



# Marked for Death

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**Category:** Romance, New Adult, Action

**Description:** Tiffany

Leading a nomadic life, I've been on the run from my rich ex-husband for years. I've learned every trick in the book, staying one step ahead of him and his trackers. He's taken everything from me, and despite everything, I've managed to carve out a life. But he's getting close again. It's time to hit the road, to start over...but it looks like the universe has other plans.

Ryder

As Sargent at Arms, stalking the crazy man trying to kill my MC brothers is part of my job description. Protecting the club is what I live for. Unfortunately, today I'm the loser in our never ending game of cat and mouse. The last thing I remember before waking up in the emergency room is staring up at the sky while bleeding out onto the cold, hard pavement. Then the pretty nurse walks in and turns my world sideways, and those soft hands know just how to handle a big, angry biker like me. With a psycho on my tail, the stakes couldn't be higher. I know I should walk away, but self-preservation has never been much of a strong suit. As my enemy closes in, I've got no gun, three bullet holes, and absolutely zero patience left. The question is, who will be the one to sign my death warrant—the crazy-ass biker who's gunning for me...or the sexy-as-sin nurse I've got a hard-on for?

**Total Pages (Source):** 31

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:43 am*

~ Ryder ~

Ducking inconspicuously into the shadows, Ryder leaned on a rusty lamppost and pulled a copy of the local paper from under his arm. As he watched the ink rub off onto his fingers, the absurdity of his situation was not lost on him. In an age of computers, electronic tablets, and smartphones, who in the world still read newspapers? Besides dumbass bikers like himself intent on appearing casual while they stalked other people, he couldn't imagine.

There was something about reading the local gawker that magically made a person go unnoticed in public. Perhaps it was such an unremarkable activity, no one wanted to interrupt. Then again, it could be because reading the paper was seen as me time, therefore making an interruption seem rude to most normal people.

He was well aware that most normal folks would die before being caught doing something rude in public. Polite conveyances notwithstanding, his club brothers didn't give a goddamn how they acted in public. They'd seen each other buck naked more times than he could count. Hell, they routinely got blown openly in front of each other as they discussed everything from the weather to local politics. Ryder didn't particularly care who saw his shiny white ass.

The one thing he didn't care for was stalking people, yet that's all he seemed to get done some days. Today, for example, he was tasked with bringing in the psycho responsible for putting a pipe bomb in one of the club's vehicles.

Watching from the shadows made Ryder feel like a bit of creep, but there was nothing for it. The truth of the matter was, people's lives were at stake, and his club

took that kind of shit seriously. Feeling mostly to blame, he'd volunteered to track his demented ass down and bring him in. To that end, he'd picked up his trail near Cheyenne and tracked him right up Interstate Twenty-five to this small town where he made exactly one stop.

Standing casually from across the street, Ryder watched his target leave a pawn shop. Instinctively, he knew the relentlessly stubborn and angry man had bought a replacement weapon for the one he lost in their last scrimmage. Making a mental note to keep his eye on the weapon, he patted his hip, reassuring himself that his own weapon was in place.

The disheveled man jumped back into his truck and slammed it into gear, screeching the tires as he peeled out of the parking lot. Grabbing him up within view of the public was undesirable for reasons too numerous to name. Since an unstable man with a grudge and a gun was an unpredictable combination, Ryder eliminated taking him around others from his list of options entirely. If it came down to risking innocent lives or letting him slip from his grasp, the rough biker would choose the latter. Any innocent blood staining his hands by extension stained the reputation of his club. Ryder would never allow his brothers to suffer for his mistakes.

Shadowing the man as inconspicuously as possible, he hung back a few car lengths and even passed him a few times as they drove for several more hours. About thirty miles back, Ace had taken Ninety to the state line. Near as he could tell, they were in some relatively backwater town by the name of Mission Point. It seemed like a decent place to piss and fill up, and that's exactly what Ace did.

Ryder's normal predilection leaned toward stealth and circumspectness to the point of being insular at times. When Ace stopped and began staidly filling his gas tank, Ryder pulled into a nearby station and did the same. The trick was to be quick about it and get back to the target before he moved on.

Just as he was about to mount his bike again, the twisted grille of an old pickup truck plowed into him, throwing him over his bike and down onto the pavement. Ryder felt a flash of pain upon impact as his head crashed unceremoniously into the pavement. Before his mind even processed that the truck was the one his target had been driving, his hand groped blindly for his weapon. Years of performing hazardous work had conditioned him in ways he scarcely understood.

Since it didn't make sense to think he could placate the grieving convict, Ryder quickly decided that it would be imprudent to try to talk with him. No matter what he said, Ace was likely to take issue with it. Ryder's sole concern at the moment revolved around surviving this dangerous encounter.

Before he could unsnap his weapon from his holster, a hulking form was standing over him with a look of debased joy spread across his dirty face. Ace had every right to be delighted with his performance today, while Ryder was nothing short of furious with himself for being bested by such an unbalanced opponent.

As he struggled to will his numb fingers to grasp the trigger of his gun, Ace sent it skittering from his hand with one rough kick. Immediately thereafter, a huge, black leather boot landed on his chest with a bone-chilling jolt. Knocking the air from his lungs, the harsh treatment also effectively pinned him to the ground. The submissive pose clawed at all his insecurities as a male, making him feel weak, powerless, and defeated.

Staring each other in the face, Ryder knew the moment to meet his maker had finally arrived. Instead of dying of old age, safe and warm in his bed, he would be bleeding out in some backwater town in the middle of nowhere. It was a fitting end for an outlaw like him, he thought with smug satisfaction. In fact, it was just exactly what he deserved.

The sound of panicked people screaming for someone to call the police filled the air.

When the corresponding voices loomed ever closer, he hoped one of them might be packing a weapon and possess some inclination to control this situation.

Reactively, Ace's head snapped toward the convenience store, causing his greasy brown hair to fly about his head. Lifting a huge, old-fashioned revolver, he squeezed off several rounds in rapid succession in the direction of the crowd, clearly intent on driving the bystanders back inside.

It must have worked because he turned back with a frown on his face and began speaking. Even with the deafening shots still ringing in his ears, Ryder could hear the man saying all the things that Ryder had known he would. His raspy voice outlined the litany of complaints he had with the club. Though the tirade was not totally undeserved, it would be a miscarriage of justice to lay all the blame at his club's feet.

Freezing mid-sentence, the man stilled when he heard the wail of sirens. Ryder could tell his little hamster wheels were turning, trying to figure out a way to kill him and make it to safety before they arrived. Lying flat on his back, Ryder prayed the cops would arrive before it was too late. In the blink of an eye, his life had skewed in a bizarre new direction. Who would have ever thought an outlaw would be hoping for the police to save his sorry ass?

Ace's mangy head dipped again, and he looked in Ryder's eyes. Though the man's expression was a blank slate, his eyes were stormy, harboring a mixture of fury, resentment, and even a little regret. Lifting his gun, Ace aimed for his face.

Just before he squeezed off the kill shot, another body collided with his, taking him to the ground. Ryder couldn't get a clear look, but his rescuer appeared to be a homeless person. The man had shaggy white hair and was wearing ragged, soiled clothing. Since the older man was a bag of bones, Ace rounded on him, literally lifting him from the ground and tossing him several yards away. Though the older man wasn't capable of winning a fight or providing protection in any real sense of the word, he

might have kept Ace busy for those few precious seconds needed for the cavalry to arrive.

Ryder managed to scramble to his feet just as Ace turned his attention back to his prey. Searching for his gun, Ryder realized it was not close at hand. The sirens were practically on top of them now. Ace took off running for his vehicle, choking off two shots as he ran. Ryder felt his body jerk with each shot. His arms came up, and he felt like a puppet dancing on a string before falling haphazardly to the ground.

Lying on his back and bleeding painlessly out onto the pavement, Ryder stared up at the blameless, blue sky. Shouldn't the clouds be dark and brooding when the devil claimed one of his own? Ryder's mind drifted as he realized he wasn't dead yet. Something about dying on a sunny day didn't feel right, so he quickly decided today was not his day after all.

Cotton candy clouds drifted by in the shape of a bear and other odd, miscellaneous forms, and he felt the sun beaming down on his face, false flags from mother nature meant to lull him into a false sense of security. If angels in heaven were real, his must have been one hell of a prayer warrior today.

The old man crawled over to him and pressed two shaking hands to his thigh. Searing pain drove home the severity of the wound, as did the look on the man's terrified face. Both of which pulled him from his mind and back to the here and now.

Ryder had seen pictures of older people with faces so lined with age, they looked hauntingly beautiful. That was exactly what he saw when he looked up at the older man—living art. A strange kind of appreciation filled Ryder's mind. On the other hand, his newfound appreciation for artful human faces could be the result of acute blood loss.

"Thanks...man. I...appreciate..." Though he wanted to speak words of gratitude, his

tongue felt thick, and the words died on his lips. The darkness slowly forced its way in, blocking out the beautiful sky. The old man's continual pressure on the hole in his leg drove home the thought that he had no idea where the second round had landed.

