



Shadow's Edge

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Category: Romance, New Adult, Action, Mc

Description: Kyle “Kai” Ghost is a shadow in the field—an elite covert operator with Indigo Security, trained to track and eliminate threats before they surface. She’s spent years building a life of precision and control, far removed from the chaotic world of the Knights MC and the father who abandoned her. But when her latest mission leads her back to the place she swore she’d never return, she’s forced to confront old wounds, deadly enemies, and an undeniable attraction to the one man who might truly see her.

Jagger, Vice President of the Knights MC, has spent his life in the dark corners of society, fighting battles most men wouldn’t survive. But nothing prepares him for Kyle—a woman who defies expectations, challenges his every instinct, and threatens to unravel the walls he’s spent years fortifying. As they race against time to dismantle a ruthless trafficking ring, their fates become tangled in a fight that’s as personal as it is deadly.

In a world where trust is a luxury and love is a risk, Shadow’s Edge delivers a pulse-pounding blend of action, forbidden attraction, and a battle for justice that could cost them everything.

This book was previously published in Susan Stoker’s kindle world as Force Projection. It’s been re-written and extended.

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Chapter 1

Kyle

The tires of my Vanquish S hummed against the asphalt as I neared the Knights MC clubhouse, the landscape around me an eerie reminder of a past I'd spent years trying to outrun. Every street sign, every familiar bend in the road, whispered memories I had no interest in revisiting. Some people took comfort in nostalgia, I found it suffocating.

Little girls dream about their weddings—the white dress, the flowers, the perfect love story unfolding like a fairytale. My best friend in second grade had been different. She'd imagined herself in a tux, standing beside the woman of her dreams. Last year, I'd watched her marry that woman, both of them glowing in matching white gowns, looking like princesses out of a Disney movie. It had been beautiful. Inspiring, even. But dreams like that? They'd never been in the cards for me. Mine had gone up in flames before I even had a chance to believe in them.

A bitter chuckle slipped out as my mind flickered to my childhood reel: a trainwreck of screaming matches, a mother drowning herself in alcohol, a father who barely acknowledged my existence. The highlight reel ended in a crescendo of bullshit—the day my mother took the easy way out, leaving me to clean up the mess.

If it hadn't been for Duke, my uncle, stepping in when he did, I would've been another casualty of the chaos. Instead, he pulled me into his world—Indigo Security, a top-tier investigations and protection company. From day one, I was put through the wringer. Firearms, combat training, intelligence work, you name it, I did it. By

twenty-one, I had my helicopter pilot's license and was recruited for covert government ops. We were the Ghosts—phantoms in the field, slipping in and out unnoticed. It was everything I craved: adrenaline, purpose, and most importantly, distance from my past.

Yet here I was, twenty-four hours fresh from the Sand Pits—the hellscape of the Middle East—pulling into a place I swore I'd never step foot in again. Why? Because Duke asked me to. Because I owed him my life. Because he'd said the one word that shattered every promise I'd made to myself. Trafficking.

A low rumble of an engine behind me signaled Match pulling in. We'd been through hell together, but our jobs didn't exactly allow for a carpool situation. At the edge of the lot, the trailer that transported our bikes sat waiting. The guys all had Harleys, but I craved speed—my Kawasaki Ninja was built for it, custom wheels, sleek paint job, and fast as sin. My car was no different. The Aston Martin had been a gift from a job in Monaco, and I loved it so much I struggled to part from when I was at home. A blacked-out Vanquish S, every inch of it luxury and muscle wrapped in a dream.

The weight of exhaustion settled into my bones as I idled for a moment, eyes tracing the building in front of me. The clubhouse had changed since I was a kid, it looked cleaner, more refined. But I knew better than to be fooled by fresh paint. The ghosts of the past didn't fade so easily.

A loud grunt yanked me back to the present, and I laughed outright as Match struggled to unfold himself from his truck. We'd taken a beating this time, and while I had my share of bruises, Match had shielded me when a mud wall collapsed, so he was worse off. Watching him move was like witnessing an old man try to bend steel.

I could've sat there, stalling a little longer, but movement at the door caught my eye.

Duke stood there, solid as ever. Beside him? The last person I ever wanted to see. Nixon ‘Preacher’ Ripley—my sperm donor. He looked the same, sadly too much like me, and I hated him for it.

More figures emerged from the building. Data, one of the Ghosts, and another Knight I didn’t recognize, but my focus stayed on Duke as he approached. He pulled me into a bear hug, but the moment pressure hit my bruised ribs, I groaned. He let go immediately, frowning.

“Couple bumps and bruises, old man. Not a big deal.” I shrugged it off, unwilling to show how much they actually hurt.

Data shoved between us, wrapping me in a hug of his own. “Good to see you, babe.”

“Yo, what the fuck am I?” Match bellowed from across the lot.

“You don’t get a hug, ‘cos you don’t got tits!” Data shot back, grinning. Laughter rippled through the group, everyone except Preacher, who stood there staring at me with something unreadable in his eyes. Good, let him stew in it.

Match scowled as he grabbed his gear. That was his default setting, perpetual grimace. In all the years I’d known him, I could count on one hand the times I’d seen him smile. Thirteen, to be exact. And even then, it had been terrifying.

I made my way to my trunk, pulling out my civilian duffel, my military bag, and my rifle case. Data grabbed my duffels and took them inside. He knew better than to touch my rifle, everyone did. That was mine.

As I turned to follow, my father’s voice cut through the air like a rusted blade.

“Kai.”

I stopped, eyes locking onto his. Neutral expression, no weakness, no emotion.

“It’s good to see you,” he said, awkward and out of place.

I didn’t respond, just nodded and kept walking. Let him squirm.

Inside, my eyes adjusted to the dim lighting. The clubhouse had cleaned up well. Gone were the sticky floors and seedy corners crawling with bacteria yet to be discovered by modern science. The men here seemed more disciplined, the space more structured. Still, it wasn’t my world.

Duke’s voice pulled me back. “We’re headed this way.” He nodded toward the hallway leading to the MC’s core, the armory, Church, offices.

“I’m not locking it up.” I gestured to my rifle.

Duke smirked. “We’re going straight to Church, Kai.”

As the people in the room shifted, heading in the same direction as us, I fell in line behind him and Preacher. The unfamiliar Knight from outside kept pace beside me, but I didn’t spare him a glance. I wasn’t here to make friends.

I was here to get the job done. And then? I was gone.

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I heard the shift in the room behind me—boots scuffing against the floor, the low murmur of voices as the rest of the group moved in our direction. The air felt heavier, charged with a mix of curiosity and tension. Without hesitation, I fell in line behind Preacher and Duke, my steps steady, my mind already calculating the next few moves.

Beside me, the guy kept pace, his presence a silent but undeniable weight. I didn't need to glance his way to know he was watching me, assessing, trying to figure out where I fit in the dynamic of this club.

Too bad for him, or maybe lucky for him, I wasn't looking to fit in.

Names didn't matter because all their faces blurred together. This wasn't a reunion, and I wasn't here to make friends. I was here for one reason only, and once the job was done, I'd be out of here as fast as I'd rolled in.

So, whoever he was, whatever silent questions he had circling in his head, I didn't give a shit. He wasn't my problem. None of them were.

"Jagger," his deep voice suddenly murmured beside me, sounding rich and smooth like aged whiskey. The name rolled off his tongue with quiet confidence, and finally, I turned to take him in. The dim hallway lighting did him no favors, but even in the shadows, I could tell he was tall, broad-shouldered, and carried himself with an easy assurance that spoke of experience. Dark hair framed a strong face, and though I couldn't make out much more, something about him held my attention for a beat longer than I intended.

I gave him a brief nod, acknowledging the introduction, before turning back and stepping into the room. The vast table in the center dominated the space, a battlefield for discussions far deadlier than most people could imagine. Sliding into a chair next to Data, I set my rifle case carefully on the floor, my ribs reminding me with a sharp throb that I wasn't at one hundred percent.

When I looked up again, the lighting in the room gave me a proper view of Jagger, and my breath caught. A fresh wave of pain radiated from my ribs at the involuntary inhale, but it wasn't just the physical discomfort that made my stomach twist. He was hot in a way that wasn't just attractive, it was dangerous. The kind of good looks that made him impossible to ignore, and the kind that got him exactly what he wanted. Short beard, tousled dark hair, and hazel eyes that were strikingly clear now that I could see them properly.

"You're drooling," Data snorted quietly beside me, fingers flying over his laptop keyboard as he pulled up files.

I rolled my eyes but didn't bother denying it. Instead, I adjusted my seat, stretching out in a way that made me look relaxed, even if my body protested the movement. The rest of the Club and the Indigo team filtered in, claiming their places while Duke and Preacher positioned themselves at the front of the room.

As soon as the door shut, Preacher got straight to the point. "You know why we're here," he said, his tone heavy with the weight of the situation. His gaze swept the room, and before he could make eye contact with me, I looked down at the table, my fingers idly tracing the wood grain. I wasn't interested in meeting his eyes, wasn't interested in whatever thoughts were running through his head about me.

"There's been a sharp increase in kidnappings—kids and women disappearing off the streets, some in broad daylight," Preacher continued, his voice tight with frustration. "So far, two boats have been intercepted, but we were too late for most of the victims

on board. And that's not all, drug-related deaths have spiked. The FBI believes the Venezuelans are making another move to control distribution. Evidence points to them being behind bad batches circulating the streets. Just yesterday, a group of college students was found dead in a frat house. The drugs they bought were laced with rat poison—one of Veneno's calling cards."

The name made my head snap up. Veneno.

Duke's first job for me had been to investigate a trafficking ring in Belize tied to them. They had been smuggling girls, some as young as fourteen, to a Boko Haram trafficking network. Sharkey and I had spent months following that lead, and what we uncovered had shattered whatever remaining innocence I'd had left. Since that day, fighting that war had become a personal mission. Anytime a trafficking operation needed handling, my name was the first on the list. I tracked the major players, but new ones were always surfacing. Still, the Veneno were different. I knew them like I knew my own scars.

Beside me, Data hit a key, and the projector in the center of the table whirled to life, casting a detailed map onto the wall beside Duke. Routes, names, connections—it was all there.

"Why the fuck would they do that if they're trying to control distribution?" a biker across the room demanded, his brows furrowed.

It was a good question, and one I already had an idea about.

"Think about it," Jagger spoke up, his voice steady and confident. "Spread the bad shit around, use your own guys to deal the good shit, and watch as the competition collapses. When other dealers start losing business because no one trusts their supply, you take over their territory. It's a basic control method—eliminate the competition without firing a single shot."

The biker across from him grunted, skepticism thick in his tone. “Sounds fucked up to me. If it were me, I’d flood the streets with the good shit. Get everyone hooked, make them crave it, and be known for selling the best.”

It was logical on the surface. But I already knew the flaw in that plan.

“But then you still have competition,” I cut in before Jagger could respond. “Say the bad batches are laced with poison and no one knows where they’re coming from, but you’ve got a reputation for pure product? Dealers will abandon the others and come to you. Less risk and guaranteed quality. It’s psychological warfare as much as it is business.”

Jagger nodded. “Exactly.”

Before anyone else could chime in, Duke’s voice carried across the room. “Jagger’s right. The Veneno don’t just want a piece of the market, they want the whole damn thing. And they’re willing to wipe out anyone who stands in their way.”

His gaze swept the room, pausing just long enough on each face to make sure everyone was paying attention. It was a tactic he’d mastered, holding a room in the palm of his hand without ever needing to raise his voice.

“Yesterday, the rest of Indigo had the chance to meet the Knights. Kyle and Match have just returned and are joining us now,” he continued, nodding in our direction.

I felt the weight of several pairs of eyes shifting onto me, some curious, some skeptical. No doubt a few of them were wondering what the hell I was doing in a room full of hardened bikers and operators. Duke must have noticed, because his grin widened slightly before he spoke again.

“I can see some of you wondering what Kyle’s doing here. Let me explain.”

Behind him, the projector flickered to life, and footage from our bodycams and the helo-cam began playing on the wall. Because of his status and reputation, Duke had clearance to review all mission recordings, and this wasn't the first time he'd used them to showcase our skills to clients. The only difference now was that our audience consisted of bikers who probably assumed I was a secretary.

Data had been the one to compile the reel, and I smirked when I heard the opening chords of Linkin Park's *Iridescent* play over the footage. Subtle, Data. Real subtle. The Indigo guys knew me well—when I was waiting or needed to focus on a target, I often hummed random songs under my breath. Everyone had their own method of centering themselves. One of the SAS guys I'd worked with hummed the British national anthem before he took a shot. Seriously, the British special forces were a riot.

The footage rolled, showing me sliding into the cockpit of the Raider helicopter. That machine was my baby. It hadn't even been rolled out for military use yet, but Indigo had secured a lease to test it in live operations. Fast, agile, and built like a damn dream, it had been fully customized to suit our needs.

