer to recognize what I was looking at.

A watch.

Not obvious, not something a stranger would clock—but unmistakable if you knew what you were looking at. The platinum band was scuffed from years of wear, the clasp still stiff like it had never been adjusted. Along the inner rim, just beneath the face, I could still make out the faint engraving—worn down now, almost invisible, but not gone. Boone had given each of us one when we turned sixteen. Not because we wanted them. Because he wanted us to understand time. Legacy. The burden of both.

And Dominic was still wearing his.

My stomach dropped—slow and cold, like falling through deep water.

I took the watch from his hand and stared in disbelief. The metal was warm from Dominic's hand, and the platinum band caught the light, dulled by grime and something darker seeping into the links. The engraving was still there—faint, almost worn smooth—but I didn't need to read it to know what it said.

Time tells the truth.

Boone had etched the phrase into every watch he gave us, like some moral failsafe. We were boys then, too young to understand what it meant.

Now I wasn't sure I wanted to.

Because the truth was that one of us had stood in this room...and left Gator Hollis bleeding on the floor.

I turned the watch over in my palm, and my eyes flicked back up to Dominic's, searching for some hint that would explain any of this.

"Whose is it?" I demanded harshly. "And don't tell me you don't know, Dom."

For a moment, he didn't answer; he just held my gaze with that same inscrutable calm that had always driven me crazy. Then something shifted in his eyes—something I'd never seen before. A flicker of uncertainty.

"I don't know," he admitted, so reluctant it was like the words had been dragged out of him against his will.

"I found him like this. The door was open. He was already gone, and this—" he glanced at the watch in my hand— "was on the floor beside the body."

His tone was low, but I noticed the slightest tremor running through it. For once,

Dominic Beaufort, the brother who never flinched or faltered, didn't have the answer.

That scared me more than the gun had.

I wanted to press him, but something in his eyes stopped me. Instead, I pocketed the watch, feeling its weight against my chest like an anchor.

"Why are you even here, Dom?" I asked, trying to get a read on that look in his eyes. "What's your play?"

He glanced at Gator's body, then back at me, and the flicker of vulnerability disappeared like it had never existed. Only that familiar steel remained.

Dominic's jaw ticked. "I was after the mastermind. Thought I had a location, a clean shot at cutting the head off this thing. But he's already in the wind. Everything's scrubbed clean. Phone's dead. Accounts gone. Any trail I had disappeared overnight."

He didn't say how close he'd gotten, but I could guess. Close enough to make someone nervous.

"So you came here instead," I said.

"Gator was the only one left who might've known where the girls were. And if I couldn't hit the top, I was going to make damn sure the rest of the chain collapsed underneath them."

I studied him for a moment. "So, tell me who it is. If you're serious about ending this, let me help."

Dominic's eyes narrowed. "No."

“Why the hell not?”

“Because he’s connected in this parish. He’s protected by more than just the cops. If I don’t play this the right way, he disappears for good, and a shit storm comes down on our family. We’re neck deep in it already, and that watch you’ve got in your pocket means we’ve just handed our enemies a loaded weapon. You’re the attorney for the whole goddamn family. I need you clean, Mason. You want to help? Keep your hands out of this.”

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I stared at him incredulously. “So that’s it? You’re just going to leave?”

“I don’t have time to explain it to you,” he said, already turning. “And you don’t have time to stop me.”

The front door creaked open behind him, a gust of humid air rushing in like the house itself was exhaling rot.

I glanced over my shoulder at Gator’s body, lying twisted on the floor, mouth open, eyes fixed on the ceiling like he was looking for what hit him. His blood had soaked into the wood, dark and sticky, congealing at the edges as it started to dry.

It wasn’t the sight or smell that turned my stomach; it was the emptiness of leaving another human like that, no matter who he was or what he’d done.

I swallowed the bile rising in my throat and turned away, one hand jammed in my pocket to make sure the watch was still there.

Rain slapped me the second I stepped outside. It pounded against the tin roof, rolled down the back of my neck, and soaked straight through the cotton of my shirt. Mud sucked at my boots as I stepped off the porch and into the yard, chasing the dark blur of Dominic’s retreating figure.

I caught up to him as he reached the far edge of the house, where his Jaguar sat half-hidden behind a curtain of hanging moss, engine idling like it had been waiting for this moment.

“Dominic!” I shouted, my voice barely carrying over the rain. “You don’t get to do this alone!”

He didn’t even turn around. Like I wasn’t standing ten feet behind him, soaked to the bone and ready to throw fists if that’s what it took to keep him from disappearing again. He was already in the driver’s seat, slamming the door shut with a muffled, expensive thud. The windows were tinted. Opaque. Like the rest of him. All I saw was the ghost of his silhouette as the engine revved and the car peeled off down the narrow drive, tires throwing up muddy spray like a middle finger aimed straight at me.

“Goddamn it, Dominic!” I broke into a run, boots sliding in the muck as I tore back toward the front of the house. The Ducati sat where I left it, red paint streaked with rain and mud, water dripping from the tank, pooling dark beneath the frame.

I kicked it into gear and throttled hard, tires spitting mud as I spun onto the road.

Rain lashed my face like a hundred tiny needles. I could still feel the press of the watch in my pocket, hear the hollow creak of that rotted floorboard behind me, and see Gator’s lifeless eyes staring at the ceiling.

No. Hell no.

Wherever Dominic was going, I was right behind him.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

SILAS

The red blur hit the turn too fast, back tire fishtailing through mud before vanishing into the trees. Mason. Goddamn it, and I was too late to stop him. Just in time to

watch him make another mistake at ninety miles an hour.

Rain pounded me, drumming on my helmet as I killed the throttle and coasted up the rutted drive. I was late. I knew it before I even pulled up to the house listing sideways in the rain.

I'd been elbow-deep in fresh gauze and blood when the call from Sylvia came through. Her cynical, streetwise shell had been shot full of holes, and she was hysterical, barely able to choke out a string of words between gasps. All I picked up was that Gator was dead and Dominic was already there.

I was standing in the bathroom, one foot braced on the tub, making a sloppy attempt to tape up my side while wearing a pair of pants I'd stolen from Dominic's closet once I realized all my clothes were trashed.

Mason had left me with no ride and no way to contact my backup. My gun was still locked in Dominic's safe. I had nothing but a seeping wound and a borrowed button-down.