Though tired enough to give up and go to sleep, some resiliently determined part of his psyche refused to let reality slip so easily from his grasp. Internally, Ryder waged his own petty war on the darkness, fighting it back over and over with every ounce of his inner strength, knowing all the while that without him, his sister had no one.

Through the impending darkness, he heard law enforcement officers arrive at the scene.

“This is a damned mess. Any idea who he is?”

## Page 2

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“No. Some guy came barreling in, mowed him down with his truck, and started shooting up the place. He’s lost a lot of blood.”

“Aside from that general information, can you...”

~ Tiffany ~

Tiffany normally sprinted through her morning routine. Only the morning routine was actually an evening one because she worked midnights. A cup of java and a light meal of fruit and yogurt energized her enough for a short run. Something about putting her feet to the pavement seemed extraordinarily exhilarating tonight.

Stepping out of her apartment and right over the ugly word spray-painted on her welcome mat, she headed for the apartment complex’s indoor gym instead. A workout was just as beneficial as a nice run in the park, right? Then again, she always did have a penchant for seeing things the way she wanted them to be rather than how they were.

This was going to be her year. Everything that had been hard was now coming easy for her. Kicking carbs and sugar to the curb had been easy as falling off a log. There was no longer any need for a sugar high because running for fifteen minutes every evening gave her a natural high that honestly couldn’t be beat. She smiled as she realized everything was finally falling into place. She was now Tiff 2.0 and she loved it!

Returning home, the light on her old-fashioned answering machine was blinking ominously. Pointedly ignoring it, she hummed to herself as she got ready for work.



Pulling her hair up into a messy, cute style, she touched it up with a flat iron, tugging down a few careless strands around her neck to soften the look somewhat. Cultivating the right professional image was not quite at the top of her list of priorities by any stretch of the imagination, but it was important nonetheless. Next, she pulled two huge duffel bags from under her bed and began to load them up with her favorite possessions.

Her extensive library of romance, self-help, and medical books were all consolidated onto her e-reader. Her mother had sat her down at her sweet sixteen party and explained the way of the world to her and lovingly held her hand as she unloaded her entire collection of over a thousand books at a local charity book drive. Clutching her new e-reader, she'd cried all the way home. It was all for the best. A woman in her situation couldn't be dragging a metric ton of paperbacks around everywhere she went.

Next, she selected only the clothing that actually fit and looked decent on her. Tiffany had always been fastidious about her clothing and accessories. Tossing in her jewelry case, sewing kit, and first-aid kit, she rummaged around for a few household items she particularly liked. Neatly packing her laptop and the external hard drive containing thousands of family pictures and the legal paperwork supporting her restraining order, she zipped the bags up and sat them at the door.

The last few years had been an endurance of sorts. She'd been more than eager to put all the running scared and sleepless nights behind her. She'd grown and evolved as a person, so there would be no more morose thoughts, self-defeating behaviors, or dwelling on the past. From now on, no matter what kind of tough choices that needed making, she'd keep her life moving forward in the right direction.

Moving to a new city had been a brilliant idea. After graduating from nursing school, this was her chance to have her dream career and a fresh start. After all, how many women got a do-over, much less three, and soon to be four in a row? Tiffany was

beginning to loosen up and see that sometimes problems were just opportunities in disguise. She refused to waste her life constantly looking over her shoulder and worrying about tomorrow.

Sneaking a quick peek in the mirror on the way out, she hardly recognized herself. All in all, she hadn't done too badly. Her long, dark hair and blue eyes were definitely her best assets. Scratch that, it was her snarky personality and ability to persevere. Live one day at a time. Taking her mother up on her outstanding advice was becoming easier by the day.

Excited about her shift at the local ER, she threw the two bags containing all her worldly possessions in the back of her SUV and headed to work without further consideration of her circumstances. At this point, she was on automatic pilot.

The city's busiest emergency department offered a thrill a minute for people with the personality to appreciate it. Challenging herself to deal with whatever man and Mother Nature threw at her was proof positive that she was strong and capable. In some irrational way, it validated her ability to make tough decisions and find success in an environment very few medical professionals could tolerate.

Tiffany had fallen in love the minute she walked into the building. She often wondered if it was the action and adventure that drew the "new and improved" her to the work. Or maybe it was the work that drew out and validated the new qualities she saw in herself. Either way, she felt privileged to find a position helping others in their time of need. Helping others filled a hole for her.

Pulling into the hospital parking lot, she immediately craned her neck to catch a glimpse of what was waiting in the loading zone. Excitement rolled through her gut as she observed five ambulances waiting to unload. The light was also flashing to indicate that they were on diversion. Smiling, she knew that meant they had a full house. Her shift would fly, rather than crawl by. This was good since it was her last

before moving on.

On account of a recent expansion, the emergency department had grown to double its normal size. Yet the place was somehow still heaving. Reading the whiteout board, she noted her assignment before going straight to her section.

Feeling the excitement thrumming through her body, she headed back to take report from her illustrious predecessor with a spring in her step. Her ability to compartmentalize the various segments of her life truly astounded her at times.

Skidding to a stop in front of a tiny podium, she noticed the woman sitting there appeared tense, frustrated, and exhausted.

Because they were on familiar terms, she knew Stephanie would enjoy the attempt to lighten the mood.

“Busy day at the office, Steph?”

Looking up at her, Stephanie offered a faint smile before blowing out an exasperated breath. “You cannot even imagine, girl. We’ve had a multi-car collision on Jefferson Avenue, a house fire that spread to a warehouse, and some sushi restaurant gave a bunch of people food poisoning. In short, we’ve been up to our elbows in burn victims and vomit all day.”

“Sounds rough.”

“Oh, and we got another gentleman from the geriatric high-rise across the street with urinary catheter complications.” Stephanie made little quotation marks in the air when she spoke the last three words.

Anger boiled in Tiffany’s blood. “You had better not tell me he had a non-deflated

cath stuck in his urethra.”

“I’d love to be able to tell you that, but I can’t.”

Closing her eyes and counting to ten, she shook her head. “How difficult is it to deflate a catheter before you pull it out?”

“Not hard at all. I get so frustrated seeing geriatric patients in pain over generalized incompetence. Then again, his dementia is pretty severe, so there is a chance he pulled it partially out himself.”

“Either way, it evidences poor quality of care. We both know they get paid top dollar to see that things like this don’t happen.”

## Page 3

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“All I know is Dr. Cole is on the warpath about it. He claims their rate of catheter complications is three times the national average.”

“That sounds like a fair assessment to me. What else do we have going on?”

Flipping through her notes, she frowned. “Air Life Line dropped a critically injured patient off earlier this evening. He’s built like a bodybuilder, covered in tattoos, and supposedly a real terror. The medics reported that they had to tranquilize him in order to provide basic lifesaving care while en route. Naturally, I assumed they were exaggerating, as they are prone to do. Then I read their report stating they had to sedate him not once, but twice during the flight. That was an imprudent choice for someone with a traumatic head injury, but I guess if your only other choice is them tearing the chopper up, you do what you’ve gotta do.”

“That sounds a little dramatic. Couldn’t they just strap him down?”

“I wasn’t there, so I don’t know. Mark my words, you are going to have your hands full with that one. He’s been unconscious thus far, but he’s due to wake up anytime. If I were you, I’d try to stay out of his reach.”

Tiffany nodded, appreciating the advice despite the obvious complication it presented. “I’m certain what you’re saying is true. However, it’s difficult to provide adequate care if I don’t get within arm’s reach. I need to be close enough to take vitals and administer medications. Speaking of which, does he have an IV?”

Looking down at her notes again, Stephanie answered succinctly. “IV therapy dropped a line as soon as he got here, so he’s fully hydrated. I noticed he’s been

restless, so I'm betting it won't be long until he wakes up."

"Okay. I'll be careful not to get myself mauled by him. Did his chem panel come back yet?"

"He's negative for drugs, with the exception of marijuana."

Typical. "Great. At least there is no danger of an amphetamine induced psychosis. You know those are always fun times."

Her friend grinned at her off-color remark, knowing she meant just the opposite.

"He's just one of several complex cases you'll be facing tonight. You still have five other patients who are all fully conscious, and a couple of them are fairly demanding. We don't have any beds open, so you'll have every single one of them until they're discharged or we find another hospital to accept them."

Tiffany nodded. "At least we're on diversion until further notice, and hopefully, it'll keep them from cramming more in on us."

Tiffany flipped through the charts, listening as Stephanie gave her a brief, incisive report on each of the remaining patients. As soon as her counterpart left, Tiffany got to work quietly visiting each of her patients, taking vitals, dispensing medications, and changing out bandages.

As the beginning of the shift wore on, doctors visited each patient, wrote orders, and the lab techs came to draw blood. One of her patients had a gunshot wound to the arm and a blood alcohol level of point ten percent. Handcuffing him to the bed was a safety precaution taken by the local law enforcement officer who brought him in. Charged with stabbing his wife during a domestic dispute, Elmer Oliver was clearly not only dangerous but a flight risk.