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On the screen, Match and I were mid-mission, scanning the terrain for signs of a hostile encampment. As I banked left, the missile warning system suddenly blared, flashing bright red on the console, but the Raider had maneuverability unlike anything else. One quick shift, and the missile veered off course, missing us completely.

“Oh goody, they want to play rough!” my own voice rang out over the footage, cutting through the instrumentals of iridescent.

The scene shifted to us confirming a hit over the radio. “Confirmed,” the clipped voice said—the coded term we used when a target had been neutralized. These days, we had to be careful with our language. Even if the men we took down were monsters, they were still lives that had been ended.

I glanced around the room, watching the expressions of the bikers as they absorbed the footage. Some looked impressed, others unreadable. But one thing was certain—none of them were underestimating me anymore.

The beat shifted, and suddenly, Jay-Z and Linkin Park’s Numb/Encore filled the room, pulsing through the speakers like a heartbeat. The footage playing on the screen had to be from one of the tail-end guys in our unit because I was further up ahead, sweeping the area on foot for recent signs of movement.

Dressed in a fitted gray t-shirt, camouflaged Kevlar vest, and matching combat pants, I moved with precision, my assault rifle gripped in front of me while my sidearm was holstered against my thigh. My pack, modified to carry my sniper rifle without it knocking against my legs, sat snugly against my back just in case. Typically, we’d be

decked out in full camouflage, but sometimes, conditions forced us to strip down to essentials. This had been one of those moments.

As I focused on the footage, the chorus of the song hit, and the entire room erupted in laughter. At the exact moment the lyrics rang out—What the hell are you waiting for?—I turned to the screen and shouted the words along with it. It was perfect timing, a brilliant catch by Data, who was always a pain in the ass but had a knack for pulling these kinds of gems from our footage.

Then, the next clip rolled in—the one that had made my name legendary.

Two years ago, we had been deployed to retrieve two soldiers captured by Islamic State fighters. As we'd fast-roped from the helicopter, the mission went sideways. Hostile fire rained down, forcing us to scramble for cover behind a mud embankment. I barely had a second to set up my rifle before I caught movement through my scope—a militant aiming an RPG directly at our helo, which was still dropping guys into the kill zone.

It was instinct. A split-second decision. The wind was right, the angle perfect, so I squeezed the trigger.

The bullet met its mark at the exact moment he fired, detonating the RPG in mid-air and taking out the cluster of fighters near him.

Apparently, a shot like that was one in a billion.

Since then, I had pulled off better. I wasn't the type to brag, but I'd tested out a Canadian military-issued McMillan TAC-50 and taken out a hostile at just under three thousand meters. That record was eventually shattered by a sniper in the Canadian Special Forces, and I had nothing but respect for the guy. That was pure fucking skill.

The room buzzed with conversation, the low murmur of voices blending together. I tuned it all out, my attention locked on the faces around the table. Some were familiar, old comrades from past missions, men who had fought beside me, bled beside me. A few smirked at me, others offered small nods or winks, silent acknowledgments of our shared history from the footage.

But no matter how much I tried to focus on the room as a whole, my gaze kept drifting back to one person. Jagger.

He sat across from me, posture relaxed but his presence was anything but. He hadn't shown much emotion since I first saw him outside with Preacher earlier, but now, sitting at the table, his expression was unreadable, his eyes sharp and unwavering. There was something about him, something quiet but charged, like a storm on the horizon.

I let my gaze drop, taking him in. His cut was worn but well-kept, a clear testament to time spent in the club. And there it was, the VP patch stitched across his chest, a silent declaration of his rank and his authority. That alone should have told me enough, but I wanted to know more.

Slowly, I lifted my eyes back to his face and our gazes locked. For a moment, the noise of the room disappeared entirely, fading into nothing but the space between us. It was a silent challenge, an unspoken question neither of us was willing to put into words. I didn't back down, and neither did he. The air between us felt charged, thick with something unnamable.

Then someone at the table shattered the silence, and the spell broke. But even as the noise of the room rushed back in, I knew one thing for certain, this wasn't over.

“Fuck me! You're Kai Ghost.”

The reaction was nothing new. People never expected me to be that Kai Ghost. With my blonde hair and curves that didn't exactly scream "elite sniper," I didn't fit the stereotype. Most assumed I was some bimbo tagging along, a girl playing dress-up. It was always amusing to watch their assumptions shatter.

JAGGER

Kai Ghost.

The name rattled something in my memory, a fragment of recognition I couldn't quite pin down. But looking at her blank expression, I couldn't tell if she even knew the weight her own name carried for Gauge who'd said it.

"You didn't realize that?" The guy who had arrived with her leaned back with an easy grin, draping his arm over the back of her chair. His hand curled around her neck, giving it a casual shake—an action that, for reasons I couldn't explain, irritated the hell out of me.

"I mean, you just watched her in action," he continued. "That's barely scratching the surface. You even saw the rifle she walked in with, and the name still didn't click?"

"I thought it was a man," Gauge admitted, still sounding floored. A chorus of agreement rippled through the table, but my mind was racing, piecing it together.

Then it hit me.

"Back the fuck up—you're the one who took out Ramirez and his entire crew."

The realization landed like a punch. The woman sitting here, watching us with cool detachment, wasn't just another operator. She was a ghost in the truest sense—feared by the enemy, revered by those lucky enough to fight alongside her.

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And I had expected someone... bigger. Some bruiser built like a tank, the kind of sniper you imagined being able to endure days in position, body hardened for the brutal patience required of the job. But from where I was sitting, the only extra weight she carried was in her chest?—

Jesus, focus!

Across the table, Preacher dropped heavily into his seat, the look on his face telling me he hadn't known either. This was going to be interesting.

"You never told me," He croaked at Duke.

Preacher kept me in the loop about everything—club business, rival movements, and, most importantly, his daughter, Kyle. Every week, he reached out to Duke for updates on her, piecing together fragments of her life from afar. But somehow, this particular detail had slipped through the cracks of their conversations.

Duke shot Kyle a glance, his expression unreadable, but she was the one who answered.

"I told him not to."

"Why?"

"Because it was none of your fucking business."

Her voice was calm, steady, but her eyes turned cold, like a steel gate slamming shut.

There was no emotion on her face, just that impenetrable wall she'd built around herself.

We all knew the history between Kyle and Preacher, or at least, we knew the version she believed. What she didn't know, what Preacher had failed to tell her, was the truth. And judging by the way she reacted to seeing him, first outside and now again in this room, it was clear she hadn't forgiven him. In fact, it was clear she wouldn't forgive him, not unless he finally stepped up and addressed the past.

I couldn't look away from her as Preacher pushed himself to his feet. He and Duke launched into the details of the traffickers, laying out everything we had on them. I already knew the intel inside and out, so I focused on the Ghosts instead, watching their reactions. None of them looked surprised. If anything, their occasional side glances when certain names were mentioned told me they'd dealt with these bastards before. But through it all, Kyle sat there, unmoving, absorbing every word with a quiet intensity.

She wasn't like the MC Princesses I'd met over the years. I'd transferred here from my old man's chapter, and I'd seen my fair share of entitled, spoiled daughters who thought their last name made them royalty. Kyle wasn't one of them. She wasn't loud or demanding, didn't expect special treatment. Hell, she carried herself like she didn't give a damn about the Club at all. And maybe she didn't.

She also wasn't the type of woman I usually went for. I'd always had a preference, and Kyle didn't fit it, but I'd be damned if I could look away from her.

And the more I watched, the more I started to think that the tough, detached exterior was exactly that—a front. A shield. I wasn't a shrink, but I'd seen enough in this life to know you don't go through what she did as a kid and come out of it unscathed, you just learned to hide the cracks.

For me, women had always been temporary. Distractions at best. Being part of an MC meant relationships were nearly impossible, and I'd never met a woman who made me think twice about that. It had been a long time since I'd focused on anything outside of the war we were waging against the traffickers.

Kyle, though? She was different. I didn't know how, but I was damn sure going to find out.

Chapter 2

Kyle

Once the briefing wrapped up and we had a solid understanding of what we were up against, the weight of the last few weeks finally hit me like a freight train. My body ached, my mind felt drained, and I wanted nothing more than to crash somewhere far away from the chaos.

"Let's get you to your room," Preacher suggested, already holding the door to Church open.

I hesitated for half a second before following him out. As we climbed the stairs, an uneasy feeling began to creep up my spine. It wasn't exhaustion, it was something deeper, something I didn't want to acknowledge. By the time we reached the door to my old room, the feeling had solidified into full-blown dread.

"No fucking way!" I stopped dead in my tracks, pointing at the door like it had personally offended me. "Fuck knows who's done what in there, so, no."

I wasn't naive. I knew exactly what kind of shit went down in MC clubhouses. What people did behind closed doors wasn't my problem, but this room? This room had been mine since I was born. Every night I'd spent at the compound, I had slept

inthatbed,inthatspace. And now? Now, I had to assume it had been turned into a goddamn porn palace, and the thought of stepping into whatever had gone down there made me want to gag.

Preacher just smirked and, with unnecessary theatrics, pulled a key from his pocket and unlocked the door. “Relax,” he ordered as he pushed it open.

I felt Duke and a few of the other guys watching from behind me. Sighing, I forced myself to move forward, stepping into the room with cautious suspicion.

“No one’s been in here unless it’s been to clean it since the day you left, Kyle.”

I took a slow turn, eyes scanning every inch of the space. Everything was exactly where I had left it. The bed, the furniture, the pictures on the walls, it was like walking into a frozen moment from my past. Even the old sketch of my dream bike was still taped up, its edges curling slightly with age.

The tension in my shoulders loosened just a fraction. I nodded and dropped my bag beside the bed before sitting down heavily, absorbing the familiarity of it all.

“I’m glad to have you back,” Preacher muttered. I glanced up to see him rubbing the back of his neck, the awkwardness clear in his stance.

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“Thanks.”

For a second, just a second, I thought that might be it, but then he asked, “Are you ever going to call me Dad again?”

The question hit the air like a gunshot.

I didn’t flinch. Didn’t look away. My voice was steady, emotionless, as I met his gaze and asked, “Do you think you deserve it?”

Silence stretched between us. He held my stare for a moment longer before shaking his head and walking out, the door clicking shut behind him. A crack formed in the cold stone inside my chest. It happened occasionally, but I wasn’t about to dwell on it.

With a sigh, I kicked off my boots and lay back on the bed. The familiar comfort of the mattress wrapped around me, the pillow top and memory foam molding to my shape. Once upon a time, this had been the best night’s sleep I’d ever had.

The peaceful moment was short-lived.

“K-k-k-k-Kaaaaiiii,” Smokey sang, drawing out my name like a damn cartoon villain as he dropped onto the couch beside my bed. Mack and Hammer flanked him, grinning like jackasses. Duke had stayed in the room after Preacher had left, but he remained standing, as always, arms crossed like the ever-watchful sentinel he was.

“So, tell me your stories,” Smokey said with a smirk. “We saw some shit from Data,

but I wanna hear it from you.”

I smirked back, knowing exactly what would get a reaction out of them. “I’m getting a new rifle.”

“The fuck?” Just like that, the tension eased. The exhaustion was still there, but for now, it could wait.

A girl could never have too many rifles and scopes—fact. And today? Today, I was getting my hands on one of the holy grails of the sniper world. “The Canadians agreed to send over aTAC-50.” The words felt almost reverent as I said them, knowing exactly the kind of reaction they’d get.

“The fuck you say?” Hammer snapped, just as expected. The man had a sixth sense for sniffing out high-caliber firepower, and this was the equivalent of dropping a steak in front of a starving wolf.

Grinning—something I didn’t do often—I nodded slowly. “Arrivesmañana, Chico.”

Duke’s lips twitched as I glanced at him, though I didn’t miss the flicker of green-eyed envy in his gaze. They all knew the unspoken rule: unless the world was burning down around us, no one touched my weapons. And so far? That level of emergency had never happened.

Before Hammer could work himself up into a proper tantrum, Duke cut in, his voice shifting into that no-bullshit tone I’d known my entire life.

“Right, fill me in. What the fuck happened to your ribs?” Straight to the point, as always.

I exhaled sharply, rolling my shoulders as I filled them in on the incident that had

been gnawing at me since it happened. I laid it out, how we had just barely caught sight of the soldier setting up with an RPG, and how we had managed to dive for cover at the last second. But the part that wouldn't leave my mind—the part that felt like acid burning a hole in my gut—was what I said next.

“They shouldn't have known we were there, Duke. There was no way they could have known our location. If we hadn't noticed him before he fired, he would've hit us instead of that mud wall.”

Duke's gaze darkened as he stared at the blank wall in front of him, his mind clearly racing in the same direction as mine.