By the time I'd cabbed it back to the bar to get my bike and punched the throttle hard enough to make my wound scream, too much time had passed. I pulled up just in time to watch Mason tear off down the highway.

He hadn't learned a damn thing—he'd kill himself at those speeds.

I didn't have time to chase him. Not yet.

I swung the Scout off the drive, tires crunching through broken beer bottles and half-buried junk as I circled toward the north side of the yard—toward the hiding place Sylvia had gasped out between sobs. The gutted remains of a storage shed sat half-collapsed against the tree line, its rusted tin roof peeled back like a busted jaw. I

killed the engine and dismounted hard, boots slipping in the churned mud as I ran the last few steps.

She was crouched in the shadows, knees tucked to her chest, soaked clean through. Pajamas clung to her like wet tissue, printed with faded stars that looked like they belonged to a child, not a grown woman living with a man like Gator. Her mascara had run in thick black streaks down her face, smeared by rain and panic, and she looked up at me with wide, glassy eyes—like a sad fucking clown left behind after the circus packed up and burned down.

I dropped to a crouch and grabbed her by the shoulders. Not gentle. I didn't have the luxury. "Sylvia. Look at me."

She blinked like she didn't understand English anymore. Her teeth were chattering hard enough that I could hear the clatter.

"Talk to me," I snapped, giving her a hard shake. "What the hell happened?"

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“I—I didn’t see,” she stammered. “I was inside. I heard them arguing—two men, maybe three—I don’t know. The voices were angry, and I just got this... this f-feeling.”

“What kind of feeling?”

Her voice cracked. “Like I needed to run.”

I exhaled through my nose, still holding her steady. “So you ran.”

“Out the back.” She nodded frantically. “Through the kitchen and past the fence. I didn’t see who fired. I just heard it—two, maybe three shots. Then nothing.”

I squinted through the sheets of rain, scanning the trees, but there were no signs of life besides us.

She wiped her nose with the back of her hand, leaving a black smear across her cheekbone. “I w-waited. I waited until I saw someone pull up on a m-motorcycle. Your friend—that pretty Beaufort lawyer.”

“Did you see anyone leave? The shooter?”

She shook her head hard, water flying from her hair. “That’s the thing—I didn’t. I never saw anyone leave.”

“Shit.” I let go of her and stood, my side burning like it wanted to tear open again. Either she was too scared to look, or whoever pulled the trigger was still on the

property when Dominic and Mason arrived.

And that meant we had a bigger goddamn problem.

I left Sylvia trembling in the dark and jogged toward the house, boots sliding across the saturated yard. The porch groaned under my weight—soggy wood, soft in the middle from termites. One hard stomp and I could probably punch right through it. I shoved open the door with my shoulder, leading the rain inside.

The stench hit first: blood, mildew, and something sour underneath. A swamp of bad decisions and old crime. I'd been in shitholes like this before. They were all the same: sagging floorboards, torn linoleum, and furniture coated in the same grime as the men who used it. A busted ceiling fan hung limp from the living room ceiling, blades swollen with humidity and dust.

Gator's body was crumpled just inside the main room, legs twisted awkwardly, arm flung out like he'd been trying to crawl away before he went still. Blood had pooled beneath his skull, thick and already drying at the edges. Eyes wide. Jaw slack. Uglier in death than he'd ever been in life. Now the package finally matched the soul inside: warped and dead.

I stepped around the body and cleared the kitchen fast. Nothing but roaches, mold, and the shattered remains of a dish rack that had lost the fight against gravity. The back hall, closets, and bedrooms turned up nothing. No movement. No shooter. No sound beyond the storm beating the roof to hell.

Whoever had done it was long gone.

I doubled back, shoved through the front door, and took the porch steps two at a time.

Sylvia flinched as I passed. I didn't stop.

“It’s clear,” I shouted over the rain. “Call 911. Tell them it’s a homicide scene. Say you didn’t see a goddamn thing!”

Her mouth moved, but I didn’t wait for the reply. I was already mounting the Scout, kicking it to life with a roar loud enough to cut through the growing storm. The engine throbbed beneath me as I peeled out of the yard, chasing the one man I couldn’t afford to lose.

Again.

I didn’t know where he was headed. Hell, he probably didn’t either. But this stretch of highway didn’t leave many options. No turns. No cutoffs. Just twenty miles of narrow, uneven blacktop cutting through the backwoods like a scar, choked on both sides by wild scrub and moss-draped cypress. Mist rose in patches off the asphalt, curling around the road's edges like smoke. Rain had turned the world gray and shifting, and the air smelled like standing water, ozone, and churned-up earth.

It wasn’t a road built for speed. It was built to swallow mistakes.

But if he stayed on it, and I pushed hard enough, I still had time to catch him.

Mason rode his Ducati like the laws of physics were a suggestion. Lightweight, twitchy, all throttle and ego. It’d outrun the Scout on a track every time.

But this wasn’t a track. It was real pavement, slick with runoff, littered with loose gravel tossed by the storm. The ditches on either side were swollen and choked with water, waiting for someone to miss their line.

Out here, power counted more than polish. My Scout was heavier, built for pull, with torque like a battering ram. She didn’t dance, but she sure as hell didn’t slip either. And I had years in this seat. I knew how to read the road; that mattered more than

topping out the speedometer.

I leaned forward and opened the throttle wide, letting the engine snarl beneath me as the Scout ate up the distance. I hadn't had time to mess with riding gear beyond a helmet. Rain was soaking through my cotton shirt and plastering it to my chest. But I kept my eyes locked ahead, every nerve wired to the road.

He was fast.

But this road was long.

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And I knew how to ride hungry.

Nothing mattered to me more than catching up to him. That badge I'd bled for? Years of fieldwork, asset building, and case strategy—gone. No reassignments would be waiting. No more handshakes or citations tucked in some quiet file in Quantico. The mission was already compromised, and I'd put the final nail in its coffin when I turned it over to Dominic.

I'd spent months threading the needle, trying to find a version of the ending where I saved the girls, got Gator and his cronies behind bars, and came out the other side with something left of my name. And somehow...still kept Mason. But it never penciled out.

No man could walk both sides forever. Eventually, he had to choose.

Now that I'd made my choice, it didn't feel anything like I'd expected. My career was the only stable thing in my life. Losing it should have gutted me, but no matter how closely I searched, I couldn't find any fury or panic to grab on to. No hollow drop in my gut. Just a powerful quiet clarity that felt like...peace.