No matter how many times she asked him to refrain from yelling, he didn't listen, as he was apparently hell bent on patching things up with his one and only true love. Barely resisting rolling her eyes, Tiffany stayed focused on writing her nursing notes, ignoring the rowdy man. The ER was always an exercise in patience.

In no time at all, Elmer's drunken voice had gone from serenading his love to taking about how much he missed her. He was irritating and totally oblivious to everyone around him as he called for the woman in question.

"Eloise. Elllooiissee. Answer me, woman."

"What?" a sharp, raspy female voice answered, resonating off the walls, sounding less than pleased at being forced to answer him in such a public setting.

Once the woman spoke, Tiffany could discern some slurring of her words. Of course, neither of them were strangers to the staff at St. Mary's. Their long-standing habitual drinking had instigated several drunken brawls between the two of them and lead to all kinds of injuries over the years. Consequently, Tiffany had been subjected to several stories about the couple by some of the more cynical staff. Try as she might, Tiffany simply wasn't able to find the humor in their situation. Witnessing it in action now, it was as sad a situation as she'd imagined it to be.

The thoroughly intoxicated gentleman persisted in his drunken effort to get his woman to forgive him. He was persistent. Tiffany would have to give him credit for that much.

Causing a scene, he spoke loudly as he yanked on his cuffs, a horrible metal on metal scraping sound. "Where are you? I can't see you no more, sweetness."

When the woman didn't answer, his voice became deeper and more desperate. "Talk to me, baby. I need to hear your sweet voice."

Undoubtedly caving in to his drunken charm, her voice softened. “I’m over here, honey bear. They won’t let me come and see you.”

Immediately, he responded with an overt and obvious attempt to gain the poor woman’s full sympathy again. “Eloise, I love you. Baby, they got me cuffed to the fuckin’ bed like I’m some kind of a criminal.”

There was some muffled laughter from the employees and other patients at the man’s childish attempts to curry favor through a bizarre mixture of inducing pity right alongside an open declaration of love.

However oblivious his awkward attempts were to the staff, his wife fell for it rather quickly. “Oh, honey bear, you ain’t no criminal.”

“They’re fuckin’ laughing at me, baby. You know how I hate that shit.”

“Elmer, don’t pay them no mind. Just keep talkin’ to me. You know, you’re my very own honey bear.”

“Oh hell, baby.” There was short, pregnant pause, leading Tiffany to think something truly profound was about to come out of the man’s mouth. “I know I stabbed you and you shot me, but can’t we just call it even?”



## Page 4

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Wow, she had not been expecting that one. Tiffany cringed as the sound of more muffled laughter rang out. Chewing her lip, she worried that it would escalate the man who was already displaying a tenuous grasp on his emotions. This whole situation was just hitting a little too close to home for her comfort, making it hard to process all the complexities of the seemingly straightforward interaction.

As a result of their intimate conversation, one of the law enforcement officers stuck his head into the bay. “You two might just call it even, but I call that a confession in front of at least a dozen witnesses. You already had your rights read, so I advise you to button it up for your own good.”

Naturally, the man stared the officer in the face defiantly as he shouted at the top of his lungs. “Sweetness, they tell me I can’t talk to you no more! These sons of bitches are crazier than we are if they think for goddamn minute they can keep us from talkin’ to each other.”

Tiffany sighed, knowing neither of them were probably going to cease trying to communicate with each other until the officers remanded them into custody.

To sum it up, not only was it going to be a long night, but afterward she’d have to listen to the entire episode being retold in lurid detail by a bunch of people who should know better. Unfortunately, Tiffany had discovered early on that her co-workers had become cynical to certain situations, chiefly by virtue of the sheer volume and intensity of the crisis situations they encountered on a daily basis.

Her genuine affinity for her coworkers notwithstanding, insolent and belligerent people with no internal controls being used as sport by people who could do it with

impunity rubbed her the wrong way on several different levels. Rare moments like this made her wonder if this environment was the best fit for her after all. Maybe on her next do over, she'd pick another medical setting to ply her wares.

~ Ryder ~

Ryder's eyes slowly opened and the room drifted into focus. Looking down, he tried to see his injuries. Immediately, it all came flooding back with several stark realizations hitting him all at once.

Thank fuck that he was alive, thinking coherently, and breathing on his own. Grateful to the old man who had intervened when Ace was about to blow his brains out, he realized how close he'd come to dying. Making a mental note of the life debt, Ryder vowed to repay it as soon as he was on his feet again.

There was a sharp, stabbing pain in the back of his head near the base of his neck, and it was severe enough to make his lip quiver. That shit hadn't happened to him since he was a fuckin' kid, and it was pissing him the hell off.

Stand up, shake this shit off, and be a man. His father's words reverberated through his aching head, leaving behind hollowness where warmth and motivation should be. His old man had been one mean son of a bitch and lived his life by an arcane set of beliefs that felt peculiar to Ryder.

He'd raised him and his sister all by himself, engraining more than a bit of his weirdness into them, but Ryder missed him anyhow. Subsequently, the cumulative effects of getting run over by a truck and catching a few bullets virtually guaranteed following his father's advice would prove an impossible task tonight...assuming it was night.

Steeling himself for the pain he knew was sure to come, Ryder forced his body up to

a sitting position. The searing pain in his head literally took his breath away and made the room spin in lackadaisical circles. Closing his eyes to stave off the nausea climbing up this throat, he eased back down on his pillow. He was in serious pain, and the drunk couple yelling totally transparent, lovey-dovey shit back and forth was not helping.

That's when it finally hit him; he appeared to be in a medical facility of some sort rather than jail, which was always a possibility when you were dealing with cops. He couldn't be just sitting around on his dick when Ace was still out there somewhere, looking to do harm to his brothers. Regardless of the excruciating pain, getting back on his feet was the only thing that mattered to him at the moment.

Ace's mocking face rose in his mind, and Ryder knew he would have to be diligent about finishing the job he started by shooting him. Trying to sit up once again, he accidentally knocked over a side table. He'd seriously underestimated the effect of whatever drugs they had given him. For the first time in his life, merely moving his arms took all the strength he could muster.

This whole situation was total bullshit, caused by whatever poison they were pumping into his veins. Refusing to allow it to break him, he pulled furiously at the IV hanging from his arm to keep any more of the meds from entering his body and consequently making him weak. Cursing under his breath, he realized that someone was going to hear the ruckus he was making, and he was in no condition to effectively defend himself until the damned drugs wore off.

Just as he'd feared, one of the nursing staff came rushing into the room, appearing astounded at his clumsy attempts to get out of bed. Hastening her way over to him, she tried vainly to push him back down onto the bed. Her small hands on his massive chest were a barely noticeable distraction. In his drug-induced haze, he found the idea of her trying to physically move him totally fuckin' hilarious. Did the diminutive nurse actually think she could push him even an inch? Smiling up at her, he resisted

the initial urge to gather her up in his arms and sit her pretty little ass in his lap.

“You have a concussion, Mr. Staunton, therefore you shouldn’t be trying to get up. Do you mind if ask why you tore out your IV?”

In response to her unwanted interrogation, he gave the inquisitive little bitch an icy glare as he responded brusquely. “Does it ever occur to you folks that maybe we don’t all want that poison dumped into our veins?”

Of course, she was in professional nurse mode at the moment and not in the correct frame of mind to accept him advocating for less medication. “You’re injured and not thinking properly right now, Mr. Staunton. You need the medications to keep from getting an infection, and the IV provides fluids when you’re unconscious and can’t consume liquids on your own.”

Shaking his head in disagreement, Ryder was certain that in her mind all her trite justifications made perfect sense. In his opinion, doctors didn’t have the right to pump a man full of shit he never agreed to. Rather than mansplaining all about his theory that doctors should render minimal lifesaving care until the person gives consent, he decided to stick to the point.

“That may be, but you need to back the fuck up and talk to me like I’m a fuckin’ human being and not some senseless fuck like the guy down the hall, screaming romantic nonsense to his old lady. I know that I’m supposed to be all grateful and compliant and shit, but that ain’t the way the good Lord made me, doll.”

Unclear what he’d expected her response to be, he was pleasantly shocked when a contrite expression instantly jumped onto her lovely face. “I honestly wasn’t trying to be disrespectful or coerce you into accepting medications you clearly don’t want. Many patients wake a little discombobulated and not thinking clearly. I can now see you do not fall into that category, so you have my sincerest apologies. What would

you like to know?”

“What the hell is wrong with me? My head feels funny.”

Tilting her head slightly, she articulated her words carefully for no reason he could discern as she explained the obvious. “You were hit by an oncoming vehicle, causing a severe concussion. Then you were shot twice.”

“Any particular reason you’re takin’ me on this scenic guided tour down memory lane? In case you forgot, I was fuckin’ there, so clearly I know all about that shit. What I need to know is what happened after I came here.”

Rather than showing irritation, she smiled indulgently at him as she responded, seemingly not as offended by his gruff manner as most women he’d met. The ounce of acceptance and understanding when he was having the roughest day of life loosened something slightly in his chest.