“Unless someone told them,” He mused.

“Exactly.”

That was the conclusion I'd come to the moment it happened. The idea that there was a rat in my unit—in my team of men I had handpicked myself—made my blood boil. Not knowing who I could trust outside of Indigo made it worse. While I was here working with the Knights, I had another mission of my own: to find the leak. Someone had tipped off the enemy, and I was going to find out who.

The familiar burn of whiskey slid down my throat as I sat at the bar, lost in thought. Around me, the guys carried on with their usual banter and nonsense, but I had long since tuned them out. After years of hearing the same bullshit, I'd mastered the art of selective hearing. Instead, I focused on the bottle in my hand, a gift from one of the Irish guys before we'd left. When he'd handed it to me, Match and I had practically cried laughing at the name—Bushmills Black Bush.

“I didn't peg you for a whiskey drinker.”

The deep voice pulled me from my thoughts. I glanced over my shoulder and found Jagger leaning against the bar, watching me with that unreadable expression he seemed to favor.

Wordlessly, I turned the bottle so he could read the label. His reaction was priceless.

“The fuck is that?”

“A gift from an Irishman.” I smirked, lifting my glass. “Not bad, actually. Once you get past the initial shudder of drinking something called Black Bush.”

Jagger’s throat worked as he threw his head back and laughed, the deep rumble of it sending an unexpected shiver down my spine.

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“To be fair,” I added, smirking, “it could be a blonde bush or a brown bush, and it would still make you shudder.”

Still chuckling, he reached for the bottle, snagging a glass from behind the bar before pouring himself a small measure. He held it up, giving me a look that was half-amused, half-challenging.

“At least it wasn’t a red bush.”

And just like that, the tension from earlier faded, the weight of the mission temporarily forgotten in the warmth of whiskey and unexpected company. I choked hard on the whiskey, the burn of it shooting straight down the wrong pipe. Instantly, my lungs ignited in protest, and I started coughing, trying to clear the fiery liquid while simultaneously resisting the urge to scream at the pain radiating from my ribs. Each hacking cough felt like a knife twisting into my side.

“Ribs...” I wheezed out between coughs, wincing as I clutched my aching torso.

“What?” Jagger leaned in closer, his voice low, his breath warm against my cheek. I’d be lying if I said he didn’t smell damn good—clean, masculine, like leather and a hint of spice, and a stark contrast to the Knights I had known in the past. Most of them reeked of cigarettes, motor oil, and enough sweat to fry an order of fries in their greasy hair.

“She busted her ribs,” Smokey, the ever-nosy bastard, chimed in, leaning past me to address Jagger directly.

I watched up close as Jagger's jaw clenched, a muscle ticking in irritation. Before I could react, he reached out and lifted the side of my tank, exposing my bruised side. Normally, I'd have broken his hand for a move like that, but maybe the damn Black Bush was making me more tolerant. Or maybe it washim.

His sharp intake of breath was followed by a slow, angry hiss. Yeah, he'd seen the damage. The scratches were healing, but the deep bruising that stretched across my ribs told the real story, one that still hurt like hell.

"Someone did this to you?" His voice was low, rough, tight with barely contained fury.

I shrugged, reaching for my whiskey and nudging Smokey out of the way to grab the bottle. "Perk of the job."

"Who?" The single word was a challenge and an offer. He wasn't asking for clarification—he was asking for a name so he could go and personally rearrange someone's face.

"A guy had an RPG and fired at them," Smokey jumped in again, clearly enjoying the show. "It hit the wall, and if it hadn't been for Match jumping on top of her"—he motioned toward Match, who was now glaring daggers in his direction— "I reckon we'd have been visiting her in the ICU."

That was a bit dramatic, in my opinion, but I wasn't about to start debating life-and-death scenarios with strangers. So, I stayed quiet, sipping my whiskey and letting the burn settle inmy stomach while trying to push the past few weeks out of my mind.

Duke had given clearance on what we could share with the Knights, but I still preferred to keep my shit locked down and only discuss things like this with Indigo. At the end of the day, this guy—in fact, this whole MC—belonged to Preacher. I

didn't trust Preacher with jack shit, so why the hell would I trust any of them with information that could blow back on my team?

Jagger's fingers drummed lightly against the bar as he studied me, spinning his glass idly. "Why do you do it?"

I tilted my head slightly, assessing him. "There are things out there that the public will hopefully never know about," I kept my voice quiet but firm. "Things that would keep you awake for weeks. I'll fight until my last breath to make sure they never hit our shores."

His eyes flickered at that, something unreadable shifting behind them.

"The public doesn't even know the surface of it," I continued. "Then there's the trafficking. I can help with all of that, so I do."

Jagger nodded slowly, taking in my words. There was something about the way he looked at me in that moment, like he understood more than he was letting on. Like he wasn't just hearing my words but feeling them.

Then, with a smirk, I downed the last of my whiskey and grinned at him. "And I get to play with fucking awesome toys."

Jagger exhaled a quiet laugh, shaking his head as he lifted his own glass in a silent toast before taking a sip.

Pushing up from my stool, I grabbed the bottle of Black Bush and waved it at him as I turned toward the hallway. "See you around, whiskey snob."

I heard the faint sound of his chuckle behind me as I made my way toward my room, my body already screaming for sleep. I needed at least eight hours tonight, double

what I usually got, and then I'd be ready to go again.

Footsteps followed behind me, and I didn't have to turn around to know it was Match. After missions, it was our unspoken rule—we bunked in the same room, watched each other's backs through the nightmares that shadowed us. Those bastards were brutal, and I felt for the soldiers who didn't have someone to keep them anchored when the demons clawed their way into the dark.

One of my friends, Hunter, had lost a couple of men on his last mission. He'd barely made it out himself after getting caught in a car bomb. I couldn't imagine the hell his nightmares put him through, but I knew they had to be soul-crushing. Whatever was left of him that hadn't already been destroyed in the explosion was probably being eaten alive from the inside out.

I made a mental note to call him, to check in.

Pushing the thoughts away, I headed into my room while Match made up the couch. Sleeping in this space was going to be weird as hell, but for the first time in a long time, I had a real bed, and no matter how messed up my head was, that was something I could work with.

Getting into bed, I turned out the light once Match was settled, pulling the blanket up as I buried my head into the pillow. The exhaustion from the day should have been enough to knockme out, but my mind had other plans. The images from past missions bled into old memories of this place, a jumbled mess of violence, heat, and familiar walls.

And then, cutting through it all, was Jagger's laughter.

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I clung to that image, the sound of it, letting it override the chaos in my head. If I focused on that—on something real, something grounding—sleep would come. And eventually, it did.

JAGGER

Watching her walk away, I couldn't shake the way she'd reacted when Smokey spilled about the RPG incident. The way she had brushed it off like it was just another day on the job, and the way she had survived it at all.

Shuddering, I turned away and made my way to Preacher's office, knowing I'd find him exactly where I expected, buried in reports, going over every scrap of intel we'd gathered.

Kyle needed to know the truth. She had to hear it from him.

It was like she was throwing herself into the fire, daring the world to take her out. And I got it, I'd done the same damn thing when I'd first patched into my old man's chapter. I lived reckless, rode fast, partied harder, anything to escape the shit in my head. Then Preacher accepted my transfer, sat me down, and gave me some hard truths that I hadn't wanted to hear, but ones I had needed to. I saw the same self-destruction in a lot of the younger guys now. We let them burn it out, then hit them with wisdom when they were ready to listen.

The Knights MC wasn't about chaos and indulgence anymore. We weren't just a gang playing out biker fantasies—we were boots on the ground, helping people who had no one else to turn to.

This human trafficking case wasn't the first time the government had reached out to us for help, but it was by far the biggest and most dangerous. These weren't just back-alley criminals slinging dope or running guns for clout. These were men designing weapons meant to kill invulnerable, selling them to street kids who didn't even know what they had in their hands. The drugs? We'd already covered that earlier, but if you've ever seen a child dead from rat poison-laced heroin, or a girl so high she gnawed through her own arm, you'd understand the kind of hell these bastards were creating.

And then, the worst of it—human trafficking.

Tiny kids, teenagers, women, all sold off like fucking livestock to be used, broken, and sold again. Some never made it past the first transaction. The ones who did? Well, their nightmare only got worse. This was a war we'd never walk away from.

But now, with the Ghosts backing us? We had a shot at actually making a dent in it.

Reaching Preacher's door, I rapped my knuckles against it, waiting for his inevitable gruff response before stepping inside. He barely glanced up at first, still focused on the papers in front of him, but when he caught the look on my face, his pen hit the desk. His full attention was on me now.

"You need to talk to Kyle."

I stood rigid, arms crossed. Normally, I'd show a little more deference when talking to our president but today wasn't normal. My blood was running hot over the guy's daughter, and I wasn't about to bite my tongue about it.

Preacher ran a hand across his chin, messing up the usually neat edges of his beard. "Why?"

I sighed and moved to the chair across from him, settling in. The moment he heard what I had to say, it'd be him punching walls, and I figured making myself a smaller target was a good idea. I'd thrown hands with Preacher before, and he was like the fucking Hulk when he got worked up.

But at the end of the day, only he could fix this. And if we were going to take down the bastards we were up against, we couldn't afford to be fighting our own demons in the process.

Chapter 3

Jagger

Trudging through the tall grass behind the clubhouse, I listened to a few of the guys groaning about being up at the ass crack of dawn. Technically, 11 a.m. wasn't exactly dawn, but these idiots had been partying hard last night, throwing back drinks with a few club girls, completely ignoring the late-night briefing Preacher had given us. Now, they were paying for it.

Duke had decided that this morning was about identifying the club's best shooters. He and the Ghosts had set up a makeshift shooting range, complete with an assortment of targets—watermelons, tin cans, and, oddly, matchboxes perched on top of some crates. The matchboxes didn't fit with the others, but something about their placement nagged at me.

As I scanned the setup, I realized someone was missing. Kyle.

Several of the other Ghosts weren't present either. Maybe she was getting a pass since she'd just returned? It seemed out of character, but I didn't see her anywhere.

Leaning against a tree, I crossed my arms and waited for the rest of the group to catch

up, watching as the Ghosts methodically prepped their equipment. They inserted earpieces, checked their rifles, and fine-tuned their sights with precision. I had been looking forward to seeing Kyle in action—word was, she was a hell of a shot—so her absence was disappointing.

Not that I should care. I usually went for women who were feminine, polished, and more concerned with their looks than their combat skills. But Kyle, she had a natural femininity that didn't need embellishment. And the fact that she was a highly trained operator? That was just fucking attractive.

“Dearly beloved, we're gathered here today...” Duke's voice rang out, catching everyone's attention.

We all turned to him, confused as hell. His smirk widened as he glanced at the Ghosts, who were already shaking their heads.

“Now that I have your attention, ladies,” Duke continued, “I want to see your shooting skills today. Knowing each of your strengths will help us in our engagements and any planning we need to do.”

His tone shifted then, the teasing edge gone, replaced with something serious. “Two hours ago, someone kidnapped Senator Menzie's sixteen-month-old daughter.”

Silence fell over the group like a hammer.

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“The nanny was out walking her in a stroller when she was attacked. She’s now in hospital in a critical condition. The kidnappers also used a signal jammer to block all security footage in the area.”

“They were fucking prepared,” I muttered, disgust curling in my gut at the thought of some bastards snatching a kid.

Duke nodded. “This wasn’t random, it was a targeted hit on a high-profile civilian. That means we’re moving out soon to find Perry Menzie, and we need to know who can do what. So, let’s get started on that.”

“Where’s Kyle?” Preacher cut in, glancing around.

Duke’s grin widened. “She’s...waiting.”

The Ghosts started laughing, some shaking their heads as if they were in on a joke we weren’t privy to.

“Kyle is an experienced sharpshooter, as you know,” Duke chuckled. “Right now, she’s just waiting for us to get into position.”

The rest of the Knights started scanning the tree line, looking for her. I had already been discreetly doing the same, but I still hadn’t spotted anything unusual. She wasn’t at the compound, it was too far away, so where the hell was she?

Sighing, Preacher pinched the bridge of his nose. “Duke, man, I appreciate you looking out for her, but I’m seriously not fucking happy about what I found out

yesterday. She's a fucking girl, she shouldn't be?—”

BOOM.

The watermelon next to him exploded, splattering his face and shirt with sticky red pulp.

Chaos erupted as the Knights immediately drew their weapons, diving behind trees and taking cover on instinct. The fact that I still didn't know where Kyle was had just turned into a serious fucking problem because we now had an unknown shooter with us in their sights.

And yet, Duke and the Ghosts were laughing.

“You little shit,” Duke chuckled, shaking his head. I finally noticed that all the Ghosts had throat mics, advanced comms gear most of us were familiar with in theory but not practice.