I wasn't mourning the job.

I was chasing the only thing that still mattered.

Mason.

He'd walked out of that apartment like he wasn't breaking—but I'd seen it. I'd felt it.

His whole body had gone still when I told him who I really was. Like I'd pulled a wire loose and cut the power behind his eyes.

He'd said he needed to clear his head, and I'd let him go, because I knew what I'd done to him and that it meant I had no right to try to keep him.

Stupid.

I should've known he'd run straight to Dominic. That damn brother complex of his, always trying to manage threats and build a bulwark against the unexpected. He couldn't help it. When it came to his family, Mason Beaufort would never turn his back on danger. He ran into it, chest bared, ready to take the hit for someone else.

I couldn't take back what I'd done.

Couldn't make him trust me again.

But I could find him. Ride this road until I saw that red machine ahead of me. Put my body between him and whatever waited at the end of the line. I could show up.

And maybe—maybe—that would be enough.

The trees opened up just long enough for me to glimpse him, a flash of red and white slicing through the mist like a flare. He was leaning hard, tucking low against the tank, his back curved like a bow drawn too tight.

My stomach turned to lead.

He'd always ridden the edge. It was part of him, something in his blood that needed to test the boundary between skill and surrender. I'd seen it in him from the start: how he handled that Ducati like it was something he needed to outrun and tame

simultaneously. He didn't ride like it was a machine. He rode like it was a weapon.

But this? This wasn't edge work.

This was suicide.

He took the next corner too low, his knee damn near grazing the asphalt as he cut through the turn. On a dry day, it would've been stupid. Out here, with the highway slick as black glass and runoff pooling in the dips, a wreck wasn't a matter of if. Just when.

I cracked the throttle harder, pushing the Scout to its edge, every part of me screaming against it—my ribs, stitched-up side, and common sense—but I didn't back off. Couldn't. The engine surged, torque dragging me forward, tires hugging the line like it was the only thing keeping me tethered to the earth.

"Mason!" I roared into the wind. "Goddamn it, Mason, slow down!"

But the words were whipped away before they ever reached him. If he heard, he showed no sign. He took the next curve full-tilt, like he was trying to outrun the storm itself.

Maybe he was.

He tore down the highway like he was invincible, but he was smart enough to know better. It wasn't that he thought he could escape pain. He just didn't care. He wanted the noise and the speed and the chance to feel something other than whatever was crawling around inside him.

Fear jabbed beneath my ribs, twisting my heart in an angry fist that refused to let go.

Because Mason Beaufort rode like he didn't care if he walked away from it. I couldn't let that happen. Not when I'd already chosen my side. Chosen him.

The Ducati's rear tire started a death wobble, threatening to come loose in the next turn. He was pushing too far past the edge—no margin for error. One twitch. One patch of oil or gravel or standing water, and he was done.

Then it happened.

The road dipped slightly, but he didn't see it in time. His back tire hit the water hard and fast, fishtailed once, then again—more violently the second time. His body jolted left, instinct trying to correct, but it was already too late.

The bike skidded sideways, wheels screaming over the slick asphalt, and Mason went with it.

Everything in me locked up.

There was no time to think. I jerked my handlebars hard left, gunning the Scout forward into the arc of his fall. My front tire caught the road where his had started to give, and I rode into the wreck like a battering ram—cutting his path, putting myself between his body and the hard, wet blacktop.

The Ducati slammed down first, metal shrieking, sparks flying out from under the exhaust as it skated across the pavement. Mason was still attached—legs thrown wide, his helmet bouncing once, hard. He was sliding fast, deadweight on a death track.

I hit the brakes just enough to let the Scout drop with him—angled it, leaned in, let gravity drag me down, metal first. My bike slammed into the road sideways, rear wheel lifting just enough to buck me left, and then the world turned to impact.

The Scout hit the ground and threw sparks, momentum dragging us forward in a grinding howl of steel, rain, and adrenaline.

I felt the first impact on my shoulder. The second with my hip. The third was Mason.

My arms caught him as the bikes tangled, momentum spinning us into a heap of heat and metal and flesh. My body wrapped around his instinctively, years of training overtaken by something more profound—raw and personal and full of goddamn purpose.

I let the Scout take the brunt, shielding us both with the cage of the engine, but there was nothing to do about the asphalt shredding my back like a blowtorch.

Pain bloomed bright across my ribs, sharp and full of heat, then gave way to something deeper—something cold. I couldn't move. My body wouldn't obey me, not even help when Mason struggled against me, rearing up on his knees to remove my helmet.

“Silas,” he rasped, and his frantic breathing ripped through me.

I thought I replied, but maybe not, because he repeated it. Louder, and thick with fear.

“Silas—”

His hands were on me, frantic now. I wanted to speak, to reassure him that I was fine. All I needed was a smile and a smartass remark, then the terror in expression would ease.

But I couldn't.

The light bled out of the sky.

And then I let go.

Chapter Thirty

MASON

Something was brushing through my hair, light and slow, easy to ignore.

I surfaced hard from sleep, that kind of heavy, body-deep exhaustion where the world didn't come back all at once. For a second, reality seemed warped, too cold and bright for my watering eyes.

My back screamed first, one shoulder locked from hours spent hunched over, head resting on my folded arms. My right leg was pins and needles, and my jaw ached from the crease of the vinyl mattress digging into it for hours. The air smelled like floor polish, alcohol wipes, and antiseptic.

Fingers threaded through my hair—firmer this time. Impatient and familiar.

I jerked upright with a sharp breath, every vertebra in my spine cracking a protest as I came upright. The world came back in pieces: beige curtains, blue linoleum, the low beep of a machine keeping the rhythm of Silas's heartbeat.

Silas.

Hope flared behind my ribs, and my eyes snapped toward the man in the bed. But he hadn't moved. Still out cold, half-swallowed by the tangle of wires and tubes, bruises blooming down the side of his chest in a mess that was painful to even look at.

He couldn't have touched me. But someone had.

I cranked my head around, rubbed my blurry eyes and snatched up my eyeglasses, and that was when I saw him.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:52 am

Ben was leaning against the bed rail like he'd been there a while, hoodie unzipped, ankle monitor flashing under the cuff of one rolled-up pant leg. He had that quiet look he got when he was trying not to make something worse.

"Jesus," I croaked. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough to watch you drool on the mattress," he said, smiling slightly. "Don't worry. I'll keep it between us."