“Unfortunately, EMS had to sedate you on the chopper, and that’s contraindicated for individuals who’ve sustained a head injury.”

“Contra what? Can you speak freakin’ English, doll?”

Rolling her eyes at him, she quickly explained in a way he could understand. “I know this is difficult to believe, but you fought the emergency responders while you were being transported in the medical helicopter. They sedated you for your own safety.”

## Page 5

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Never one to underestimate his own irresponsible stupidity in the face of danger, he almost laughed that she thought such a response was beyond the norm for him. “That’s not hard for me to believe at all. In fact, it sounds just like some shit I would do when I’m outta my head. I’m a natural born fighter, and that shit does not just go away every time I bump my head.”

The woman grinned at him, clearly appreciating his manly idiosyncrasies and self-deprecating humor. “I’m no doctor, but since you’re hydrated and alert enough to take medications, you won’t need the IV you...umm...removed to be reinserted.”

Trying to shake off the slowly diminishing headache, he chose not to argue that they weren’t sticking him again because he’d already drawn his line in the goddamn sand by removing it. To demonstrate his appreciation for her being kind and trying to understand his point of view, he tried to moderate his tone. “Look, lady, I don’t care if you’re a doctor or not. You must know if and when I can get the hell outta here.”

“I know your physician had not approved you to be ambulatory yet, and that’s a strong indication that it would not be reasonable to expect you to be steady on your feet while the medications are still in your system. Continual attempts may result in tearing open your sutures or even falling and incurring another injury. If you lie back down, I’ll tell you everything I know and help you get whatever you need as best I can.”

Knowing he was being somewhat unreasonable, Ryder massaged his chest as he tried to formulate a plan of action. His chest ached as he nursed the irrational fear that if he laid down, he would not be getting up again. “I ain’t laying back down until you start spitting out answers to my damn questions. Where the hell am I?”

“You’re at St. Mary’s on the outskirts of Bismarck, and you’ve been here—”

“Fuck,” Ryder hissed under his breath. “Bismarck, North freaking Dakota?”

Following what appeared to be her normal, empathetic manner of interaction, she fluffed his pillow as she conversed soothingly, “Yes, Mr. Staunton, you’ve been here nearly five hours. As I said, EMS elected to bring you by helicopter due to the severity of your injuries. Some bright spark probably thought we were the best option for you because we specialize in traumatic brain injuries.”

“Jesus, I hear what you’re laying down for me, but I seriously need to get out of here.” Though she hadn’t explained why, Ryder didn’t reckon there was much chance of that since his head was splitting open just from sitting up in his bed.

“I’m unclear on exactly why you’re so intent on leaving this very modern and well-appointed medical facility. I cannot stress to you enough that your very survival might depend upon the monitoring and medical support of our TBI team. They are the best in the business, as evidenced by the fact that doctors come from all over the country to see how we operate.”

“Christ, you sound like an infomercial extolling all the virtues of St. Mary’s; do you know that?”

Frowning at his insolent remark, she pressed her lips into a thin line as if she were attempting to hold back a torrent of insults. Instead of cutting loose with those critical remarks, she spoke as respectfully as possible. “If you leave before you’re stable, you can be pretty much guaranteed of a negative outcome. Nothing going on in the outside world could possibly be worth your life.”

For some reason, annoying her was somehow gratifying, and he couldn’t stop himself from stating curtly, “I have someplace to be.”

Continuing her calm and respectful tone, she explained, “Your loved ones will understand. None of them would expect a seriously injured man to leave the hospital, especially one in your condition.”

He wheezed out a laugh and his hand immediately went to his side. “The fact that you actually believe that I have loved ones is downright adorable, doll.”

“Everyone has someone who cares about them.”

Her presumptuous words demonstrated how little she understood of his world, consequently provoking the dark beast lurking just beneath the surface. “Ain’t nobody out there that gives a fuck where I am, except my club brothers and the man tryin’ to kill me.”

As if to illustrate his point, he growled, moving forward in a vaguely threatening pose that had served him well over the years and watched her jerk slightly away from him.

Absurdly pleased with her response, he thought to himself that she should be warier of dangerous men. This pretty little bitch was far too trusting of the wrong kind of men to suit him.

Moreover, after what happened to his sister, he was on a mission to see that kind of shit didn’t happen to anyone else he knew. If edging into her personal space taught her to be appropriately wary of strange men, she would be safer for having experienced the momentary fear. In his mind, he was doing her a service.

Getting back to the subject at hand, he stated flatly, “I can’t be sitting around here making nice with all the doctors and pretty nurses with a goddamn target on my chest. Can’t you see how having a killer on my tail might make it impossible for a man to relax?”



Her occupation notwithstanding, Ryder got the feeling she genuinely cared about her patients in general, especially when her voice took on a twinge of desperation as she tried to convince him to prioritize his medical needs. “The trauma surgeon pulled one slug out of your leg and another out of your arm. As I mentioned, you have a concussion and some fairly potent sedatives in your system. If you walk out now, I doubt you’d make it a hundred yards before you collapse.”

“I sure the hell can’t just lay here and do nothin’, doll,” he sneered.

Waving one delicate hand in the air as she placed the other on the slight curve of her hip, she didn’t seem inclined to give up on him. “You can’t shake off a couple of gunshot wounds like they’re nothing and just go on about your merry way.”

Rolling his eyes, Ryder barked a humorless laugh, both annoyed and charmed by her naiveté and persistence in trying to save him from himself. “A couple of bullet holes are nothing. If the bastard hadn’t hit me with his truck, he wouldn’t have gotten the opportunity to shoot my ass, that’s for sure. Thank God he wasn’t going at top speed, or I’d definitely be a dead man.”

“Her hand flew to her mouth in horror at the visual he’d inadvertently created in her mind’s eye. After shocking her, he lowered his voice, attempting to dial down the alarm. “He’ll be comin’ for me. I gotta get movin’.”

Once his words sank in, her head came slowly up to look at him, and he could see shock and some disbelief on her pretty face. “You think a killer is going to stalk you across the state line?”

However smart she was, this chick just didn’t get it, and he was quickly losing his patience with her innocent ways. “Hell, the fuck yes, I surely do. Look, lady, I know that sounds all manner of crazy, but I promise you, he won’t stop ‘til one of us is dead.”

Her enormous, pretty, blue eyes stared at him for a long moment. After a lengthy pause, she spoke so softly that at first, he wasn't sure what she said. "I don't know why, but I do believe you."

Finally, here was a woman willing to go the extra mile to understand where he was coming from. "You have got to get me outta here because he will be comin' for me, I promise you that."

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Next, she broached the issue any professional woman in her situation would be most concerned about. “Do you think he’ll try to come inside the emergency room?”

“Hell’s bells, he’s totally unhinged and brazen as hell. He won’t think twice about shootin’ the place right up.” Watching her wrap her arms around her stomach in what was obviously a protective pose tore at his heart. Scaring the resilient woman he was growing a solid liking for made him feel like shit, but allowing danger to blindside her was the bigger concern.

“Maybe you’re just being paranoid. It could be an adverse reaction of some sort to the medication.”

“Trust me, it ain’t.”

The sound of raised voices filled the air, drifting back from the direction of the medical station. One of the physicians demanded for security to be called in halting, broken English.

Immediately, the compassionate woman standing before him, who’d appeared so composed and intense when she’d enter his room, seemed to fold in on herself. It pained him to see all her assertiveness fall away, leaving fear and anxiety haunting her angelic face. Some protective instinct reared up inside of him, and he wanted to wrap his beefy arms around her and assure her everything was going to be all right, but unfortunately that was not an option at the moment.

Rather than sugarcoat the situation for her, he hissed quietly, “That might be our killer.”

Dropping her chin to her chest, she appeared to be deep in thought or possibly falling into despair. It was difficult to tell.

The disgruntled biker gripped onto the side of the hospital bed, trying to steady himself as he stood with as much dignity as possible under the circumstances. Seeing his knuckles turn white and feeling the sweat dripping down his forehead, he knew without a doubt that he was too weak to run from the diabolical fool chasing him.

His nurse suddenly launched into action, pacing back and forth as she muttered under her breath. “Don’t even think about trying to walk out of here. You won’t make it more than a few steps into the hall before he catches sight of you. We can’t take a chance on him opening fire in the building. There are too many lives at stake.”

Sinking back down on the bed, he whispered, “Got any great ideas, ‘cause I sure the fuck don’t.”

She shook her head. “I’m thinking.”

Ryder hated to see her in the line of fire, another hapless victim caught in the cross fire between his club and a demented madman. “Get the fuck out, doll. Run.”

“I’m not leaving you in the clutches of a coldhearted killer.”

“You don’t even know me.”

“You’re a human being. That’s all I need to know.”

This time, it was Ryder’s turn to be impressed as the seemingly defeated woman found her backbone again. “Fuckin’ stubborn, courageous bitch. Get behind me. Maybe if he nails me, he’ll be so eager to make a clean getaway, he’ll leave you alone.”

“I’m not an idiot. I’m the witness. Killers never leave us alive.”