Through his laughter, Duke turned to Preacher, reaching out to help him up. “Looks like she didn't appreciate the shit coming out of your mouth.”

Preacher wiped the watermelon from his face, scowling.

Duke smirked. “These new mics stay live instead of needing to be activated manually. So, yeah...she heard everything.”

The Ghosts broke into another round of laughter, and even I couldn't help the grin pulling at the corner of my mouth.

Wherever she was, Kyle Ghost had just made one hell of a statement.

We all turned in circles, scanning the treetops, rooftops, anywhere she could have set up her shot. Now that the initial panic had settled and we knew we weren't under attack, just dealing with a sniper with a grudge against her old man, it became a different kind of problem.

"You won't find her," one of the Ghosts said seriously. "If she doesn't want to be seen, you won't see her."

KYLE

"Shit, my bad. My finger slipped," I muttered to Duke while simultaneously listening to Hunter over the other comms channel. One earpiece connected me to my team, the other to him. Multitasking at its finest.

That didn't mean I hadn't heard what that asshole had said about me earlier, like Preacher actually gave a shit. She's a fucking girl.

Asshole.

"What are you doing?" Hunter asked, his voice calm and familiar.

"Cleaning my new scope. I had an asshole between the crosshairs."

Hunter snorted but didn't comment further. After we hung up, I returned my focus to the scope, watching as the men below swept away the watermelon shrapnel. I'd been lying up here on the clubhouse roof for the past forty minutes, waiting for my cue to start taking out targets.

But my focus wasn't just on the range. The senator's daughter had been kidnapped, and every second we wasted playing target practice made me itch to move. The idea of some bastard laying hands on that little girl made my stomach churn. I wanted to

be out there, tracking them down, ending the nightmare before it even started.

At least now, with Hunter and his team working with us, I felt better. I knew how they operated—efficient, tactical, ruthless when necessary. Exactly what we needed. Because the guys I was currently watching through my scope barely looked like they could tie their own damn boots.

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“Are they trying to solve world fucking debt?” Match snapped beside me, adjusting his position.

“I doubt they’d be able to spell world fucking debt,” Sharkey added with a snort.

I grinned but didn’t take my eyes off the scope.

“Kai,” Duke’s voice crackled in my earpiece.

“Yeah?”

“Right to left,” he ordered.

Shifting slightly, I double-checked the readings on my scope, exhaling slowly. Alanis Morissette’s Jagged Little Pill ran through my mind, the familiar melody grounding me.

“Affirmative,” I murmured. “Might want to tell the little girls to hold onto their panties, Duke.”

Match let out a rare laugh beside me.

Without another word, I squeezed the trigger, taking out the first watermelon in a perfect explosion of red pulp. The tin can beside it followed, flipping into the air. Next came the grapefruit, then the apple. I lined up the matchbox next, sending it flying. And finally, my favorite shot of all—the matchstick itself.

Flicking the safety back on, I remained still, watching through the scope. The Knights stood frozen, staring at the now-empty shooting range. Their reactions were priceless—shocked, impressed, a little unnerved.

As I passed my scope over Preacher's gray-looking face, I caught sight of Jagger. Unlike the others, he wasn't in shock. He was grinning.

"Think the VP has a thing for you, Kyle," Sharkey commented, watching through his binoculars.

I ignored him, waiting for an update from Duke.

Finally, as the Knights began setting up new targets, his voice came through my earpiece. "You can show yourself, Kyle."

I pushed up from my position, brushing dust from my shirt and pants before slinging my rifle over my shoulder. Sharkey stood beside me, already grinning as he raised his binoculars.

"Let's give the boys a wave," he suggested.

Together, we raised an arm in unison, waiting for them to notice.

It was Jagger who spotted us first. From this distance, we were barely distinguishable against the bright sky, but the second he pointed, the entire group turned, their heads snapping in our direction. Shock settled over them, a mixture of awe and what-the-fuck expressions.

"Y'all can come down now," Duke ordered through my earpiece.

Smirking, I shot one last glance through my scope right at Jagger before making my

way toward the ladder.

The space from Preacher had been nice, a rare reprieve even though it hadn't been that long, but we had a job to complete. As we had discussed this morning, if the Knights didn't have the necessary skills, we would rely on Hunter and his team while keeping the Knights on standby as backup. This wasn't the ideal option, though. We needed as many fighters as possible to take down these traffickers, and right now, our numbers weren't where they needed to be.

To cover our bases, I had also reached out to an old friend, Mace. I had known him since my early training days, and his crew was anything but amateurs. They had handled cases like this before—some worse. If shit hit the fan, I knew I could count on Mace and his people to step in. One of his guys, Adam Montgomery, was always ready to move. For now, it was just a heads-up but having them as a backup plan was reassuring.

Following Sharkey and Match down the stairs and out of the clubhouse, we crossed the grass toward the group of Knights waiting for us.

“How the fuck you see so far?” one of them asked—the same guy who had spent the morning bragging about how much pussy he'd pulled the night before.

I had instantly disliked him. I didn't have time to babysit some asshole whose brain was stuck between his legs. Actually, doing a quick reassessment, considering his phrasing and lack of basic sense, I figured he probably didn't have a brain at all.

Bringing my rifle around in front of me, I pointed to the scope. “Well, now see,” I drawled, deliberately putting on a simpleton-style hick voice, making some of the guys laugh. “I looked in this here area and didn't not see nuttin'. So, Match here says I should look through this lil hole doohickey. It was magic, like I was right behind y'all. Then I closed my eyes and pressed this here thingy.” I pointed to the trigger,

grinning.

Laughter rippled through the group, but when I glanced up, Preacher was watching me with a blank expression. He could disapprove all he wanted, the days when he had any say over what I did were long gone.

“So, now that you know about the doohickey and the thingy, let’s break up into groups and figure out what y’all can do,” Duke clapped his hands, effectively ending the discussion.

By the end of the training session, each of us had three Knights under our command, ready to be tested. Somehow, I’d ended up in a group with Jagger. Teaching him how to use my scope meant getting in close, which quickly turned into an experience.

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I leaned over his back, guiding his hands, and adjusting his stance. It was a simple enough task—except that when my chest pressed against his back, a sharp exhale left both of us at the same time.

Fucking distractions were always dangerous.

JAGGER

It had been a long day of training, and the Ghosts had tested us on everything. We had started with shooting drills, then moved to hand-to-hand combat. Not a single Knight had been able to look away from Kyle as she took on the other Ghosts to show us some useful moves. Her movements were precise and fluid—every strike calculated, every dodge seamless. Not one of the guys had managed to take her down.

Then, we paired off. I ended up against a guy named Match, and the bastard was solid. I held my own, but by the time we called it a night around eight o'clock, I could already feel bruises forming on top of bruises.

Still, I was proud. Smug, even. And judging by the way Preacher looked, he felt the same. The Ghosts weren't moving as smoothly anymore either. We had held our ground, and that counted for something.

Now, I had one thing left to do—catch Kyle alone.

“Kyle,” I called, following her up the stairs. She turned at the top, raising a single brow as she watched me approach. She didn't say a word, just waited, like she knew what I wanted.

Not elaborating, I caught her wrist and pulled her toward her room.

“You know,” she drawled, amused, “I can walk in the right direction without help.”

“We need to talk.”

She opened the door and stepped inside. I followed, not giving her a chance to shut me out. The second I kicked the door closed, I caught her wrist again, spinning her so that her back hit the wood.

The sharp thunk of her rifle hitting the door echoed in the room.

I had intended to talk to her about something. Anything. But being this close, I was done pretending.

“What are you?—”

I didn’t let her finish. I slammed my lips onto hers, rougher than I’d meant to, but I had no control left. The need to taste her, to claim her, had taken over every rational thought in my head.

She could have broken my neck in seconds if she wanted to, but it seemed like that was the last thing on her mind. Instead, she melted against me, her hands sliding around my back, fingers gripping tight. My tongue traced the seam of her lips, pressing insistently, urging her to let me in. The second she did, I didn’t hold back, sweeping inside, groaning as her taste hit me.

This—this had to be what heaven felt like.

My hand moved, slow but firm, trailing down her side before slipping under her shirt. Her skin was warm, soft, and fuck if I wasn’t already addicted. Just as my fingers

grazed the edge of her ribs, a sharp knock on the door shattered the moment.

We jerked apart, breathing heavily, staring at each other like neither of us could believe what had just happened.

“We need to talk,” I rasped, brushing my nose against hers, unwilling to pull away completely. Her breath hit my lips in short, shallow pants, and she nodded, eyes dark and unreadable. The knock came again, louder this time, pulling us back to reality.

Swiping my thumb across her lower lip, I stole one last kiss, soft and slow, something I never did. Hell, kissing had never been an option for me but with her, I wanted more.

“We’ll talk later.”

Kyle swallowed hard and stepped back, straightening her shirt as she turned toward the door. I forced myself to take a deep breath, reigning in the frustration that came with ending that kiss too soon.

The second the door swung open, Duke stood there, arms crossed, an eyebrow arched as he took us in. There was amusement in his eyes and a hint of a smirk tugging at his lips.

“Well, now, it seems I have shit timing,” he mused, shifting his gaze to Kyle. “Hunter just pulled up, so you better put that away.” He nodded at the rifle still slung across her back, a forgotten detail in the heat of the moment.

Kyle exhaled, giving me one last glance before nodding.

“Go do it, baby,” I murmured, giving her a gentle push. “Then we’ll go see who this is.”

She locked the rifle away and turned to me in the safe Preacher had brought up earlier, expression unreadable. “I know who Hunter is. He’s my backup.”

Herbackup? The way she said it, like it was nothing, had me biting back a smirk.

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I followed her through the clubhouse, but as we crossed the main room, Duke caught my attention with a subtle nod, signaling for me to step aside.

“She’s not what she seems,” he murmured as we walked toward a few of his guys.

I studied him. “What do you mean?” I had already suspected as much, but I wanted to hear him say it.

Duke sighed, rubbing a hand over his face before turning to me. “Kai will make you believe she could take on the world with one hand tied behind her back, and hell, maybe she could. But I remember the girl who showed up at my place after her mom died. She was broken. Since then, she’s never stopped. She’s always moving, always protecting, always saving someone. She never just...” He trailed off, eyes dropping to the floor. “Stopped. There are moments when she’s Kyle, an almost normal person. But, more often than not, she’s Kai. Fuck, some of the guys don’t even see the difference between the two, but I’m thinking you might.”

His words hit me harder than I expected. I wasn’t naive—I knew Kyle carried weight on her shoulders most people would buckle under. But hearing it confirmed and seeing the way Duke looked when he talked about her past? That changed everything.

I nodded, giving him the only assurance I could. “I see the difference between the two. You have nothing to worry about from me.”

I turned, heading toward the door, but Duke’s voice stopped me just as I reached for the handle.

“I never thought I would,” he muttered. Then, after a beat, “Just a head’s up, she’ll play ping pong with your balls before you can blink if you fuck her over.”

I might have stumbled slightly as I stepped outside, but I recovered quickly, catching up to Kyle and Preacher as a group of unfamiliar men approached.

Kyle had no idea, but if I ever fucked her over, Preacher would get to me before she could. Not that it would ever happen, because something about Kyle was different.

In fact, everything about her felt different.

I just hadn’t figured out why yet.

As we stepped outside to meet the incoming MC called Valiant—the club Kyle had apparently reached out to for backup—I instinctively stayed close to her. Some might call it possessive, but it was more than that. It was protectiveness.

I knew she could handle herself. Hell, I had seen it firsthand. But that didn’t stop the voice inside me from whispering that I should make sure she never had to. And these new arrivals, I didn’t know them, which meant I didn’t trust them.

Engines cut off, filling the air with tense silence as the men dismounted their bikes. Kyle didn’t hesitate.

“Glad you could join us,” she called out, her voice firm, authoritative. “Let’s get this show on the fucking road.”

Duke had been right when he said she never let herself stop. Since the moment we learned about the senator’s missing daughter, she had barely slowed down. I hadn’t seen her take a break all damn day, and considering everything we had done—physically and mentally—that was impressive as hell.

How the fuck does she keep going?

I followed them into Church, taking a seat as Kyle led the briefing for Hunter and his team. They ran through the latest intel on the traffickers, while Data worked his magic on the keyboard, flipping through images that projected onto the wall behind her.

Kyle spoke with a commanding presence, flipping between information like she had lived in this world her whole life—which, in some ways, she had.

“Who the hell are these people?” Gauge asked, finally voicing the question we had all been thinking as we listened to her recap and reviewed what images Data had managed to track down.

This wasn’t just a kidnapping, it was too perfect, too calculated. This had been planned, orchestrated for a reason.

“Assholes, that’s who,” Kyle replied, her lips curving into a dangerous smile. “That said, they dropped the ball about an hour outside of where the kid was taken.”