I rubbed at my face, trying to wake myself up properly, though everything inside me still felt about two feet underwater. "How the hell did you know I was here?"

Ben shrugged, thumb hooking into the edge of his hoodie pocket. "Dom told me what happened."

I blinked at him. "You're still speaking to him?"

"Not like I got a group chat going with the rest of you," he said, dry as ever.

I let out a low breath that might've been a laugh, except it stuck halfway down. "Last I heard, Gage still wants to rip his heart out and feed it to him, and Gideon looks like he's praying for spontaneous combustion anytime Dom's name comes up."

Ben's mouth twitched at that. "Yeah, well. He didn't call looking to make peace. He needed help running interference with Gideon."

I frowned. "Interference for what?"

“To place some of the girls,” Ben said. “The ones he pulled out right before the feds busted that trafficking ring in Mississippi.”

That gave me pause. It had only been a few days since the crash, and news was still coming out almost hourly on the local channels.

Dominic’s interference had paid off in the only way that mattered. The feds finally had enough to run a sting across the Mississippi border, and for once, it stuck. Dozens arrested. A handful of girls were taken into protective custody, and enough weapons and narcotics were seized to make headlines for weeks. The press conferences were already rolling—flashing lights, federal jackets, local politicians preening in front of microphones like they’d engineered the whole damn thing themselves.

But no one was claiming ownership of the operation. Whoever was running the thing had vanished, and so had most of the transport men on our side of the border—low-level thugs who kept their heads down and mouths shut. They weren’t in custody, but they weren’t on the street either. Whether they were in the wind or Dominic had found them first... that was anyone’s guess.

The bayou hid a lot of secrets.

No arrests had been made in Gator’s murder. No suspects, no names, and barely any mention of it in the news. Just a dead body in a condemned house and a rumor that maybe he’d gotten too greedy or crossed the wrong man at the wrong time. Whoever had pulled the trigger was long gone.

Instinctively, I glanced at Ben’s wrist, but it was covered by the frayed sleeve of his hoodie.

“And you agreed to help?” I asked, slower this time.

He looked at me then, eyes clear and steady. “I’m not in any place to judge what my brothers do, Mase. Not after everything. And if he’s trying to make it right, I’m not gonna be the reason he can’t.”

I leaned back in the chair and rubbed the grit from my eyes. Silas was breathing easily, and he’d been surfacing from his medicated sleep every few hours, but never long enough to do more than meet my eyes before he slipped away again.

That tether of hope I was clinging to felt thinner by the hour.

Ben hadn’t moved; he just stood there, arms crossed loosely over his chest, one foot braced against the bed frame. His hoodie was damp around the edges from a dash through the rain, but if he was uncomfortable, he didn’t show it. He just watched me with his sad, patient eyes, as if waiting for me to take an offer I didn’t even realize he’d given me.

Silence had always been his language of choice.

“You never said why you came,” I muttered. “A call from Dom isn’t a reason.”

Ben shifted his weight, arms still crossed, ankle monitor blinking once in the dim light. “We’re twins, Mase. You don’t have to earn my loyalty. You’ve already got it.”

He finally looked at me then, eyes steady. “I might be a mess—up here.” He tapped his temple with a vicious finger. “But you’re my brother. If you think I wasn’t gonna show up when you needed someone? You don’t know me at all.”

My eyes dropped to the scuffed linoleum, then drifted toward Silas, taking in his chest’s slow rise and fall beneath the tangle of monitor lines.

“You’ve always been there,” Ben said. “For all of us. Backup even when we didn’t

want it. Even Gideon relies on you, and you know he'd rather eat broken glass than admit to needing anyone."

His smile was small and quiet, like a private joke between us, but I was too tired to smile back.

"You made yourself the foundation," he said. "For everybody else's damage. And you never stopped to ask if you were allowed to fall apart too."

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“It’s not like that,” I said slowly, feeling it out in my mind before speaking. “It’s not just about helping. It’s...control. If I’m the one handling things, then I know what’s coming, and I have a plan to fix it. Then nothing can blindside me.”

It felt shameful to admit, but Ben’s expression didn’t change. That gave me the courage to continue.

“I’ve spent my whole life preparing for the worst-case scenario. Building my day around contingencies. Shaping every plan, every habit, so I never have to feel that drop in my gut again. The one we used to get when Mom was off her meds, you know? Or when Dad dropped us off for the last time.”

Ben stayed quiet, but I felt him listening.

“And I would’ve spent the rest of my life like that—probably died like that—if it weren’t for him.”

I looked down at Silas, the man who'd nearly torn himself apart keeping me alive.

“He never asked me to hold it all together,” I said softly. “He didn’t want someone with all the answers. He just wanted me. All of me. Even the mess.”

My throat tightened.

“He taught me how to live in the moment. How good it feels to let go and live and not worry about what comes next. Without him... I’d never have realized how many years I wasted just surviving instead of living.”

Somewhere overhead, the vent kicked on with a low mechanical groan, pushing out air that smelled faintly of bleach and plastic tubing. Recycled, processed, flavorless. It didn't matter how often they scrubbed these places down—the smell of fear was baked into the walls.

Ben shifted beside me, arms still crossed tight across his chest, one thumb tapping against his forearm like he needed somewhere for the tension to go. “So, what now?”

“I don't know,” I admitted.

For once, I didn't try to fill the space that followed. I didn't reach for a plan or roadmap to make it sound like I had it under control. I just let the words sit there—raw and unvarnished. Let them be exactly what they were.

It was Ben who noticed first.

He went still beside me, head turning just slightly, eyes narrowing.

I followed his gaze, and the second my eyes landed on the bed, my heartbeat surged.

Silas's eyes were open.

Unlike the dozens of times he'd surfaced throughout the day, only to be dragged immediately under, this time was different. His face was pale and drawn tight, lips dry and cracked, one corner twitching like he wanted to talk but didn't have the strength yet.

But those eyes—those goddamn eyes—were clear.

And locked on me.

Ben stepped back, quiet as a ghost. I didn't even spare him a glance. The soft squeak of his sneakers on the linoleum told me he was leaving, but it was the only sound he left in his wake. The familiar silence of a man who knew how to disappear.

I kept my focus on Silas.

Nothing else mattered.

I swallowed hard past the catch in my throat. "How do you feel?"

His brow twitched slightly, like the question was stupid but worth tolerating. Then, slowly—painfully—he worked his tongue across cracked lips. His voice was ragged when he spoke, like he'd swallowed some of that gravel we'd scraped up off the road.