Rubbing the throbbing vein in his temple, he realized the smart little bitch was right. Shit, what had he been thinking? Everyone knew killers didn’t leave witnesses behind. He watched her pull open a cabinet under the sink and begin jerking out supplies. She chucked handfuls of stuff into a large garbage bin. It seemed like a gigantic waste to him.

Staring at her incredulously, he literally could not fathom what she was doing. “Ain’t no time to be cleaning house, sweet cheeks. He’ll make holes in my road-weary body, faster than you can plug ‘em up.”

She flashed him a quick, mischievous smile, those blue eyes flashing. “Button it up, gorgeous. I finally thought of a way out of this mess.”

As if to demonstrate her resolve, the woman quickly shoved the bin against the wall and walked over to him. “Lean on me.”

Wrapping one of his arms around her neck, she dragged him the few steps across the room. Bracing herself on the built-in cabinet, she turned him sideways. “This is going to hurt, but you need to ease yourself into the opening. I’ll take as much of the weight as possible. Try not to tear open your sutures.”

Winded from the effort of moving, Ryder didn’t bother with a response. The pretty little bitch was saving his life. He needed to shut the fuck up and get with the program. As he bent down, she shifted her leg against him, easing him into the small compartment. It hurt like hell, but he sealed his lips.

Shoving his chart into his hands, she quickly shut the door. Alone, sitting in the dark, Ryder felt like a child again. A helpless little boy hiding from his father’s fists. Forcing himself not to panic, he clutched the cold metal chart as he listened to what

was going on in the room.

Within moments, he heard the curtain being ripped open. It was a metal-on-metal scrape he recognized from the nurse coming in earlier.

Tiffany's genial voice immediately sounded off. "Are you here for our Jeffery Thomas? The ambulance drivers picked him out of that house fire across town. We weren't sure who to call. Would you happen to have his insurance information? They're going to need that if you don't want him to end up with a huge hospital bill."

Ryder thrilled at the clueless tone of her voice. This chick was good. The momentary relief turned to worry as he imagined the huge, hulking form hovering over the small, vulnerable woman. The sound of boots stalking over to her almost made Ryder jump from his hiding space. Then he remembered this was not only his only chance at life, but it was hers as well. She had been correct about her being a witness. Ace was not the kind of man to leave behind a witness. He'd kill her quick as a wink and not think twice about it.

"It stinks in here."

Ace's full-throated growl and close proximity to his new female friend set Ryder's nerves on edge. Forcing his lips closed, Ryder throttled back the instinct to pummel the man back a few feet from the vulnerable, fresh-faced female trying her best to protect him. Now was definitely not the time for thrilling heroics.

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“What’s that stench filling the room?”

“The smell of burning flesh, I imagine. I barely notice things like that anymore. Look, your loved one got transferred to ICU. You are going to have to go there if you want an update on his condition.”

To anyone else’s ears, the nurse’s words and tone of voice might have sounded casual and professional, particularly in this environment. Ryder wasn’t fooled by her fake calm, though, because he could hear the echo of fear and desperation hidden beneath the surface of her easygoing demeanor. It was like a siren’s call, beckoning him to detach himself from his current circumstance and focus on defending her from the treacherous man standing before her.

The deep voice was rough and harsh. “I want to see his chart.”

“Sorry, sir, St. Mary’s is not authorized to allow that. If you want information on Mr. Thomas, you will have to speak to the physician. If Mr. Thomas wishes you to be privy to his medical information, he can sign a written release. As I said, he was transferred to ICU almost an hour ago.”

Pausing long enough to seem confused, she asked, “Did you say you were a member of the immediate family?” Her crisp reply revealed a deep-seated ability to hide her true feelings. It was enough to make Ryder wonder where such an innocent young woman might have acquired such a jaded trait.

Instead of answering her, the contemptuous man stalked back out of the bay, and his footsteps soon faded into the distance. Her footsteps faded as well, and Ryder

assumed she was making sure the man had exited the building.

Immediately, Ryder pushed the cabinet door open and took a deep, cleansing breath. Grabbing one ankle, he pulled it awkwardly out to rest on the cold, institutional flooring. Repeating the process with the other foot, he used his good arm to grab the top of the cabinet and began hoisting himself up.

Within minutes, his new partner rushed back into the room and yanked the curtain closed behind her, concealing them from view. She ran to his side, draped his arm over her shoulder, and helped him up. Ryder didn't have it in him to object when she eased him down onto the bed.

"Did he leave the premises?" Surprised at the harsh and raspy sound of his own voice, he realized he was not doing nearly as well as he'd originally thought.

"Yes. I watched him get into a pickup truck and drive away. Someone told him we were on diversion and that meant his loved one could have been taken to another area hospital."

"Once he figures out I ain't in one of them, he'll circle back around."

Her voice was calm, but her wide eyes gave away her fear. "I know how men like him are. I could see it in his eyes. He's not going to give up looking for you."

As a result of her refusal to leave him to his fate, critical thinking, and her astonishing courage in the face of danger, Ryder had to admit that he was becoming fascinated with the diminutive nurse. In fact, he had a hard time keeping the open admiration from his voice when he spoke to her.

"You are one smart little bitch. Now you see why I need to get outta here before he realizes his mistake."



Smiling slightly back at him, she chewed her bottom lip, seemingly mulling the situation over in her mind. “Agreeing is not particularly helpful. You’re bleeding around your sutures and are in no condition to leave. Can’t you see that?”

Nodding, he stood again and tried to take a step toward her as he kept eye contact. “Hell yes, I can see how foolish it is to leave when I’m bleeding and unstable on my feet, but what you need to see is that we got no fuckin’ choice.”

“Mr. Staunton...” Walking over to him, she helped steady him on his feet instead of forcing him back down onto the bed.

In his humble opinion, that was yet more progress, since she didn’t appear to be on automatic pilot anymore where he was concerned.

“Call me Ryder.” His head was still throbbing, and his fingers were half numb, but he wanted to hear his name on her lips. Taking a deep breath, he allowed his eyes to drift from her face down to her chest, landing on her name badge. Tiffany Stone, RN. Looking up to recapture her eyes, he spoke quietly. “Miss Tiffany, if I’m going to survive, I need your help.”

“I don’t know how I can be any more help than I already have in this situation. I’m just a nurse.”

He hated seeing the fear so clearly stamped on her attractive face as she gazed up at him.

Cupping her face in his hands, he tried to communicate the urgency of his need. Meeting her eyes, his words were sincere when he told her, “I can’t be found here, electronically or physically. You are the only person I have right now. Will you help me?”

After facing off with the estranged man, Ryder could tell that his open honesty affected her, softening her to his request.

“Look, doll, you were amazing. How often do you get the chance to match wits with a killer while a man’s life hangs in the balance?”

Ignoring his attempt at humor, she replied thoughtfully, “Fine, Ryder. This is my last day at this job, so I’ll take a chance for you. Updating your information in our database shouldn’t be too difficult, since we have identity issues with our patients off and on. If I don’t modify that information, they might give him information on you if they think he’s family.

“Him coming here again is too much of a risk for you and the other patients we’re treating, so it’s a lesser of two evils kind of choice for me. In fact, we might be able to stash you in one of the empty offices in the back for the night, then on the off chance that he comes barreling back in here, he won’t find you lying helpless on your back.”

Grabbing her by the arm, he whispered, “You’re a woman after my own heart.”

Ignoring his gentle flirting, she placed a warm hand on his chest and eased him back again. “I’ll be back when things calm down, gorgeous. In an hour or so, it’ll be a ghost town out there. You’ll likely be transferred to another hospital in the morning. They won’t want to discharge you in your condition.”

“I need my…personal effects.”

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Turning her sharp gaze on him, she quipped humorlessly, “I saw your personal effects, Ryder. I’m betting you’d be happy if I just brought your wallet and gun, right?”

“Don’t look at me like that, Tiff. I got a killer on my tail. Of fuckin’ course I want my one and only weapon.”

Sighing, she folded her arms across her chest. “I don’t see how that’s going to happen. The social workers log it and lock it upon arrival. I don’t even have access to it.”

“I can’t protect us without a weapon. Can you bring me one in somehow?”

Her eyes got huge. “Are you seriously asking me to bring you a weapon? No, absolutely not. I don’t mind helping you stay alive, but I’m not going to end up in an orange jumpsuit over bringing a perfect stranger a weapon.”

“So, you think I’m perfect?”

Her eyes widened. “What? No. That was a figure of speech.”

Ryder smirked. “You already called me gorgeous. I think you do like the look of me.”

She glared back at him. “Don’t even think of trying to sweet talk me into breaking the law. I won’t do it. Not for you or any other hot guy.”

“So, now I’ve stepped up to hot?” For some godforsaken reason, he couldn’t stop

himself from flirting with the adorably innocent nurse. Now was so not the time, but Junior was raring to go.

Rolling her eyes, she folded her arms over her chest. “Sure, you’re hot. Are you happy now?”