The screen behind her flickered to an image of a man walking into a service station.

“Look familiar?”

Hunter’s entire posture stiffened. “Fucking Demingo.”

That name carried weight. We had already been briefed on this bastard over dinner before Valiant arrived, so I leaned back, observing how they processed the information. Their reactions were subtle but telling. Every man in Hunter’s crew had the unmistakable presence of military background—disciplined, sharp, analyzing details like a second nature.

Then, there were the small gestures and the silent communication between them. The way they relayed messages with quick glances and barely-there hand signals. This was going to either be interesting or a nightmare.

“The best news?” Kyle continued, her voice smooth but electric with tension. “Because of this screw-up, we have pictures of the car...” She clicked the images forward to a close-up of a license plate. “...and we know where it’s headed.”

The next slide brought up a map, and suddenly, the tension in the room shifted.

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“You have got to be kidding me,” one of the Valiant guys clipped out, leaning forward like he was ready to come out of his seat.

I had heard Duke mention this place earlier. It’d been where they had found the bodies of a group of girls years ago, murdered, by the same monsters we were hunting now.

Kyle didn’t react to the outburst, just watched them with steady patience, waiting for them to process what that meant.

“Game on,” Match said, breaking the silence.

Kyle’s lips twitched, just slightly, before she stepped back, letting Preacher take over the rest of the briefing.

I shifted slightly in my seat, doing my best to conceal the hard-on that was now making my life difficult. It had been there all day, just from being around her. But watching her command a room, watching the way she worked—calm, confident, dangerous without needing to flex about it?

Yeah, that just made things a whole lot worse.

Chapter 4

Kyle

Steam still clung to my skin as I stepped out of the shower, exhaustion settling into

my bones like a heavy weight. All I wanted was to collapse onto the bed, let sleep drag me under, and forget the day's chaos. But just as I reached for the towel to wrap around myself, a sharp knock echoed through the room.

Figuring it was Match, because who else would it be, I didn't bother looking up.

"It's open!" I called, already moving toward my duffel. My muscles ached from the long day, and all I wanted was something soft and comfortable to sleep in. "I think today went well, don't you?" I said absently as I dug through my bag, pushing aside neatly folded clothes in search of a pair of shorts and a tank top.

My civilian bag, the one with the good stuff, was a rare luxury. Unlike my work gear, these clothes were actually nice—soft fabric, rich colors, and lace-trimmed edges. Hell, even my underwear in here felt like a treat. I pulled out a pair of yellow boy shorts, the kind that fit just right, and made me feel like I had a semblance of normalcy in the middle of all this madness.

"I'm kinda impressed with how many of them know what they're doing," I continued, slipping the shorts on under my towel. "And did you see Jagger shooting today? That man's got some serious skills." I heard movement behind me, but Match wasn't much of a talker, so I didn't expect an answer. He usually just grunted or nodded, so he was a silent presence I'd grown used to. Still rummaging, I found a tank top and pulled it over my head, shaking out my damp hair. "Duke says they have a couple of usable rifles with scopes on them, so that should give us an advantage tomorrow night. Which group are you going in with?"

The silence stretched out with not even a grunt from Match. That was weird.

With a sigh, I decided to just let it go. "Just get into bed, Match?—"

"What the fuck?"

The voice that cut through the room wasn't the one I was expecting. It wasn't the usual low, indifferent response I expected either. No, this voice was sharp, rough, and pissed.

My stomach lurched as I spun around, so fast I nearly lost my towel. Standing just inside the doorway, arms tense at his sides, was Jagger. His eyes burned into me, a mixture of anger and something else I couldn't quite place.

"Match?" He repeated, his voice tight, questioning, demanding.

Shit.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, gripping my towel tighter even though I was mostly dressed.

"I came to talk to you." His jaw clenched tight as he explained and looked around the room. Then, with that same dangerous edge, he asked again, "Match?"

It took me a second to process, my mind sluggish from exhaustion. And then it hit me.

Oh! He thought Match was here. In my room. In my bed.

I swallowed hard. "Nightmares," I explained, my voice quieter now.

Jagger's expression flickered, his anger momentarily replaced with something else—confusion, maybe? His brows pulled together, and damn, even in the middle of a standoff, the man had good eyebrows.

"Nightmares?" he repeated, like he wasn't sure he'd heard me right.

I nodded slowly, watching as the tension in his shoulders shifted, like he was recalibrating. Like he wasn't sure whether to be pissed off or something else entirely.

And that? That was almost more terrifying than the anger.

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“We both get them. So, after a mission, we stay in the same room to help each other.”

His face immediately softened, and he started walking toward me again. “I’m sorry, baby.”

It went against everything I believed to be affected by that one word, yet it managed to crack the concrete surrounding my heart. The guys treated me like one of their own, and unless someone was hitting on me, I rarely received that kind of attention. With Jagger, I couldn’t deny that I enjoyed it.

Shrugging, I went back to getting dressed, very aware of the hazel eyes watching every movement. “It happens to everyone.”

I’d just pulled the tank over my head when arms went around me from behind. Ever since the kiss earlier, I had moments of wondering what was going on with him, mixed with questions about whether I could trust him. I still wasn’t sure, but I tended to go with my gut, which didn’t usually steer me wrong. With this guy, it was telling me that I could trust him, but I would still proceed with caution until I was sure.

“What are they about?” He spoke softly into my neck, causing goosebumps on my arms.

“Shit that happens when we’re away, victims that we’ve failed,” I explained, making it as vague as I could. I wouldn’t tell him that I also had nightmares about the things that my mom had done to me and the moment that I’d found her after she... No, I didn’t think about that.

I felt his chin rest on my shoulder and the slow movement as he nodded. “When did you get this?” His hand swept down the phoenix tattoo on my side that I’d gotten after my first assignment as a ghost. It was on the opposite side of my injured ribs, which were screaming again after today, and represented the moment I’d become Kai and not the girl that I’d been before it—weak little Kyle.

“Just after I joined Indigo and became a Ghost.”

The tattoo started at the top of my thigh and twisted around my back, where the tail feathers transformed into waves. It covered the entirety of my back and was done by a friend of Hammer’s. I’d laid on that table for five hours while he worked to shade and create a masterpiece I admired daily. The tattoo helped ground me and also kept my defenses up. I wasn’t the same girl I had been before, she was long gone.

Additionally, I designed a piece during one of my military assignments, which I then had blown up to cover the center of my stomach. That tattoo was hidden for now as I held my hand firmly over the front of my tank top.

“It’s beautiful,” he murmured.

Turning around to face him, I tried to keep my face blank. “What are you doing here?”

Throughout my childhood and at work, I’d been surrounded by confident men who never balked at a question or showed embarrassment. It was just how it was. Now, watching Jagger try and answer this, something which would have struck me as almost weak if it’d been one of the Ghosts, seemed endearing as he opened and closed his mouth several times and rubbed the back of his neck.

Sighing, he tipped his head back to look up at the ceiling before looking back down at me. “I’ve grown up in this world. You know who my dad is?” It was a rhetorical

question, everyone knew his dad. “I was an asshole until your dad took me on and helped me work my way to where I am today.” The implication that Preacher could be a motivational and helpful guy had me stiffening slightly, something which Jagger seemed to understand based on the sympathetic look that crossed his face. “Not once have I come across something special, Kyle, but in the last couple of days, I think I have. You.”

I was used to the typical bullshit that guys spewed when they wanted something, but for a guy in his position, he wouldn't have to spin those tales normally. I didn't engage in relationships because I had witnessed the pain and turmoil they could bring. I wasn't jaded, nor was I naïve enough to believe that all relationships were like that. I simply wasn't willing to take the risk. As I watched Jagger closely, contemplating his next words, I observed the body language cues I had learned and relied on in my job. Unless he was a Hollywood actor, none of his signals suggested that he was being deceitful.

“Look, I like you, and I think you like me too.” He stood there, watching me for a sign that he was right. I gave him a brief nod and watched his shoulders visibly relax. “Can we...” he trailed off, reaching up to grab a handful of his hair as he struggled to find the words. I could have shown him some compassion, but I had never been in this situation before, and it didn't seem like he had either. Then again, I was still exhausted, and the weight of the case we were working on and my concerns about Perry were heavy on my mind.

“Okay,” he obviously hadn't expected me to say anything because he jumped slightly. This strong biker who took no shit in any area of his life was making himself genuinely vulnerable for me. I couldn't let him tear himself up trying to explain it anymore.

His relief was palpable as he let out a breath, stepped toward me, and pulled me into a strong hug. I wasn't a tactile person, and the team wasn't either, so it took me a

second to relax into it. The second I did, though, he softened as well.

Reflecting on my childhood, I realize that the only person who ever truly hugged me was Preacher, along with a few of the guys. My mother was abusive, a painful reality I tried to avoid reliving, especially after discovering her after she committed suicide. Her letter provided some context for her struggles with abuse and alcohol, but it did not excuse her actions. I could never condone what she'd done.

Shaking myself out of those thoughts, I pulled back from Jagger. "I need to sleep."

He nodded, but what shocked the hell out of me was the soft kiss he pressed against my forehead. It was a simple gesture, but it made something tighten deep in my chest.

"We have a busy day tomorrow, and you need to be ready to work your magic." The side of his mouth quirked up in a small, almost sweet smile that contrasted with the hardened edges of him. "Can I stay here tonight? Just to sleep," he added quickly, noticing the shift in my expression.

"I don't know if that's safe," I muttered, avoiding his gaze. I wasn't worried about him—I was worried about me. If he knew just how deep my damage ran, would he still look at me the same way?

I wasn't oblivious. I knew Jagger and the rest of the MC had likely pieced together parts of my past. Specifically, my childhood and the things I had endured. Hell, if I heard similar things about one of my teammates, I'd recognize the scars they carried. But that wasn't even the tip of the iceberg when it came to my issues. No one came out of my line of work unscathed. The sad reality was, no military personnel did.

"I swear, I just want to build this," he said, gesturing between us. "I've never had anything like this before, and I want to do it right."

I swallowed hard. I appreciated what he was saying, really, but fuck, I was going to have to tell him.

“I get— I have problems when I sleep.”

His brows furrowed slightly. “How do you mean?”

Walking over to the bed, I sat on the edge, staring at the floor. I didn't do this. My team already knew, they didn't need explanations and never had. Unless it affected my ability to do my job, I never had to explain myself to anyone. This was so fucking hard.

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“I get nightmares,” I admitted, still staring at the floor, refusing to meet his gaze. I didn’t want to see pity. Ihatedpity.

My nightmares weren’t just about missions or the shit I’d seen in combat. They were also about the things thatcame before.

Jagger’s boots came into my line of sight, and then he squatted in front of me, his hands lifting to cup my face, forcing me to look at him.

“That’s understandable,” he said, his tone even, steady. “Duke showed us some of the shit y’all have had to do. And we’ve seen the footage from your time away. I get it.”

He said it so easily, like it wasn’t a big deal, but I knew better. We’dsee, because sometimes, my reactions weren’t just thrashing or waking up in a cold sweat. Sometimes, they wereviolent.

Jagger studied me, something unreadable in his expression. “Is it just about that? Or is it about...you know?”

My whole body went rigid.

I could admit it to myself. And I was sure the guys knew that I had nightmares abouther. But I wasn’t going to lay that shit bare forhim.

Whatever he saw on my face made his mouth firm into a hard line. He nodded once, pushing to his feet, then held out his hand. “Let’s do this.”

I hesitated but eventually took his hand, leading him around to my side of the bed while he stripped down to his boxers. I wasn't bashful. I had spent enough time around men, in situations where dignity and pride had to take a backseat to getting changed or cleaned up. But this was different.

Because it was him.

As he pulled off his shirt, my eyes traced the ink covering his chest and shoulders. I knew his back bore the club's patch, a permanent declaration of his loyalty. He was built solid, something I'd already gathered during today's workout. But seeing him like this, muscles shifting under his skin, was an entirely different experience.

Once we were both settled, I decided to lay down some ground rules.

"I don't spoon," I warned. "If I wake up and you're in my personal space, I will cause you pain."

Jagger rolled over, turning off the light before shifting behind me with a sleepy sigh. "What?"

"Spooning," I deadpanned. "Where your body heat melts the skin off my back, and I wake up thinking I'm burning alive."

He snorted, then, to my horror, moved closer, pressing his chest against my back.

"So noted," he murmured, amusement clear in his voice. "Just so you know, I've never actually slept with a woman before. I'm a solo sleeper. Well, unless you count that time me and Gauge got wrecked and woke up where we'd passed out...fucking spooning."

I burst out laughing, unable to stop the mental image of Gauge, the massive beast of a

man, wrapped around Jagger like a teddy bear.

“Photos?” I asked between laughs.

“What do you think?” he drawled.

Oh, there were photos.