"Like I picked a fight with a five-hundred-pound steel bitch," he rasped.

I barked out a mangled sound—half-laugh, half-sob. I don't know what I'd expected, but knowing him, it should've been something like that.

He didn't look away. Just kept his eyes on me, unblinking. Quiet. Like he was cataloging every change in me since he'd been unconscious. Every thought and feeling I'd shoved down deep. Despite everything that had happened, the way he looked at me hadn't changed. Like he still knew exactly what he was looking at, even if I didn't.

"You scared the hell out of me." I couldn't hold it back anymore; the fear scraped its way out of my throat whether I liked it or not.

His mouth tugged into something between a grimace and a smirk. "The pavement started that fight. You were just collateral damage."

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I let out a breath through my nose, sharp and humorless. “Next time, just shoot me. Fewer variables.”

“What, and deprive the world of that face? Selfish bastard.” Silas’s eyes gleamed with that same old devilish heat that had always gotten a rise out of me.

My gaze dropped to his hand resting slack against the blanket, skin mottled with bruises that hadn’t started healing yet. I didn’t reach for it, no matter how much I wanted to. I couldn’t. One more inch and I’d be laying myself bare.

“What’s the damage?” he asked, lids so heavy he could barely keep them open.

Unable to resist, I stretched my pinkie out toward his nearest finger. The touch was so light, he probably couldn’t even feel it. But I did. The warmth, the electrical pulse that couldn’t be quantified, but I recognized it every time he walked into a room.

“Your gunshot is slightly infected, but they’re managing it with some drip antibiotics,” I said slowly, arranging the nurses’ reports into something easy to digest. “You broke your clavicle, cracked a few ribs, and your back looks like someone tried to sandpaper you down to the bone. You’ll have scars, and they won’t be pretty, but it...it could have been much worse.” My breath hitched. “You were lucky.”

“Yeah,” he muttered, sliding an amused look toward me. “Feels just like luck.”

I hung my head. My body still ached from the crash—not as bad as his, not even close, but enough to remind me what a goddamn idiot I’d been.

“I shouldn’t’ve ridden like that,” I blurted. “I just... wasn’t thinking straight. Dom was acting like he’s fucking invincible, and once we found Gator, I?—”

I broke off abruptly, my mind snagging on something I hadn’t even begun to process. The blood, the face that had looked so different alive...the watch.

It was still sitting in the locked drawer of my desk at the task force building. I didn’t know what the hell to do with it. Dominic and I hadn’t talked about it, and I hadn’t told anyone else. Not yet.

I cleared my throat and tried to shove the thought aside. “Anyway. You should know... Dom pulled it off. He saved the girls. Got to them before anyone else could. The feds swept the Mississippi side after that, but whoever ran the whole thing? Still a ghost. No charges. No name.”

Silas released a slow breath and settled his head against the pillow. His gaze tracked upward, settling somewhere on the water-stained ceiling tiles like he was trying to read what came next in the shape of the cracks.

“That’s the important part,” he said, almost to himself. “Not the only part that matters. Not with the drugs still moving, and the ones responsible still on the loose. But if the girls got out... and no one innocent died getting them there—” He blinked, eyes still fixed on the ceiling. “Then I can close the page on this one.”

I shut my eyes.

Close the page.

I knew what he meant, and it was more than the case. It was this chapter of his life. The part where he lived nothing but lies...including us.

My throat went tight before I could stop it. I hadn't felt that sick, hollow pinch of panic since I was a kid, watching people walk out and knowing better than to ask them to stay. He hadn't said the words yet, but I could feel them lining up behind his teeth.

It was good while it lasted.

People said that when they wanted to make a bitter truth go down easily. That it had meant something...but not enough. Yeah, we'd burned hot. Fast. Cut open pieces of each other that we didn't show to anyone else. I knew that. I knew it in my body, how I still felt him when he wasn't in the room. We'd said things—realthings—and meant every word.

But maybe it wasn't about truth.

I didn't know if truth could carry us that far.

“What...” I had to clear my throat and try again. “What's next?”

Silas's gaze stayed fixed on the ceiling. When he finally spoke, it was slower than usual, like every word was being weighed on its way out.

“I've got to report to my field office,” he said detachedly. “Debrief, go through the case files, and see how many loose ends we can tie off before every bridge is burned.”

“And then?”

Silas's mouth tugged at the corner, not a smile—more like a grim acknowledgment of where this was headed.

“I don’t know,” he said quietly. “Not much left on the other end of that flight. My career’s probably done. There’s no coming back from the mess I’ve made.”

I looked down at my hands and flexed my fingers on instinct. My palms were scraped, and the knuckles on my right hand were split open. The skin was puckered and raw. I closed them slowly into fists and rested them on my thighs.

“I can’t leave Devil’s Garden,” I said. “I can’t leave my family.”

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His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "Yeah."

Before I could talk myself out of it, I brushed my fingers along the stubble of his jaw. His skin was warm under my touch, and he allowed me to turn his face toward mine.

"Tell me you'll come back," I said quietly.

Silas's gaze didn't waver. But the silence stretched long enough to tell me what was coming.

"I can't," he said. "I don't know what I'll have left to offer if I do."

"That's not good enough."

He flinched like the words hurt and sucked in a deep breath. "I know," he said hoarsely.

I looked away first.

We'd survived the crash, but that didn't mean we'd figured out how to sort the wreckage and rebuild.

Eventually, I rose, knees cracking before they let me straighten. I grabbed the folded blanket from the foot of the bed and shook it out slowly, laying it over him with more care than I'd realized it would betray.

His eyes followed the motion, but he didn't say a word.

“I’ll let the nurse know you’re awake,” I croaked, backing away.

“Mason—”

My name stopped me halfway to the door. I turned.

He held my gaze...but he didn’t say a damn thing. I didn’t blame him. What was there left to say?

I nodded. Once. Controlled. Contained.

Then I walked out, wishing like hell that love alone had ever been enough to solve a thing.

Chapter Thirty-One

MASON

Sweat rolled down my spine as I leaned over the Ducati’s frame, both arms buried elbow-deep in its guts. The cracked fairing was propped against the wall, and one mirror was tucked in a box of salvageable parts. Half the tail section was missing.

Gideon said it looked like something that lost a fight with God. I didn’t disagree.