“Come, sit on Daddy’s lap.” Where the fuck did that come from? Ryder realized in that moment that his dick was doing all the talking.

“You’re freaking unbelievable. You don’t have time for shit like that. You’re a walking dead man, remember? Get your head together.” The woman’s face was flaming red. Whether it was from true anger or embarrassment, he couldn’t tell, but it was fucking sexy as hell.

Her harsh words felt like getting doused with cold water.

“Whatever you say, Nurse Stone.” He heard his tone of voice change as he edged into asshole mode again. Something about being brought up short by the hot nurse seriously aggravated him. She was all kinds of right about how this wasn’t the time or place, but it still pissed him off.

There would never be an appropriate time for a woman like her to sit on his lap. This was a fact he was all too aware of, and it had him feeling some kind of way.

~ Tiffany ~

Tiffany stalked to the nurse’s station and slammed his chart down on the counter, still angry about the big man’s flippant comment. Why did all hot guys think nurses were bimbos? She got enough of that shit from the doctors and interns. She didn’t need to hear it from the hottest guy she’d ever met.

It rubbed her the wrong way that she'd just saved the asshole's life and yet, he still considered her as some type of one-dimensional stereotype. Why exactly did she have to have a thing for handsome, dominant men? It always ended up getting her into trouble.

Punching violently on the computer keyboard, she pulled up his file. Ryder Staunton was quickly changed to a John Doe. Erasing all the other information, she hit save. Identity mix-ups happened occasionally. Someone grabbed the wrong wallet andboom, everything was off. Making such corrections never drew much notice.

Pulling a clean chart, she completed it with his medical information. What the hell was she doing? Forging patient information could not only get her fired but her nursing license pulled. Just the thought of not being a nurse was enough to send her spiraling headlong into a mini panic attack. Freezing, she forced herself to calm the hell down. Tonight was her last night at this place, so there was very little risk for her at this point.

The bottom line was, she just couldn't bring herself to risk the big biker's life. She'd be a piss poor nurse and lacking in human decency if she wasn't willing to risk it all to save a man's life. The fact that he was an attractive and interesting man was just a bonus. Why the hell was she so fascinated with him anyway?

Chewing her bottom lip, she turned the situation over in her mind. Maybe she wasn't interested in him as a man. The nurse in her just wanted him to survive the night. Determining that was indeed the case, she snapped the chart shut and headed back to his bay.

"Well, Mr. Ryder Staunton is now officially a John Doe."

Ryder jerked his chin in her direction. "Thanks a fuckin' lot, doll. With any luck, I might just live to see the light of day."

“You’ll survive. I’ll see to it.” The determination in her own voice surprised her. It must have taken him by surprise as well, because his eyes came up, searching her face.

“Why did you say you were risking your life to save me again?”

“That seems to be the question of the day.” Smiling wryly, she answered defensively, “I work in a hospital. It’s what I do. It’s nothing special to do with you.” She was certain her toughened-up voice didn’t mark her words for the lies they were.

The man’s jaw tightened. “I’m hearing what you’re laying down. Ain’t nobody ever thought I was anything special, so I fully understand.”

Tiffany’s mouth fell open, and she wanted to contradict his inaccurate and self-deprecating comment. However, at that moment, one of the physicians walked in.

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“How are you feeling, sir?” The doctor was on automatic pilot, speaking before he even looked at Ryder’s chart.

“Not so good, doc. My head’s all fuzzy. Can’t seem to remember anything.”

Grabbing the chart, the doctor performed a cursory evaluation, his response short and clinical. “You were hit by a vehicle. A moderate to severe concussion can lead to short-term memory loss. Chances are it will come back, with the exception of the memories surrounding the accident itself. It’s not unusual to lose those memories permanently. Do you need something for pain?”

“Hell, the fuck no. I ain’t interested in taking nothin’ to screw my head up even more.”

“If you change your mind, let us know. The pain might become quite severe.”

Tiffany was getting annoyed with the physician. He didn’t have the courtesy to even look at Ryder when he was talking to him. One glance at him on the way into the bay communicated he was a biker, and that was all the narcissistic doctor needed to dismiss him as a person. What’s more, she could see how it embarrassed Ryder to be marginalized, especially in front of her.

“I’ll survive a little pain. Drug addiction, not so much.”

Tiffany quickly interjected. “I’ll keep a close eye on him, Dr. Cole. If the pain gets above eight, I’ll let you know.”

The clean-cut young doctor's eyes landed on her and he responded warmly. "I know that you will, Miss Tiffany. You are one of the best nurses we have at St. Mary's."

Feeling her face flame red, she turned and began organizing supplies in a side cabinet. "Thanks, Dr. Cole." Tiffany had forced the words from her mouth, not liking the way he treated her and Ryder differently.

Come to think of it, the majority of the doctors were total asshats at St. Mary's. She knew what his drill was. Dr. Cole had asked her out a couple of times already. Now she knew why her gut had been telling her to hold back.

Sitting outside Ryder's bay until everything died down, she brainstormed ideas of where she could stash him for the rest of the night. An idea came to mind, and it was perfect. Slipping into his small bay, she murmured, "It's pretty quiet out there. We should get you moved."

Wrapping his arm around her neck, she helped him slip out of the back of the bay and down a quiet hallway.

"Where are we going, doll?"

"I was going to stash you in an office, but I thought of an even better idea. I'm going to put you in Duncan's lab."

"Who the hell is Duncan?"

"He's a friend of mine. He's got a grant to study TB and stuff like that."

By that time, they were in front of his lab. Using her name badge, she swiped the door open. Thank God it was a small hospital. No one cared much about security unless something bad happened.



“Shit, is it safe in here?”

“Sure. Just don’t touch anything, and whatever you do, don’t eat anything out of the mini-fridge.”

“Like I would.” His lip curled in mock disgust as he spoke.

“Here, I brought you a package of scrubs. You need to wear them along with the paper cap. Anyone walking by will think you are just pulling an extra shift.”

“Fuckin’ great. Are these even going fit my fat ass?”

Leaning back, she glanced at his rear. “Oh, quit your whining. Your ass doesn’t have an ounce of fat on it, by the way.”

“Great, now you’re developing a sense of humor. This night just keeps gettin’ better and better.”

“I almost forgot. If anyone looks like they’re going to come in, make this gesture.” She held up her hand, palm out.

“And why would I do that?”

Pursing her lips, she answered reluctantly. “It’s American Sign Language for stop. It’s our signal that we’re handling samples containing dangerous contagions. You know, like active tuberculosis and flesh-eating bacteria.”

“You’re pulling my leg, right?” He stopped mid-step, pulling open the plastic pouch of scrubs. She tried not to look at his taut, naked ass as he jerked up his hospital gown.

“Of course not. It’s all part of what Duncan studies.”

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He went back to dressing, grumbling under his breath, “Fucking crazy-ass doctors. Can’t believe you folks use a freakin’ hand gesture for something that dangerous. You folks are fuckin’ unbelievable.”

Tiffany cringed slightly. For all his lack of education, the big biker was absolutely right about procedures being pretty lax at St. Mary’s.

Feeling the need to justify herself, she interjected, “There is a written protocol, but you know how people are.”

“Yeah, well, this ain’t the place to be cuttin’ corners. Fuck, can you help me get this shirt on?”

She rushed over to him and helped him pull it out of the plastic. “At least you got your fat ass covered all on your own.” She smiled, hoping some gentle teasing would put him in a better mood.

“Keep talkin’ about my ass, princess, and I’ll start checkin’ out yours again.”

Lifting the shirt up as he bent down, she replied jokingly, “You wouldn’t be the first.”

“I noticed that. Got something going on with that asshole of a doctor?”

Helping him work his injured arm into the sleeve, she was careful not to hurt him more. “Not that’s it any of your business, but no. I’m not seeing him or anyone else here.”

“Not even the glorious Duncan?”

Laughing softly, she tried to imagine Duncan being interested in her. “Actually, you’re more Duncan’s type.”

“That ain’t never gonna happen, doll. I only like the ladies.”

“Well, I’m sure they all flock to you, big guy.”

“I’ve got your big guy right here,” he said with a flex of his hips. “Wanna shake his hand?”

Swatting at him playfully, she eased the shirt the rest of the way over his head. “Be good for a few minutes and you might survive the night.”

Looking up, her eyes collided with his heated gaze. Smoothing the shirt down his chest, she realized her hands were lingering a little too long.

“Keep touching me like that, and the wood I’m sportin’ is going to have your name written all over it.”

Without meaning to, her eyes traveled down, landing on his huge bulge. Oh my. How could he be turned on when he was running for his life?

“Christ on a cracker, what’s wrong with you?”

Hooking his arm around her waist, he pulled her flush with his body and murmured, “You’re the only thing right in my world at the moment. Ever thought of stealing a moment in time, just for yourself?”

His eyes were filled with heat and his voice was laced with desire. Frowning, she

tried to make sense of his words.

“I live a dangerous and unpredictable life,” he explained with a fierce edge. “Sometimes, when I see something I want, I just grab it. Even if I only have it for a moment, it can live in my memory instead of my imagination.”