MC members could act like aggressive assholes all they wanted, but no way in hell would they pass up an opportunity to capture a moment like that. I had to find them.

“Sleep, baby,” Jagger murmured. His voice was softer now, a little heavier with exhaustion.

Just before I let sleep take me, an image flickered through my mind—the baby face of the senator’s daughter. Tomorrow was going to be hell, we had to get her back because I knew exactly what would happen if we lost her trail.

And I couldn’t fail another baby.

JAGGER

I woke to the sensation of the bed jolting to the left, followed by a heavy thump and Kyle’s muffled groan. Whatever was happening had nudged her farther from me. Fumbling in the dimness, I reached over and switched on the lamp. The soft glow revealed Kyle gasping for breath, her arms tightly crossed over her face as she curled into a fetal position on her back.

I was about to reach across the bed to try and wake her up without scaring her when she screamed.

“No, Mom. Please stop.” She punctuated it with a wheeze, and her hands went to her neck.

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A noise at the door took my attention from her, and I saw Preacher standing there with a look of murder on his face and his gun in his hand. Seeing that she was dreaming, there was an immediate shift from anger to sadness, but he remained where he was watching her.

“Mom, stop! Please, it hurts. My arm hurts.” Then came the gasping.

I glanced at Preacher, who was starting to make sense of what was happening to Kyle. By the tightness on his face, he realized that she’d suffered a measure of abuse at the hands of the woman who’d given birth to her. If the woman wasn’t already dead, he’d have killed her himself.

“Daddy, help me!” The final wail broke both of us.

Looking at me, he whispered through clenched teeth, “Find out. I want to know all of it. My fucking baby—” The last word came out as a croak as he turned around and, with one last glance over his shoulder at Kyle as I shook her gently awake, walked out and closed the door behind him.

There was a thump, and Tarp asked Preacher if he was okay before the footsteps walked away.

Watching Kyle as she woke up, tears streaming down her face, I saw the moment she realized she wasn’t in the dream and that she was safe. When she saw me looking at her, though, her face shut down, and she sat up and went to get out of bed. I couldn’t lose this moment with her, so I wrapped my arms around her from behind and moved so that my legs were on either side of her, with her back to my chest.

“Wanna talk about it?”

She was clammy and almost as hard as a rock as I held her, but I was adamant.

“Ah it’s nothing, just an old thing from a mission. It happens from time to time,” she shrugged. “Can I get up and go to the bathroom?”

The weight on my shoulders over what I was about to say was immense. Moving my head so that my forehead was against her shoulder, I took the leap.

“Your mom was on a mission with you?”

I’d expected her body to pitch forward, so I moved with her when it happened. I had no doubt that she could get out of the hold that I had her in if she wanted to, but Kyle didn’t cause unnecessary pain and damage to people. During training today, she could have a million times over, but she always held back.

“What the hell are you on about?” Her voice was almost brittle, given how tightly her jaw was clenched. “It was a flashback of this mission that had some shit happen, is all.”

“Baby, you were yelling about your mom and asking her to stop because it hurt. At one point, you called out for your dad.”

I’d expected a fight. I’d expected her to deny it or throw me out. I’d expected anything but what she actually did. It was like someone had suddenly drained her of everything as she collapsed back onto me and put her head in her hands. Taking her weight and listening to her shaky breaths in and out, I wanted to take the weight of what had happened, too. I didn’t doubt that what she did for a living stayed with her and that she’d seen things no one should see. If I could take one bit of weight from her, though, I would.

“She was so mean,” she croaked. “I would hide away from her or stay here, but it wasn’t ever enough.” I adjusted her so she sat sideways across my lap with her head on my chest. “I thought that if I could make Dad happy, I could maybe get away from her, ya know?” It was rhetorical, but I nodded my cheek against her head. “Nothing was ever good enough. She would tell me how evil Preacher was, how he sold little girls and other terrible things, and that he hated me. He was never around, which hurt even more and made me wonder if she was telling the truth. Then she got a baseball bat,” she paused and shuddered. I felt sick to my stomach but knew better than to interrupt her. “Dad would come home sometimes, and I’d be so bruised and sore that I’d hide in my room and pretend I was sick. There was even one time I had to walk on my own to the ER because I had a broken arm and bruises all over my body.”

“Jesus Christ!” The nearest ER when she was a kid would have been over an hour’s walk. And Preacher had been so close to finding out...

“Then the day happened,” she sounded almost robotic, like she’d locked that day away.

“Did you ever try to tell your dad?”

Her answer was just to shrug. I would bet my bike that the bitch had told her that he’d never listen or believe her, or she had threatened her in some way. Preacher was going to have a fucking shit fit over this, but I now understood why she had issues with him.

“I’m tired now,” she still didn’t sound like the Kyle I had come to know in such a short time.

There had been contradicting flashes of the woman who was pretty much a legend. On one hand, she was a kick-ass tactical ace who could take down anyone without blinking. Then, on the other, was this vulnerable woman who had never opened

herself up emotionally apart from to her team. I was going to have to tread more carefully than I thought. The other issue was, how did I tell Preacher without breaking the trust she'd just placed in me?

I was about to move us so that we were lying down when she turned around and straddled my lap. The warmth of her pressed up against me almost made me groan.

I watched her as she held my face in both hands and looked into my eyes. Then, shocking the shit out of me, in a move that was tender and something that seemed so far away from the regular Kyle, she gave me a soft kiss.

“Thank you,” she murmured against my lips.

Wrapping her up tightly in my arms, I hugged her before moving us, so we were lying down again. After turning off the light, she went back to sleep almost instantly while I lay there trying to get my head around it all. Preacher was going to be nearly feral when I told him what I'd found out. I had to find a way to do it when Kyle wasn't around because she'd know that I'd told him. I also had to find a way to get Kyle to forgive me when she did find out.

Then there was the secret that Preacher was still holding back from her. When had my life become so fucking complicated? Usually, the shit keeping me awake was the jobs we were doing and the people involved. That all still weighed on me, too, but now there was Kyle.

Fucking hell!

Chapter 5

Kyle

The numbness had started creeping in, a slow, insidious tingle spreading from my thighs to my core as I lay stretched along the thick branch of the tree I'd chosen for the job. In theory, it had seemed like a good pick—solid, sturdy, plenty of cover. But in practice, the bark was rough, digging into my ribs, and the pressure against my pelvis was becoming borderline unbearable.

I shifted slightly, trying to redistribute my weight, but there was no escaping the discomfort. My vagina was practically screaming at me now, a steady pulse of protest that was hard to ignore. I'd spent hours lying on the ground before, elbows pressing into unforgiving dirt, neck cramping, waiting for the perfect shot. But at least then, I could adjust, do my usual focus drills. At least then, I wasn't balanced precariously in a goddamn tree.

Still, I had to count my blessings. No scorpions skittering around my arms, no blistering sun roasting my back. It could be worse. It had been worse. The joke among my team was that we could endure just about anything—bullets flying, wounds bleeding, bones aching—but swamp ass? Swamp ass was the true enemy. It led to swamp crack, and that was a nightmare no one wanted to deal with when you had to lie still for hours or trek through a hellscape of heat and sand.

The tiny earpiece crackled to life, and Preacher's voice came through, smooth and controlled, as always.

“On my signal. Kyle, take two. Hunter, proceed west, we'll take east. Jagger, hit north. Duke, south.”

Hunter and I had been skeptical when Preacher first laid out the plan, but after running through the options, we'd both agreed it was the best way forward. Even if it stung to follow orders instead of calling the shots myself, Perry's safety was the priority.

I reached up, pressing my throat mic twice in acknowledgment. A low-pitched tone confirmed my response, and then I heard the faintest shuffle of movement as my team advanced.

Two guards stood at the front of the compound, armed to the teeth and oblivious to the fact that they were already dead men walking. My job was simple—take them out and provide cover.

Just as I adjusted my sight, a cricket landed on my forearm, its tiny legs prickling against my skin. I ignored it, exhaling slowly, steadying my shot. The targets were a joke. Heavily armed, sure, but if you were running an operation like this and wanted to stay under the radar, maybe—just maybe—you shouldn't be parading around with RPGs strapped to your back and firing random shots into the air like an action movie reject. Fucking amateurs.

I tapped out three signals to warn my team: shots incoming. Then, I squeezed the trigger.

The first man went down without a sound. The second, sensing something was off, reached for his radio, but my bullet found him before he could press the button.

Three taps again. All clear.

But something felt off. Only two guards, that didn't sit right. This compound had been heavily protected before, why the downgrade?

I filed the thought away and refocused on my scope, tracking the teams as they moved. Preacher and his crew disappeared into the shadows, smooth and efficient. Hunter and Blake reached a door, and instead of the usual breach tactics, they held up a foam soccer ball, one of our classic distractions. The moment it rolled forward, shots rang out from inside.

Through my earpiece, I heard the same report from every team. Resistance was high.

The cricket moved, its tiny body brushing against my skin, but I didn't have time to flick it away. My scope caught a figure in dark clothing moving toward Preacher's team. No insignia, no familiar markings. But the sword strapped to their side, that was new. None of our people carried swords.

The unknown reached for a gun, lining up their shot on Preacher's exposed back. I exhaled, focused, fired, and the figure crumpled to the ground.

"Thanks," Preacher's voice came through, low and even.

I pressed my mic once in response. No distractions. No small talk. Just the job.

Gunfire erupted from inside the building as the teams breached. I kept my scope trained on their movements, watching as Hunter's squad navigated forward with practiced precision. Across the compound, Jagger's team engaged incoming hostiles, six of them pushing toward his position. One by one, the teams made it inside. The real fight was just beginning, and I was ready.

The sound of a baby crying sent an icy chill down my spine, and my grip on the rifle tightened instinctively.

We had the baby.

That should've been the end of it, the mission accomplished, and the relief setting in. But something was wrong.

"What the fuck?" someone shouted through the comms, voice sharp with disbelief. A pit formed in my stomach.

"We have a negative on the mark," Hunter's voice came through, tight and controlled. Too controlled.

One by one, the rest of the teams checked in with the same report.

No mark.

Shit.

The warehouse was dimly lit, the air thick with the stale scent of unwashed bodies and spilled gasoline. Three kids huddled together near the far wall, their wide, terrified eyes flicking between us. Hunter's team had found them inside, and now, standing in front of them, I listened as they described a woman. A woman who sounded a hell of a lot like Bo.

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My stomach churned.

Bo had been a friend, a close one. She'd worked alongside my team, running missions with her own crew. We'd trusted her. Then, six months ago, she vanished—no word, no trace, nothing. And now, here she was, not just alive but apparently tangled up in something I never would've imagined.

I refused to believe it. Bo wouldn't be involved in trafficking, least of all with kids.

Before I could even start forming an explanation, Mace—one of Hunter's friends—exploded. His face had gone pale, his breath short and ragged. Shoving his phone into our faces, he pulled up a photo of two women—his sister and his girlfriend.

What the fuck was going on?

Preacher's voice cut through the tension like a blade. "We were set up. They knew."

The words sent a ripple of unease through all of us.

"How?" Hunter's voice was sharp, demanding. He wasn't just angry, he was already strategizing. Already figuring out where the cracks in our intel were.

I couldn't hold this back. Not now.

"I think I have the answer to that," I muttered, pulling out my phone. My pulse hammered in my ears as I held up the screen, showing them the message I'd received

while I'd been in the tree.

A photo. A blonde woman holding Perry. He was asleep, cradled in her arms like he belonged there. Silence fell over the room.

Noah, Hunter's second-in-command, stared at the screen, his disbelief thick in his voice. "Is that Bo?"

We all knew the history between him and Bo, the tension that had lingered for years. The weight of it was written all over his face now—shock, betrayal, something raw and ugly brewing beneath it. No one answered him because no one needed to.

Before we could, Duke spoke, and what he said shattered whatever control we had left.

"It's not what you think," he said. "She's with me."

The world tilted for a second.

Hunter's entire body went rigid. "What?"

The room bristled with energy—dangerous and volatile.

Blake barely managed to grab Noah in time before he lunged at Duke, his hands itching to wrap around his throat.

"And you didn't fucking think to mention this?" Hunter roared. "Not once? There wasn't a single goddamn moment where it crossed your mind that this might bemootherfucking vitalinformation?"

Normally, I had Duke's back, no matter what. Not this time. This time, I just stood

there, arms crossed, watching as Noah strained against Blake's hold. His breathing was ragged, his fury unchecked.

Hunter wasn't as patient.

He moved past Noah and didn't hesitate. His fist connected with Duke's jaw so hard, the impact echoed in the space like a gunshot.

Duke hit the ground, and the kids—already shaken—burst into frightened sobs.

"Shit," I muttered under my breath, motioning for a few of our team to get the kids out of here. They needed to be away from this mess.

The rest of us stayed, because there was no walking away from this disaster.