We weren’t talking much. The heat had sucked away any energy we had to speak. It clung to the oaks and the bones of the old barn behind Eden, which we used as a makeshift shop. The cicadas kept up enough conversation for both of us.

Gideon worked the way he prayed: methodical and silent. I wasn’t praying. I was just trying to keep my hands busy long enough not to think about how hollow the days had felt since the hospital. Since I walked out of that room and didn’t look back.

Since Silas.

The world I'd built over a lifetime—controlled and squared off at the corners—should've snapped back into place by now. I'd thrown myself into work the way I always did, buried myself in boxes of old judicial case records for Colton, hoping the structure would hold. But it didn't. Not really. Everything I touched felt thinner somehow.

The meaning was gone...or maybe it had never been there to begin with, and Silas was the one who'd helped me realize it.

Every morning on the way in, I couldn't resist driving past the Dead End. I could've taken a different route, but I didn't. It had been closed since Silas flew out. The windows were dark and boarded, and it already looked like the kind of place teenagers would dare each other to break into on a Friday night.

Like the man who'd once lit it up with nothing but a crooked smile and a cigarette had never existed.

He hadn't called or texted, but I didn't blame him. The Bureau was probably raking him over the coals...if he was still with them at all. Besides, what was left to say? We'd gutted ourselves in that hospital room...and still, it hadn't been enough.

Still, that damned aching lump in my throat showed up every time I thought about it. I'd swallowed it so many times it felt like habit now. And still, it didn't stop hurting.

I was starting to worry that it never would.

Gideon finally broke the silence with a grunt and the metallic click of a socket wrench. “You know,” he said, bracing the fairing stay with one hand as he tightened the bolts, “this would go a hell of a lot faster if you let a specialist handle it.”

He didn’t look much like a priest today. Grease streaked the front of his faded T-shirt, sweat darkened the collar, and his jeans were torn at the knee. His forearms gleamed under the low-hanging barn light—sinewy and slick, working steadily with the grit and grace of someone who knew how to rebuild things that didn’t want to be fixed.

He wasn’t wearing his watch. I’d noticed straightway, but then again, I wasn’t wearing mine either. Not for work like this.

I kept wiping chain grit off the swingarm with an oil-dark rag, each pass rougher than necessary. When I didn’t reply quick enough, he kicked at my ankle with the toe of his boot.

“Yeah, well.” I kicked him back, exhaling hard through my nose. “She’s my baby. I wrecked her...so I should be the one to fix her. At least as much as I can.”

He hummed thoughtfully in the back of his throat but didn’t push.

Gideon leaned back on his heels and wiped the sweat from his brow with the inside of his forearm. “You can’t always force a fix, Mase. Sometimes, you just need to let go and leave it in someone else’s hands.”

“Like who?” I asked sarcastically. “God?”

“For starters,” he said, biting back a smile.

I dropped the rag into the pan beside the tire and glared at him. “Is that what you’re doing with Dominic?”

Gideon didn’t even flinch, but he slowly picked up a socket and tightened the bolt he’d torqued once.

“That’s different,” he said simply.

That was it. No lecture. No pushback. Just silence—and the steady rhythm of his hands staying busy while I sat there and felt like a goddamn asshole.

A few minutes passed. Sweat rolled down the back of my neck. The cicadas droned. A screen door slammed somewhere up at the house, and a dog started barking. When did we get a dog? I’d been so wrapped up in my heartache that I hadn’t even noticed.

“Letting go isn’t in my nature,” I grumbled. I bent things until they fit, and I found a way to shoulder it if something broke. Even when it wasn’t mine to carry.

The rag slipped out of my hand, landing on the dusty concrete floor, and instead of picking it up, I just stared at it, lost in thought. In misery. Eventually, I realized I hadn’t moved in several minutes. It felt like I might’ve stayed that way forever, if not for the phone buzzing in my pocket.

I wiped my hands on my jeans and pulled it out, smearing the case with grease from the edge of my thumb. Light refracted off the screen through the slats of the barn roof, and I squinted down at it to make out the name.

That's when I stopped breathing.

I didn't even have the chance to say hello.

"That silence," Silas murmured in that whiskey-soaked voice I knew so well. "That's how I know it's you, counselor."

That voice. That damn voice. Still rough and rich as sin, steeped in that slow, teasing drawl that had my whole body flushing hot all at once. I shuddered. My nervous system recognized him before my mind had even caught up.

"You always breathe like you're bracing for impact," he mused. "Makes me wonder what you think I'm about to do to you."

My throat worked around his name, but I couldn't speak. He was already in my blood again, just from the sound of him.

"You gonna say something, or you need another minute to get your heart rate under control?" he teased, soft and deadly smooth.

I licked my dry lips and finally managed to find a response. "Silas."

"Mm." He gave a satisfied rumble that had always made me feel like prey. "Yeah, I missed that."

"Where... you're back?" I tried to keep the question clinical, but it came out thin and off-balance. No matter how tight I locked it down, I couldn't disguise my hurt.

"For now," he said. "But I might stick around...if I find something worth staying for."

I rubbed a knuckle over the ache in my chest, but it didn't ease up. It was just a wound I'd learned to work around by this point. Still tender when touched.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 4:52 am

Gideon was sitting back on his heels, watching me with concern. I couldn't stand the worried look in his eyes, so I turned my back to him and focused on the phone in my hand.

"You didn't call," I said, quieter this time, before I could second-guess myself. "You didn't text."

"I know," he said, and that single admission landed harder than most people's apologies. "I figured if I reached out too soon, I'd only drag you through more pain. You don't deserve that. You deserve a man who knows exactly who he is and what he's got to offer."

He paused. I could hear the quaking breath he took, shoring up his courage to say the next part.

"I didn't know if I had anything left in me that wasn't a lie."

I kneaded the back of my neck, digging my fingers into the knotted muscle to keep from crawling out of my skin. "And now?"

"I didn't call to explain," he said, voice dipping lower, into that dangerous register that always felt like it was meant for just me. "I want you to meet me."

My grip tightened around the phone. "Where?"

"Take a drive," he murmured. "I'll text the address. North side of the parish, past the rail yard. You'll know when you see it."

“That’s not an answer.”

“No,” he said, and I could hear the shape of his smile, the kind that made promises without ever saying a word. “It’s a chance...for both of us. Don’t keep me waiting, counselor.”

Then he hung up.