Absently rubbing her hand up and down his muscular chest, she responded with a whisper, “That makes more sense than a lot of things I’ve heard.”

“I like the way your hands feel on me. I know I ain’t nothin’, but sometimes a man needs a taste of heaven.”

Looking up at his gorgeous, scarred face, she could see him moving closer. Her eyes drifted down to his lips, and before she could think of what to say, he was kissing her.

If she thought he was going to be rough and demanding, she couldn’t have been more wrong. His lips ghosted over hers, teasing and pulling her into his thrall.

Suddenly, her hands slid through his hair. His mouth became more demanding, his tongue swiping across the seam of her mouth. He was begging for entrance, and she wanted more than anything to give it.

Instead, she pulled back, forcing distance between them as she struggled to pull herself together. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me. I shouldn’t have—”

“Don’t fuckin’ apologize for the best moment of my entire life. Just fuckin’ don’t bother,” he snapped.

Turning his back to her, she took the opportunity to beat a hasty retreat. Quickly twisting the blinds shut to conceal his presence, she gently shut the door behind her. Walking back to her station, the reality of her entire situation set in.

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She hadn't known him long, but it was easy to figure him out. The man who thought he wasn't worth anything was everything she'd ever dreamed of having in a man. Running around in leather and doing God only knew what didn't mitigate the fact that he was intelligent, insightful, funny, passionate, and breathtakingly dominant. A woman would have to be comatose not to see how he easily cut through all the crap and got straight to the point. After everything he'd been through, it was a testament to his strength.

Tiffany liked his suggestion about stealing a moment just for herself a little too much. Regardless of the positive spin she normally put on her life in order to make it bearable, the truth of the matter was things had been pretty damn rough.

Moving three times inside five years, struggling to get in a semester before he caught up with her, and the stress of never knowing when he was going to show up or how long he was going to toy with her before he showed himself was really taking a toll on her.

She desperately needed just one moment of the intimacy she craved to get along. That Ryder had the same feelings was like a sign from God. He was right about it being something to hold onto to get through the long, sleepless nights. Maybe she should just loosen up and grab her one moment of happiness before things went to shit again.

~ Ryder ~

It was just his fuckin' luck to have the hots for a woman who clearly wanted no part of his irresponsible ass. Didn't know why he tried to kiss her, knowing she'd never see him as anything more than a dirty biker. Nice women always had their

preconceived ideas about his kind.

Ryder was so sick of his life always being filled to capacity with the wrong kind of women. The club whores were all the same. Each had some sad story to tell, and none of them were quite right in the head. They weren't the kind of women a man could settle down with and trust his heart to or trust to raise his kids. His club brothers had learned that the hard way. Even the club president had been burned, coming home to find his woman in bed with the mailman. Who in their right mind fucked their mailman?

Shit, he was almost as pathetic, having the hots for his new nurse. He needed to stop thinking of her as a possibility and get his head screwed on straight. She worked at the hospital to fuckin' help people, not to be taken advantage of by her patients.

The pretty brunette was destined for the arms of a nice doctor or lawyer, not an ignorant biker. Ryder had saved every cent he'd ever made to afford a home and family. It was one of the reasons the club whores chased his ass so diligently.

He'd held out, waiting to find someone special. Ryder was the kind of man who understood that, when it came to women, half the battle was knowing what you wanted in a life partner. He wanted someone sweet, strong, and classy. The rest was a combination of preparing for the life he dreamed about, recognizing when a woman had the right stuff and then engaging with her enough to be sure she was the one.

He had enough in the bank to buy a nice house and fill it with all the things a woman needed to live a comfortable life. Unlike the majority of his club brothers, he was sick and tired of sleeping with tramps and groupies. If he was ever lucky enough to land a wife, he'd make it a point to treat her right.

The last thing he wanted was to see tears in his woman's eyes. He wanted to see something soft and righteous. His gut twisted as he realized he wanted love.

Sinking down into a rolling chair, he leaned back and tried to sleep. This was as close to safe as his life was likely to get anytime soon. He'd be a fool not to take advantage of the locked door.

Slipping off into a deep slumber, he dreamed of the thing he'd probably never have. In his dream world, he had a beautiful, willing woman in his arms. Though they had their eyes closed and were kissing, he knew instinctively who the woman was. Her light floral cologne and the taste of her cherry lip gloss gave it away.

His hand slid through her long brunette hair, and he just enjoyed the moment. In his dream world, hands skimmed over him, setting off a wave of need fiercer than any he'd known before. Her hands drifted down to his pants. Apparently, in his dream, he was wearing scrubs as well, 'cause she pulled the elastic waist down beneath his junk. The moment her delicate hands landed on his cock, his eyes sprung open.

"You got a thing for molesting innocent, hard-workin' bikers, doll?"

Her lips were hot on his neck as she whispered her reply. "Didn't want you to think I wasn't interested. The kiss was just..."

Trailing off, she left him to fill in the blank. The realization hit him like a freakin' ton of bricks that his kiss had apparently put her into a tailspin of sorts. He knew nice women were easy to rattle, but he just never thought himself capable of doing the rattling. A huge tidal wave of lust hit him hard and fast.

"Give me your mouth, darlin'. I need it."

Nodding, she slid to her knees in front of him. Swallowing hard, he wondered if he was still dreaming. Her warm, wet mouth closing over his heated flesh banished that thought from his head. This woman was putting her all into it, taking him deep and swirling her tongue around the head as she sucked at him.



Grabbing a handful of her hair, he guided her up and down his cock, careful to avoid choking her on its massive length. The visual of seeing himself sliding in and out of her mouth tore him up. Then one delicate hand closed around his ball sack and she squeezed him gently.

“Fuck.” He hissed the words as he filled her pretty little mouth with his seed, rocking him to his core. She was everything a woman should be, and he wanted to bury his face between her legs in the worst way. “Come, it’s your turn. I’m gonna lick you ‘til you can’t even walk.”

Laughing, she stood and leaned over, kissing him again. “As sweet as that offer is, I have to get back. Rest. You only have a couple of hours before shift change.”

The side of his mouth tilted up and he relaxed back into the chair again, feeling all the muscles in his body loosen. “Whatever you say, doll. Thanks for lending me those sweet lips. You got no idea how much I needed that.”

Smiling indulgently, she replied, “I can’t imagine a big, sexy guy like you has to go without very often.”

Reaching out and grabbing her by the nape of the neck, he pulled her down for another kiss. “Ain’t never had a problem with quantity. ‘Til now, the problem has always been quality.”

Her answering smile was soft and sexy, just like the woman it belonged to. “Careful, I’m starting to think you’re just a big old sweetie.”

“I’d always be sweet to you, doll.”

“Bet you’re a man of your word.”

Something about how she said that made him believe she thought them to be true.

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“You give me one goddamn minute and I’ll prove it.”

She shook her head, those brown locks swaying around her beautiful face. “Wish I had a minute. We can’t get distracted by sex. Remember the angry man with long, stringy hair? We need to be on the lookout for him and keep you safe. Don’t you have people who can come and help you?”

“I got brothers. Taking care of him is my assignment. I ain’t gonna call for no backup ‘til the job’s done.”

“Jesus, you’re supposed to kill him?” she asked, sounding shocked.

“Best you don’t think on what I’m meant to do to that ornery bastard. Get back to work before they come lookin’ for you. I’ll think of something, doll. I always do.”

Nodding, she avoided looking in his eyes. That wasn’t a good sign, but best for her to get her head around what he did early on, ‘cause when this was all over, he was definitely gonna come looking for her again.

~ Ryder ~

Ryder spent the next couple of hours mulling over his options. The one inescapable fact of his life was that he simply could not stay here after the light of the coming day. He needed to get his wallet and get the fuck outta town, taking Ace with him. The only way to keep Tiffany safe at this point was to put distance between them.

A plan slowly formulated in his mind. He’d pretend to settle down back in his

emergency room bed when she came for him. Once she was out of the building, he'd discharge himself whether they liked it or not. Members of his club did it all the time. It was called leaving against medical advice. They could advise all they wanted, but in the end, it was still his choice to stay or leave.

Once he was out, he'd buy a gun at a local pawn shop and hunt Ace down like the mangy mongrel he was. When it was all over, he'd come for Tiffany. No matter the time, the expense, or the protesting on her part, he'd make her fall in love with him. Hell, the pretty little witch was already halfway there. If there was one fuckin' thing he was competent at, it was wooing women.

Before he knew it, she was standing over him again. "Time to wake up, mister sleepyhead. You don't look very comfortable wedged in that tiny chair. Ready to get back to your comfortable bed?"

"I need to get outta this joint, doll."

"I hear they've lined you up a bed at Mercy. Transport should be here for you within an hour."

Grabbing her by the hips, he pulled her down into his lap. "I was gettin' worried that you forgot all about me back here."

Smiling warmly, she brought a bottle of water to his lips. "You're too tasty to forget."

His eyes shot up to hers. "Is that a fact? Ain't no woman ever told me that before."

"I thought you might want to know."