Duke groaned, slowly pushing himself up. Blood dripped from his lip as he moved his jaw, testing it.

Still, no one spoke. Because whatever the fuck had just happened, whatever this meant for all of us, was only the beginning.

"She can't be compromised. She's finding locations for us," Duke's voice was firm, steady, but there was an edge to it, something tight beneath the surface.

Hunter wasn't having it. He shot to his feet, fists clenched at his sides like he was barely restraining himself. "But you knew she was in there. You knew she'd get the mark and retreat."

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Duke didn't flinch, just exhaled sharply and dusted himself off. "She's not there to intercept and retrieve," he muttered, brushing dirt from his jeans. "She's there to find and pass the locations back to us. If she intervenes, her cover is blown. She'd be in danger, as would the innocents involved." His voice dropped slightly on that last part, his meaning clear.

It made sense. Logically and tactically—it was actually a huge advantage to have someone on the inside. But logic didn't mean shit when emotions were running this high.

Noah wasn't buying it.

"She could be killed!" he snapped.

I snorted. If there was one person who didn't need anyone worrying about her, it was Bo. She was more than capable of taking care of herself.

Duke smirked slightly, as if he'd been expecting that reaction from me. "You don't actually believe that any more than I do," he said, then nodded toward me. "That woman could give my beautiful niece a run for her money."

I rolled my eyes, snorting again, but didn't argue. No fucking way, not when he was telling the truth.

Noah wasn't done. He stalked right up to Duke, practically vibrating with fury. "If anything happens to her, you son of a bitch," he spat, his voice low and lethal, "I will fucking end you myself."

And just like that, he turned and stormed off, heading straight for the bikes.

I exhaled, watching the tension simmering in the air. I hadn't driven my bike to this location. I'd taken an SUV instead, expecting to have Perry in it when we left. Instead, I had three kids, an unexpected bonus. And now, I was begging every higher power that Bo had Perry somewhere safe, because if she didn't...Fuck.

I turned my attention back to Mace, who looked about two seconds from combusting. His anger wasn't just a simmer, it was volcanic. His girlfriend and his sister were tangled in this mess, and his body was coiled tight, a raw nerve waiting to snap.

I stepped toward him, catching his attention before he could say something reckless.

"I won't let you down," I said, my voice firm. "You have me."

Mace met my eyes, searching them, measuring. Slowly, I watched the shift, the emotion bleeding out, the rage dulling into something cold, something controlled. It was the art of war, the tactic we all learned early on—shut it down. Remove the emotion. Focus on facts. Strike with precision.

His expression settled into the same blank neutrality I was wearing. Good. He'd still swing between logic and emotion in the coming hours, but for now, he could focus on being a warrior. Not a brother. Not a lover.

I gave him a brief nod, then turned back toward the SUV. We had a job to do.

JAGGER

The kids were safe, dropped off with the authorities, and the necessary reports filed. One of Kyle and Hunter's contacts had taken over from there. The whole time, the guy had referred to her as Kai, though, and it was eating at me. I knew I had to get

used to it, but to me, Kai was separate from the woman standing in front of me.

Kyle had always carried a masculine name. She owned it. She made it work. It had belonged to her grandfather—a man she idolized. Jagger had given it to her, and it fit.

But Kai? Kai felt... wrong. Like it didn't belong to her. Like it was a shell, a shadow of who she really was. I doubted I'd ever call her that.

We were driving toward Mace's town when she suddenly signaled for us to pull over. The second we did, she broke the news, Perry had been found in the same park where she'd been snatched. A fucking note had been left with her, saying the kidnapper had suffered a moment of madness—grief-driven, fueled by the death of their own child. A bullshit apology.

But the real kicker? The authorities were covering it up. The Senator was pushing for harsher penalties and demanding more power to fight trafficking. If the public knew just how out of control the situation really was, they'd panic, and the government would look weak. They knew this, so, they swept it under the rug.

We were still stewing over it when Hunter's phone rang. It was his dad. And the news was the kind that made the blood in my veins go ice-cold. His woman—Piper—had been taken and a photo had already been sent, just like with Mace's woman and sister.

A single message beneath it.

"Tick tock."

Hunter lost his shit, and it took everything we had to bring him back.

Now, we were holed up in a run-down motel, the walls thin, the air thick with

tension.

Mace, Hunter, and Preacher were in the middle of a heated discussion—or maybe a better word was explosion. They were shouting, strategizing, barely keeping it together.

I'd seen a lot in my life. I'd watched men die in front of me, their last breaths rattling in their lungs. I'd seen women brutalized, kids beaten, soldiers crack under pressure. But this? Seeing them lose control? Seeing Preacher—the man who had always been our rock—looking like he had no answers? What I was feeling right now was a different kind of fear and anger.

One I didn't ever want to feel again.

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Mace's voice rose again, another yell, another flare of rage, then Kyle stepped forward.

And just like that—she took control.

“Data,” she spoke into her cell, voice sharp, no room for argument. “Look into the feeds. Search specifically for any signals near the compound and the Valiant compound. Find us the link.”

She turned to Hunter, her gaze firm, steady.

“I’ve made contact with Bo,” she said. “I’m waiting for her to return the request.”

And just like that, the room shifted, because now we had a lead. And if there was one thing we were good at—it was hunting down our enemies.

Coleman, one of Mace's old friends, stepped into the center of the room, his expression unreadable but his presence commanding. Former military, now running a high-end security company, the man was a walking weapon—calm, lethal, efficient. If he was involved, it meant we had resources on our side that could turn the tide.

“I’ve got my people searching for Mace's sister and his woman,” he updated us, his voice steady but edged with urgency.

A ripple of tension passed through the room, everyone processing what that meant.

But Preacher wasn't done. He folded his arms, his eyes cold and calculating as he

addressed the real issue gnawing at the rest of us. “We need to find the rat too.”

That hit differently. We all knew it. We all felt it.

Someone in my MC had betrayed us. A mole working with these fuckers, feeding them intel, and putting our people in danger. That truth burned beneath my skin, raw and festering. It wasn't just a breach of trust, it was a death sentence. Whoever they were, I wanted them found. I wanted them to understand exactly how rats were rewarded by the Knights MC.

Hunter finally snapped.

“You’ll fucking excuse me,” he snarled, stepping right into Preacher’s space, “if I don’t make that one of my priorities. My woman is who knows fucking where. Mace’s woman and sister are missing too. We don’t know what the fucking plans are for them.”

His voice was a roar, his fury unchecked. Not many men got away with speaking to Preacher like that and lived to tell the tale. I saw my President’s jaw tick, his fingers curling into fists at his sides as he visibly restrained himself.

Hunter wasn’t done.

“Your rat,” he spat, “is your problem.” Then he turned on his heel and stormed out.

The silence left in his wake was suffocating.

I flicked a glance toward Kyle. She sat there, watching it all unfold, her face blank, completely unreadable, but I was starting to pick up on her tells. I’d seen her calm Mace down before by stripping all emotion from her expression. It was a tactic I knew well—removing feeling to stay sharp.

But she wastoogood at it, too closed off. And it bugged the shit out of me. I understood shutting things down in moments like this, but the way she did it? It was as if she was denying her own emotions completely, not just suppressing them. And that was dangerous.

I hadn't had the chance to tell Preacher what she'd confided in me last night. I knew I needed to, but the thought of it made me feel like shit. Kyle didn't open up to people. I'd broken through that wall, and now, I was about to break her trust. Even if it was for her own good.

I exhaled and walked up to her, saying nothing, just holding out my hand. She hesitated, then, after a beat, she slipped her fingers into mine.

I pulled her up from the chair and led her out of the room, through the dimly lit hallway of the motel, and into one of the empty rooms we'd booked. The second the door clicked shut behind us, I did what I'd been wanting to do since this whole mess started, I pulled her against me, my mouth crashing down onto hers.

I needed to taste her.

To hold her.

To make sure she was okay.

KYLE

Inside, I was a mess. People assumed that when you were trained to kill for the right reasons, it didn't leave a mark on you. That you could walk away clean. That you could justify it.

They were wrong.

Taking a life was always a weight on the soul. No matter what they'd done—no matter what they were about to do, it stayed with you. Tonight, that weight pressed heavy on my chest. But even more than that, seeing Mace and Hunter break the way they had? That shook me.

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I'd known them for years. Known them as level-headed, mentally strong men. They were built for war. Seeing them crack under this, that was hard.

And then there was Preacher. I was noticing things about him, things that didn't sit right. Had he changed? Had he always been like this, and I just hadn't seen it before? I didn't know.

But the second Jagger's lips found mine, all of it—the questions, the doubts, the heaviness—I let it go. Because this was something solid, something I could feel.

His mouth moved over mine, demanding and urgent, but then slowed, and the kiss deepened. My fingers curled into the leather of his cut as I pressed closer, feeling the solid heat of his body against mine.

"I need you," I whispered, my hands going to his shoulders, pushing the cut off of him.

Jagger didn't hesitate. His hands slid beneath my shirt, skimming up my sides, sending a shiver through me as he pulled the fabric over my head and tossed it aside. His eyes darkened, tracing over my skin, lingering on the tattoo that ran down my front.

"Jesus Christ," he muttered, his fingers brushing over the ink. "Just when I think there can't be more to you that turns me on, I uncover even more."

Heat pooled low in my stomach at the rawness in his voice. I let my hands explore him in return, gripping the hem of his shirt and dragging it up, forcing him to break

away for a second as I pulled it over his head.

I'd seen his body before, but I hadn't gotten the chance to really explore. And right now, I planned to take my time.

His skin was a canvas of contradiction—his arms bare, a stark contrast to the intricate scrolling tattoos that covered his chest and shoulders. It struck me as odd, but it also fascinated me. Each design told a story, one I didn't yet know but wanted to trace, to memorize.

Leaning forward, I let my tongue follow the inked lines, savoring the taste of him. His muscles tensed beneath my hands, a shudder rippling through his body. I smirked against his skin. Good.

My hands roamed, sliding up his sides, then across the hard ridges of his back, feeling every powerful shift of muscle. He was solid, raw strength under my fingertips.

I dragged my tongue over his nipple, and that was the moment he broke.

“Fuck this,” he growled.

The next thing I knew, I was airborne. A startled gasp left my lips as I landed on the bed, Jagger's weight pressing me into the mattress a second later. My pulse pounded, not with fear, but with something much, much more dangerous.

This was new. Normally, men saw that I was in shape, that I could hold my own, and just went with the flow. They let me lead. Jagger wasn't most men.

And fuck, I loved it.

His eyes raked over me like a predator surveying his kill, dark and filled with wicked

intent. The bed dipped as he shifted, kneeling between my legs before pushing to his feet. Towering over me. Watching me.

I held his gaze, reaching behind my back to undo my bra clasp. His fingers went to his belt, his movements slow, deliberate.

A challenge.

Rolling my shoulders forward, I let the lace straps slip down my arms before tossing the fabric aside, adding to the growing pile of discarded clothes.

Jagger's eyes darkened further, his jaw flexing. His belt came undone with a sharp metallicclink, but instead of dropping his jeans, he leaned down, gripping my boots. With a quick yank, he pulled them off, not bothering with the laces. I never undid them—just in case I needed to move fast, to disappear soundlessly. I'd never been so fucking grateful for that habit.

His hands found my hips next, pushing me back onto the mattress. My breath caught as he flicked open the button on my pants, the rough scrape of his knuckles against my skin sendingsparks through me. With one smooth motion, he stripped them away, taking my panties with them.

A sharp inhale, that was the only sound he made before my pants went flying.

“Fucking hell.” His voice was rough, raw. His fingers brushed over my inner thighs, spreading me wider beneath him. “I’ve never seen anything so fucking beautiful.”

Heat pooled low in my stomach, ay pulse pounded in my ears. I lifted one leg, sliding my foot up the inside of his thigh until it rested against the open fly of his jeans.

“Off,” I ordered.

One brow lifted, a smirk ghosting over his lips. “I think I’d rather enjoy you first.”

I clenched my jaw. Under different circumstances, I would’ve let him. Would’ve taken the time to let him do whatever the fuck he wanted. But we didn’t have time.

“We can do that another time,” I countered, my voice steady despite the fire burning inside me. “Right now, we don’t know if someone’s going to hammer on that door with an update. We could be needed any second. Do you really want to risk that?”

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It took him all of five seconds to come to the right conclusion.

His jeans hit the floor, then he was on me. I expected his mouth to crash into mine, expected him to take what we both so clearly wanted. But Jagger never did what I expected.

Instead, he bent down, his lips brushing over my nipple before taking it into his mouth and sucking hard. A strangled moan slipped free as my back arched, my fingers tangling in his hair.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

He didn't stop. He kissed his way down my stomach, his tongue following the path of my tattoo, branding me in a way I didn't think was possible.