I stared down at the dark screen, already missing the sound of his voice. The address came through a moment later. No message. Just a dropped pin. Very precisely, with hands that wouldn’t stop shaking, I slipped the phone back into my pocket.

When I turned back to Gideon, filled with trepidation and fear, he was already watching me. His smile was gentle, equal parts priest and big brother, and just enough to give me courage.

“I’ve got it here,” he said, picking up the rag I’d dropped. “Go.”

I tripped in my rush out of the barn, heart hammering. My jeans were stained with grease, and my damp shirt clung uncomfortably to my sweaty skin. I should’ve taken some time to change and wash up, or at least made some attempt to look like a man with control over his own damn life, but I couldn’t waste the time.

Not when he was waiting for me.

The sun was sinking low when I hit the road, bleeding orange and gold across the windshield and softening the world's edges. I followed the pin north, past the big houses with white columns and wraparound porches, past hayfields and feed stores, and past trailer parks with rusted swing sets and cars up on blocks. The further I drove, the more the world unraveled—manicured fences giving way to leaning mailboxes and roads that buckled at the shoulder—and eventually, to nothing at all.

Kudzu crept up fence posts, reclaiming them for the wilderness, and the trees got taller, older, as the bayou took over.

I rolled the windows down just enough to let the humid air crawl in, thick with the green scent of standing water.

The GPS cut out a mile back, but I'd memorized the location by heart, so I pushed on. Asphalt gave way to gravel, churning up the underside of the Porsche, and then to packed earth, damp with bayou mist. Cypress trees rose like giants on either side, their roots half-drowned in black water. Moss trailed like silk from their branches.

Just as I began to wonder if I'd overshot the pin, I saw it. A cabin—small, clean-lined, and glowing with warmth against the encroaching dusk. It sat tucked at the end of a crooked driveway, cradled by an overgrowth of trees. Wooden steps led up to a wraparound porch strung with soft yellow lights. A stone path branched off the side of the house, leading the way to a solid-looking dock.

I killed the engine and sat there for a long moment, hands still on the wheel, staring through the windshield like the place might vanish if I blinked too hard.

This was the place he'd told me about the day of our road trip, the only home he'd ever described with peace and reverence. The dock, the trees, the hush of water lapping at the shore...it was all exactly as he'd described it. Not the exact place, of course...but it was the same in spirit.

I climbed out of the Porsche slowly. Gravel shifted under my boots as I crossed the driveway, but when I reached the steps, my palm hovered over the railing. I closed my eyes, grounding myself, breathing in the smell of sun-warmed wood and listening to the creak of the porch settling in the breeze.

For one split second, I thought about turning back. Not because I didn't want this, but

because I did. Too much.

I was fucking terrified.

But that had never stopped me, so I gripped the railing and forced myself to climb the stairs.

No answer on the first knock, and then again on the second. No footsteps inside. No voice. Absolute silence, suspended, like the world was holding its breath with me. Somewhere in the trees, a heron called low and mournful.

And then?—

The soft crunch of gravel behind me.

I spun around.

Silas stood at the edge of the porch steps, hands tucked in his jeans pockets. His shirt clung to his broad chest, damp where the bayou mist had kissed it. The ends of his sleeves were rolled, and the wind off the dock tugged at his hair, curling it slightly at the edges.

He looked like both a sin and a sacrament.

“Door’s open,” he said in a low voice. “But I figured you’d come find me first.”

I stared at him silently, too overwhelmed to speak. The man who made his living with words, struck dumb by the sight of the one man who made me whole. All I could say was...

“Silas.”

“Hey, counselor,” he murmured, eyes smiling. “Miss me?”

My fists clenched at my sides. I stared at him, heart rattling in my ribs, but I felt frozen. I’d imagined this moment more times than I could count. Sometimes it ended in anger. Sometimes in silence. Sometimes I couldn’t even picture him showing up at all.

But never—not once—had I imagined what it would feel like to see him standing here. Looking at me like that. Like I was his. Like all he was waiting for was me to realize it.

My throat burned. I tried to breathe, but it just stuttered out of me in a half-sob that sounded like it belonged to someone else.

That's when I broke.

It wasn't graceful or planned or dignified. It was a need so powerful that it broke through all the careful boundaries I'd sealed around myself. In one blind leap, I threw myself off the porch and collided with his chest.

He caught me in his arms like he'd known it was coming.

From the very first, he could always read me like a book.

His grip was firm and sure, one hand cradling the back of my head, the other fisting in my shirt like he needed the contact just as much as me. My arms were around his shoulders, brutally hard, and I pressed my face to the curve of his neck to breathe him in, warm and solid and home.

The scent of him... God, it was enough to break me.

"Goddamn you," I said hoarsely, digging my fingers into the meat of his shoulders. "You took your time."

His laughter was a low, rumbling sound against my chest. "It's not easy, shutting down an old life and creating a new one from scratch. There were leases to break and clearances to surrender." His voice was soft and deep in my ear. "I had to pack up the apartment and clean out a locker full of half-finished reports. You wouldn't believe the paperwork."

His breath was warm against my throat, and I felt more than heard the exhaustion tucked into those words. It hadn't been easy for him. Of course, it hadn't. A man like

Silas didn't just leave something he'd dedicated his life to. He had to peel himself out of it one scar at a time.

"Turned in my badge," he added after a beat. "Walked out with a handshake."

I pulled back far enough to look him in the eyes and get a read on his expression. There was something new in his eyes. Not regret. Just a sense of wistfulness and...freedom. Hard-won and still raw around the edges.

"I didn't know where I was going at first," he said, brushing a thumb along my jaw like he couldn't quite believe I was real. "Just knew where I needed to end up."

My breath caught, and I swallowed around the outpouring of questions that wanted to spill from my throat.

"So, I found this place," he said, nodding toward the cabin behind us. "Paid six months up front. Gator's crew never talked, and the ones who knew anything worthwhile either disappeared or don't want the smoke. The feds are chasing bigger targets now. As far as Devil's Garden's concerned...Silas McKenna's just an ex-con with a talent for slinging whiskey and bad jokes."

I blinked at him. "Seriously? You're just gonna go back to being a bartender?"

His mouth quirked. "Someone's gotta do it. A place like this needs someone behind the bar who isn't afraid to take keys from drunks or play therapist when the regulars start crying into their beer."

"You were the worst therapist I've ever met," I muttered.

He grinned. "Yeah, well. You kept coming back."