"Gobbled a lot of dick in your day, princess?"

Biting her bottom lip, her face heated and she shook her head.

“I didn’t think so. You seem kind of shy about it. You gonna be shy about me returnin’ the favor?”

Her eyes shot wide open. “Get your mind back on staying alive, will you?”

“The coast is clear? You didn’t see our guy, did you?”

“No, maybe he’s not coming back.”

“I’m not getting my hopes up. He’s pretty tenacious.”

She slipped back and off his lap. He followed her until they were standing face-to-face.

“I honestly don’t know what to make of this situation. It’s getting progressively harder to believe all this is actually happening.” Before he could respond, she turned and headed through the door.

Grumbling as they headed out, he did a mental assessment and felt as if his body was stronger. “Unfortunately, it happens to me all the time. Don’t worry, I’m hard to kill.”

“He needs to leave you the fuck alone.”

“Careful, doll, you’re starting to sound like a woman who gives a shit. Those are in short supply in my world.”

He climbed into bed, noticing that the sheets had been changed. She quickly covered him with a blanket that had been heated. Next, she tenderly changed out his bandages. He liked how she held down his skin when she pulled tape up and

smoothed her hand over his skin as she cleaned him. Hell, this must be what it felt like when someone gave a shit about you. Instead of just demanding shit from you constantly like the club whores, they were kind and gentle. It felt wonderful, and Ryder desperately wanted more of it.

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Pulling over a tray, she murmured, “Try to eat a little something. You need to keep your strength up.” Fidgeting with the front of her shirt, she asked anxiously, “Are you going to be at Mercy if I come and visit you tonight?”

Sighing, he waved her over. “Look, doll, you stay away from wherever I’m supposed to be, ‘cause you know it ain’t safe.”

Nodding, she whispered, “Take care of yourself. I left my number on a little piece of paper in your shoe. Call me if you need anything.”

Cupping her chin, he tilted up her face to look into her eyes. “I don’t know what’s going on between us, but I want more of it. What do you say I give you a jingle when it’s safe, and we’ll see where this goes?”

She nodded to him. “I like you, unlike your little friend with the stringy hair. He’s kind of an asshat. Do you have any idea why he’s gunning for you?”

“I killed his brother,” Ryder choked out in a hoarse whisper.

Her gaze held tight to his, searching his face for some clue as to why he would do that. The poor woman honestly looked shocked shitless by his abrupt admission.

Cursing under his breath, he stated flatly, “Hey, babe, I never said I was a saint.”

She began to scoot back. “I don’t know how I feel about that.”

“You’re too trusting, Tiff. You warmed right up to me, even though I look like

leashed carnage.”

“I’m not mentally deficient.”

“I’m all too aware of that fact. You should be commended for not assuming the worst of me, but I’m not like most people.”

“It was your eyes,” she blurted.

“My what?”

“You can tell a lot about a person by looking into their eyes.”

Ryder swallowed thickly. “What about my eyes caught your notice?”

Moving a little closer, she spoke softly. “Your eyes are very honest and a little haunted. I don’t know if you realize it or not, but you’re very direct. I’m thinking you don’t bother lying very much because you could don’t care what people think of you.”

Her insight shook him up a little. He wasn’t used to being read so clearly by another person. Trying to get back to the point, he insisted, “I’m just pointing out that most people aren’t very nice, doll. You need to be aware most people you are going to meet are pretty selfish and self-absorbed.”

The look on her face told him she wasn’t buying his attempt to redirect the conversation.

“Why’d you do it, Ryder? You’re a decent person. If you killed someone, there must have been a reason.”



“It was self-defense, but I’ve done other bad things. I’m not technically what you’d call decent.”

“I refuse to believe that you’re a bad person.”

For some reason, her insistence that he was a decent person provoked his anger. “Well, you better get your head around the fact that I am damn sure not a hero. You know, not all of us had parents at home checking our homework and teachin’ us to be God-fearing little girls and boys. Some of us came from truly shitty circumstances. We had to do things nobody wants to in order to survive from one day to the next.”

“I can’t see you hurting me.”

“There is a world of difference between being capable of and willing to hurt a woman than being a decent human being.” Running his hand through his short, spikey hair, he spat out gruffly, “Shit, girl, I’m trying to give you a piece of advice in case I don’t make it. There’s no goddamn nice way to say that. Just do me a personal favor and don’t be so trusting.”

The empathy on her face nearly took his breath away. “I promise to be more cautious in the future. Does that make you happy?”

“Sure, babe. It thrills the fuck outta me.”

“You’re going to be fine. You’re hard to kill, remember?”

Her gentle teasing took the edge off, causing him to smile.

“Look, I’ve got to go give a report. Stay put and be safe.” She pushed away from the bed and started for the door.

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“I ain’t used to a woman tellin’ me what to do,” he grumbled.

“Think of it as a suggestion,” she teased. “I’ll call your room once they get you to Mercy. You’ll be needing some jammies and stuff.”

His expression snapped back to angry in a heartbeat. “You’re gonna stay the fuck away ‘til I say otherwise, just like we talked about. Got it, doll?”

She froze in place just inside the doorway. He could tell she was shocked by his anger. Fuck, why couldn’t he dial it down a notch?

“Any idea why you’re suddenly so annoyed?” Her head was tilted to the side and her expressions more curious than angry. Most chicks would be running for the hills. This one at least had enough of a heart to cut him some damn slack after everything he’d been through. That spoke volumes about the kind of woman she was.

His eyes held hers as he tried to articulate what was eating at him. “‘Cause you’re not listening to me, and I don’t like repeating myself.” The words were tossed out with no heat this time. Glancing away, he finished, “If you keep sticking your nose in my business before I’m at full strength, you’re likely to wind up dead.” His voice broke. “You can’t be dead, sugar. You just might be my one, and I’d die if that bastard put so much as a scratch on your skin.”

She nodded, a small smile forming. “I get it. You’re being protective in your own screwed-up way.” Fuck, her voice sounded almost cheerful. “Just remember, you catch more flies with honey.”

“Work with me here, doll. I can only take so much stress.” If Ryder could hear the desperation in his own voice, so could she.

Nodding, she headed out of the bay with that little smile still playing on her face. Shit, that woman was something else, and he was circling back around to her as soon as it was safe.

The pretty little thing was in and out several times in rapid succession before dropping a kiss on his lips and heading home for the day. He gave her fifteen minutes to be sure she was gone and then headed to the nurse’s station. Twenty minutes of ruckus later and he was strolling out the door. Well, it was more like hobbling with dignity, but at least he was a free man again.

Ticking off his priorities kept them clearly in mind on a day when he was not only limping but light-headed. First, he needed to stay out of sight as much as possible. Second, he needed to buy more ammo. For some reason, when they gave back his gun there were no bullets in the clip. He always counted his shots. According to his calculation, he should have had at least four bullets left. Even though he hadn’t gotten off a shot during the altercation with Ace that landed him in the damned hospital, he had earlier that day. The bottom line was, carrying an empty gun was no kind of protection at all.

The one and only silver lining in an otherwise shit situation was the knowledge that the pretty little nurse was miles away.

Tiffany sat in her SUV listening to her favorite music mix. Ryder was not fooling anyone with all the bullshit about complying with Dr. Cole’s transfer order. Her women’s intuition told her the man had no intention of going to Mercy Medical. He needed a swift kick in the pants for thinking he could fight off a killer all on his own when he wasn’t even stable on his feet. He was a serious badass; there was no doubt about that. However, he needed to hold up somewhere and recuperate before something bad happened to him.

Seeing him staggering out of the emergency room was verification of her worst suspicions. The stubborn fool was dripping sweat and limping as he tried to make his way down the street. Something in her chest tightened when he reached up to shove his sweaty hair out of his face. Starting her SUV, she pulled up beside him and rolled down the window.

“If I’d been a snake, I’d have bitten you.”

Panicking slightly, he jerked his head around. “What the fuck are you doing here, Tiff? We talked about this.”

Rolling her eyes, she just knew he was looking for his killer. “He’s not here. I’ve been keeping an eye out for you. Besides, we didn’t talk. You talked and I just listened. Get in. I want to have my say.”

Cursing under his breath, he swung himself around the other side of her vehicle and climbed into the passenger seat.

“Buckle up, hon. You’ve had a pretty rough time of it as of late. We wouldn’t want you to get injured if I have to brake hard.”

“What part of ‘being around me is dangerous’ don’t you understand?”

“The part about how you plan to defend yourself when you can barely walk.”

“I’ve got to end this,” he insisted.

“You can get back to shooting up the west once you’re fully recovered.”

“You sure the fuck are not just taking me home with you. Get your head around that fact right goddamn now.”

“Do you always curse so much? It’s not your best feature,” she replied calmly.

“Yeah, babe, we both know what you think my best feature is.”

“Your eyes.”

“Thought I was tasty.”

She bit down on her bottom lip. “You are. You have the most beautiful brown eyes, though. Can’t get them out of my mind.”

Looking out the back window, he murmured, “That’s real nice, doll. I need to stop somewhere to buy bullets.”