My jaw flexed, but I couldn't stop the pull at the corner of my mouth. He wasn't wrong.

Silas pulled back, putting some space between our bodies, but he didn't let go. His hands stroked up and down my bare arms, like he couldn't stop touching me.

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“It’s honest work,” he said with a shrug. “I like the hours and the noise. I like that nobody asks too many questions so long as the pour’s good and the lights stay on.”

He stepped in closer, his forehead brushing mine.

“And if I get to end my nights with you again...” he murmured, “then I’d call that the best damn promotion of my life.”

I was barely hanging on, and those words—end my nights with you—nearly shattered what was left of my control. They weren’t slick or teasing, or intended to manipulate me into a certain reaction. They were simple, steady, and true, just like the man who spoke them.

My grip eased in his shirt, but I only pulled away enough to rest my forehead against his chest. “Three weeks,” I croaked, barely above a whisper. “I didn’t know if you were gone for good.”

Silas’s hands tightened on my arms. His breath hitched, and that calm composure finally cracked, just enough to let me see inside.

“I didn’t know if you’d still want me,” he admitted gruffly. His voice was filled with brambles, the way a man sounds when he’s baring his soul and not sure if he’ll be punished for it. “Not after so many lies.”

“You could’ve called.”

“I wanted to call,” he insisted, eyes locked on mine. Steady as a heartbeat. “Every

goddamn day. Just to hear your voice. But I kept thinking...maybe I was just a break in the storm for you. A place to run when life got loud. I've built a dozen lives based on lies, but I've never tried to build something real. What if—what if it's not enough?"

The vulnerability in his question pierced my heart. Silas had always been smooth and confident in a way that made my heart stutter. I loved his smirk and swagger, the teasing laughter in his eyes, and how he made me feel like the center of his private universe.

But this quieter part of him tugged at me, too. It made me want to gather him in my arms and protect him the way I knew he'd always protect me.

He might've lied about his name and past but never in the ways that mattered. Not once. He never lied in the way he looked at me. Never pulled punches when I needed truth. Never made me feel like I had to be anything more—or less—than exactly who I was.

Even when everything else had been smoke and mirrors, the way he saw me had always been real.

And that was what I'd fallen for.

"You were never just a break in the storm," I said fiercely. "You were the only place I could breathe."

He blinked, and I saw the fear behind his eyes, the part of him that still didn't believe in being chosen for who he was.

I reached up and curled my fingers around his neck, drawing him in just enough to keep him from looking away.

“I don’t care how many lives you lived before this,” I whispered. “This one? The one with me? It’s real, and I’ll choose it—I’ll choose you—every damn time.”

His breath caught, and he stared at me in wonder, like maybe some part of him still thought he didn’t get to keep this.

So I repeated it for both of us.

“Every time, Silas.”

His eyes shuttered momentarily, just long enough for me to see what it cost him to let the walls down. But when he opened them again, that deep, dark gaze locked onto me like he was memorizing the moment and storing it somewhere sacred.

Neither of us spoke. We didn’t have to.

He breathed slowly, and some long-held tension bled out of his shoulders. Then he reached for my hand, lacing his fingers through mine with a careful reverence that undid me more than anything else. He looked toward the cabin, then back at me.

“Come inside?” he asked quietly. No command, no taunt. Just hope.

I nodded once, already moving. We crossed the porch together, hands still joined, the old boards creaking beneath our steps.

Inside, the cabin smelled of cedar and strong coffee. Silas had already started to shape the space with his hands, his habits, and his particular kind of order. It was modest but solid, the kind of place that held heat in the winter and cooled slowly in the summer. It looked like him. Felt like him, too: sharp edges worn down by use, quiet strength tucked into every corner.

But it was the details that caught me. Two mugs were turned upside down, waiting beside a coffee pot. A spare set of hooks by the door, and an open coat closet, only partly claimed. It felt like someone had taken the first steps to build a life here, but left room for someone else to step into it.

“You settling in?” I asked weakly.

“Trying,” he said, then tilted his head curiously and added, “There’s space here if you want it, blue eyes.”

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My throat felt scratchy, but not in the miserable way it had for weeks. Not that sharp, splintering ache I'd gotten used to carrying around like a second heart. This was something else. Softer. I knew if I let them out, the tears would be relief, like a first breath after coming up for air.

I looked down at our hands. His thumb brushed over my knuckles, sure and steady, like he wasn't sure he could stop—and didn't want to.

"You sure?" I asked, finally meeting his eyes. "I don't know what comes next. You and Dom might've shut down part of the problem, but Dom is still neck-deep in trouble, and so is Ben."

Vanderhoff was still out there, circling my family, waiting for an opportunity to destroy us. The watch sat locked in my desk drawer, and I had no plan for how to tackle it.

But for once, the lack of a plan didn't shake me.

Because when I lifted my eyes to his, Silas was already watching me. Calm. Unshakable. Mine.

"I've got your back," he said simply. "No matter what comes our way."

I believed him.

How he looked at me reminded me of the first moment we met. He could always read what I thought and felt at a glance. In his unerring way, he read my heart and gave me

what I needed most. No strings and no expectations. Just offering it up like it was the easiest thing in the world to love me that well.

Slowly, almost reverently, he removed my glasses and hooked the earpiece on the collar of his shirt. Then he cupped my face in his weathered hands. His thumbs traced my jaw line, calluses scraping against stubble, and his quiet tenderness sent ripples of desire through my body.

His lips brushed mine with infinite care, soft and gentle, asking before taking. Like we had all the time in the world, and still, he wasn't about to waste a second of it. This was about more than passion. It was about love. With each sip of my lips, he was showing me how much I mattered.

I sank into it without thinking, my fingers curling in the front of his shirt, and let out the breath I'd been holding for three weeks straight.

He kissed me again, harder this time, angling my jaw just enough to deepen the kiss. I let him take it further, tasting me like he'd missed this—missed me—with every mile that had separated us. And I gave it all back to him, thrusting my tongue between his lips just to hear him moan.

By the third kiss, we were both breathing heavily. His strong arms wrapped around me, pulling me flush against him. I slid my hands under his shirt, feeling the warm, solid muscle of his back. He smiled against my lips, that crooked, cocky grin that never failed to make my knees weak.

“Careful, counselor,” he murmured, voice rough with heat and laughter. “You keep kissing me like that, and we won't even make it to the bed.”

“We've got time,” I breathed against his mouth.

We had a lifetime.