Then, just before reaching where I was aching for him most, he muttered, "No fucking way do I not have time for this."

And then his mouth was on me.

I gasped, my body jolting as his tongue flicked over my clit. The heat of his breath, the perfect pressure, it was too much and not enough at the same time. My fingers dug into his scalp as I tried to ground myself, but he only groaned in response, the vibrations pushing me closer to the edge.

He licked, sucked, and then—fuck—he bit down gently. I was unravelling.

His tongue dipped lower, sliding inside me, slow and deliberate. “You taste fucking gorgeous,” he murmured against me, his voice vibrating through my entire body.

My thighs trembled, but he wasn’t done. His hand slid up my stomach, his thumb dragging down until it pressed against my clit. A sharp pressure. A slow circle.

I wasn’t a vocal person in bed, but Jagger had just destroyed that. I was writhing, moaning, begging—my voice hoarse with need.

“Please.”

It was barely a whisper, but he heard it.

His mouth left me, only to be replaced by his fingers. He pushed two inside me, deep and slow, curling just right, his lips latching onto my clit again. Then he sucked hard, and I shattered.

A scream ripped from my throat as I came, my body locking up, shaking as waves of pleasure crashed through me. I barely registered the fact that I was gripping his hair so tight that it had to be painful. But when I did, I forced my fingers to loosen, my whole body still trembling as he continued stroking me, drawing out every last shudder.

As my mind slowly drifted back down to earth, one thought flickered through the haze. I had never felt like this before, and that terrified me.

I was still coming down, my body shuddering in the aftermath, when Jagger moved over me, his cock rubbing against my overly sensitive pussy. A sharp gasp tore from my lips, my body jerking as the friction sent another wave of overstimulation through me. He groaned at my reaction, his eyes dark and wild with hunger.

Slowly, I raised my hips, guiding him toward my entrance. Our gazes locked as he began to push inside me, the stretch burning just enough to make my breath catch. I reached above my head, grabbing at a pillow, needing something to hold on to. He was so wide, his thickness forcing my body to accommodate him inch by inch. Even though he was taking it slow, beads of sweat dotted his forehead from the effort of holding back.

“Jesus, baby,” he rasped, his voice strained. “You’re so fucking tight.”

His head dropped to the crook of my neck, his breath hot against my skin. He pulled back slightly, giving me a moment to adjust before pressing forward again, deeper this time. The slow, deliberate invasion had me gripping the pillow tighter, my nails digging into the fabric. I appreciated the patience, I really did, but I needed him. I needed him in a way I had never needed anyone before.

Lifting my head, I caught his lips with mine, flicking my tongue against his, tasting the groan that rumbled from deep in his chest. That was all it took. I wrapped my legs around his waist and pulled him in, arching my hips, taking him all the way.

The pleasure was instantaneous—a full-body shockwave that ripped a moan from my throat, so raw, so desperate, it bordered on a scream.

Jagger wasn’t unaffected. His whole body jerked as he let out a strangled shout.

“Fucking hell, baby.” His forehead pressed against mine, his breath ragged. “Are you okay?”

I nodded quickly, not trusting my voice, and rolled my hips experimentally. Immediately pleasure exploded through me.

I moaned, my back arching off the bed. “I need you to move.”

Jagger lifted his head, his eyes locking onto mine, searching. Whatever he saw there must have reassured him, because he pulled back slowly, almost teasingly, before sinking back in just as slow. We both groaned as he bottomed out again, my walls clenching around him. Still holding my gaze, I lifted my leg, curling it around his ribs, opening myself even further for him.

That was all the invitation he needed. His rhythm picked up, the slow, controlled thrusts turning deeper, harder. The room filled with the sound of panting breaths, moans, the rhythmic slap of skin against skin. The air was thick with heat, with need, with the sheer intensity of what we were doing.

I felt his gaze shift downward, and I followed, watching where our bodies met, watching as he slid in and out of me, slick and glistening. A flicker of awareness registered in the back of my mind that he'd put on a condom at some point. I hadn't even noticed. I was too far gone, too consumed by the way he was filling me, stretching me, driving me toward something blinding.

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A tight coil formed deep inside me, my muscles starting to flutter around him as the buildup grew stronger.

Jagger felt it.

“You gonna come on me, baby?” His voice was a low growl, rough and full of promise.

I whimpered in response, unable to form words. Grinding my hips against him, I dragged my clit over the ridges of his abdomen, searching for the friction I needed.

Jagger was a step ahead of me.

“Here,” he whispered, lowering one hand between us. His thumb found my clit, circling it with slow, calculated strokes, just light enough to drive me insane.

It wasn't enough, and he knew it.

His lips brushed against my ear. “Tell me you're mine,” he murmured, the words sending a fresh wave of heat through me. “Say it, and I'll give you what you want.”

I was too far gone to argue, too desperate. At that moment, I would have given him anything. My pride. My dignity. A goddamn kidney if he'd asked.

I nodded frantically, but that wasn't good enough for him.

“Say it,” he demanded, stilling inside me, refusing to move.

I swore I was going to murder this man. I was trained in multiple ways to kill. My skills in hand-to-hand combat were unmatched. And if this beautiful bastard didn't start moving again, I'd make sure he found out exactly how skilled I was.

But looking up at him, at the raw hunger in his eyes, the smug curve of his lips, I acknowledged the brutal truth. I needed him alive to get what I wanted.

So, I played dirty.

I clenched around him, tightening my walls until his jaw locked and his whole body trembled above me. His restraint was cracking.

I smiled. Leaning up just slightly, I let the words fall from my lips, a whisper full of sin.

"I'm yours."

The second the words left my mouth, Jagger snapped, his control completely shattered.

With a raw growl, he slammed into me hard, the force of it knocking the air from my lungs. My head tipped back, a scream ripping from my throat as the pleasure exploded. And I let it consume me.

"Fucking right you are," he growled, his voice dark and full of possession as he drove into me, over and over, each thrust harder, deeper, sending me spiraling closer to the edge.

My body was already primed, raw from the way he'd pushed me past my limits before, but this—this was something else entirely. I was already close when his fingers found my clit, pinching just enough to send a shockwave through me. That was all it took.

The orgasm hit me like a supernova, stealing every breath from my lungs. My muscles locked tight, my body shaking, my vision blurring. My core clenched around him so hard that I could barely comprehend the sensation. It wasn't just pleasure, it was something more, something primal, something that shattered every single preconceived notion I had about sex.

I barely registered Jagger's groan above me, the deep rumble of his pleasure vibrating against my skin, but I felt him—felt the way he tensed, his control snapping as he lost himself inside me.

I didn't know how long it lasted, but when it finally ebbed, I was left limp and spent beneath him, my fingers still clutching the comforter in a death grip. My muscles ached, and my body tingled in the aftermath. What the hell had just happened?

Jagger collapsed on top of me, his skin hot and clammy against mine, his breath ragged as he buried his face in my neck.

"Holy fuck," he panted, voice raw. "I'll move in a second. I just... can't feel my body."

A breathless laugh escaped me, surprising me. There had never been a moment where I'd felt this close to someone, not even during missions where every movement, every breath, had to be in sync to stay alive. But this, this was different. This wasn't just trust, it was something I wasn't sure I'd ever felt before.

Jagger lifted his head, his lips curling into a lazy smirk, his eyes warm with amusement as he looked down at me. I wasn't sure if what we'd just done had been making love or fucking—but whatever it was, I realized something. I trusted him. And maybe—just maybe—Jagger was the exception to my rule. And I was willing to take that chance.

Chapter 6

Kyle

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A couple of hours later, after Jagger and I had made every good use of the shower and each other, we were all gathered around, about to eat, when my phone rang.

Bo.

I put it on speaker immediately, every nerve in my body tensing as I waited.

“You’re not being smart, Kai,” she murmured, her voice low, cautious. “I can’t take this risk.”

Before I could respond, Hunter jumped in, his desperation bleeding through. “Bo, it’s me. It’s Hunter.”

A sharp inhale.

“She’s okay, Hunter,” she whispered. “I’m working on it.”

The relief that hit me was immediate, we had her on our side. But Hunter was pissed, understandably.

“That’s it?” His voice snapped like a whip. “That’s all you can say?”

Bo’s breath was shaky on the other end. “I don’t have a lot of time.” Her voice dropped lower. “I didn’t know what they were planning until it was already done. You need to clean shop, Preacher.”

My stomach turned at the words. Clean shop?

Preacher leaned against the wall, his arms crossed, his jaw clenched. His eyes flicked around the room, scanning like we were already being watched. “How did you know I was here?”

She gave a soft, almost pitying laugh. “You were part of the retrieval.” Her tone turned sharp, urgent. “You need to clean shop.”

Something was wrong.

Noah sat forward, his expression tight. “Bo, when I see you?—”

A sharp cut cut him off, dismissive, like she already knew what he was going to say, and then the line went dead.

Silence. Thick. Heavy. Ominous.

Jagger was the first to break it. “Oh, fuck. I know who she meant.”

Before any of us could react, my phone buzzed again, Data’s name flashing on the screen. I snatched it up, barely getting out a greeting before he spoke.

“Got ‘em.”

The room was dark, damp, the air thick with the stench of sweat and fear.

And her, the bitch I’d hated for years.

I paced in slow, deliberate circles around her, my boots scuffing against the concrete floor. She was tied to a chair, her breathing sharp, her eyes flicking around, searching for an escape that didn’t exist. I forced myself to stay level-headed.

The old emotions—the rage, the bitterness, the betrayal—I pushed them down. This wasn't about the past. This was about now.

She had been selling out the Knights, feeding information to the very pieces of shit we were at war with. But why?

If I went off half-cocked, I could miss something important, I had to stay in control. I had to keep my Kai mentality.

The rational, stable-minded soldier.

I stopped in front of her, crossing my arms, tilting my head slightly. "Tell me," I murmured, my voice eerily calm. "Why?"

She swallowed hard, her eyes darting between me and the door like she thought someone was coming to save her. We both knew that no one was.

I crouched down, leveling my gaze with hers.

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“No more lies, no more bullshit.” My voice was a whisper, but the steel beneath it was unmistakable.

Her lips trembled, but she didn’t speak.

I leaned in closer, letting my breath ghost over her cheek. “You will tell me,” I promised, my tone soft. “One way or another.”

Her breath hitched, and I smiled because I wasn’t leaving this room until I got what I wanted.

“Ahhh, Store,” I murmured, circling the chair she was sitting in, slow and deliberate. She was trying to act unaffected, her posture perfect, her expression neutral. No fear, at least, not yet.

I could change that, easily.

“What are you going to do, Kai?” she sneered, her lips curling in disdain.

Even now, she looked immaculate. Polished. As if she wasn’t sitting in the middle of a room filled with people who wanted nothing more than to break her apart. That would change soon enough.

We hadn’t been far when Jagger put the pieces together, tracking her to one of the MC’s other chapters. A couple of calls later, and we were here. The chapter’s President had done his part, they’d kept her distracted until we arrived, ensuring she had no time to run. The element of surprise had been on our side, and it had

beenfucking glorious.

“You know,” she drawled, voice laced with venom, “yourdaddyalways had a hell of a dick. How he madeyou, I’ll never know.” Her gaze flicked over me, smug and cruel. “But then, he always wanted aboy, didn’t he? Couldn’t stomach the idea of adaughter. So, he named you like a guy.”

For years, I’dhatedthis woman. The way she treated me. The words in my mother’s letter. ThetruthI had learned about what Preacher had done with thispiece of shit.

And what had happenedafter.

I inhaled slowly, keeping my expression carefully neutral, I wouldn’t give her the satisfaction of a reaction.

“That’s nice, Store.” I exaggerated a yawn, sitting back in my chair and stretching like I wasboredof her existence. “But here’s the thing—it’s notmeyou have to worry about.” I leaned forward slightly, voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. “See, mydaddy—” I barely swallowed down the bile that rose in my throat at the word “—has somethinghewants to say to you.”

Her lips parted, eyes narrowing slightly, but she recovered quickly.

“Probably the same thing he was saying to me two nights ago,” she taunted, her voice saccharine sweet, knowingexactly what she was doing. “The same thing yourbitchmother walked in on years ago... before sheblew her brains out.”

I stood in one slow, controlled movement, and then walked back toward her.

Standing in front of her, I watched her closely.

There. A flicker. She was good, but not that good.

Fear flashed in her eyes for half a second before she masked it.

“Oh, no, no, no,” It uttered, bending slightly so we were face-to-face. “See, I know exactly where my father was two nights ago, and it wasn’t with you.”

Her expression faltered and I smirked.

“In fact,” I continued, my tone dripping with amusement, “you’ve been a nothing for a long time now, haven’t you?” Her face twisted in rage. I’d scored a direct hit. “That’s why you did it, isn’t it, Store?” I murmured. “Figured you’d get some payback because you weren’t looked at anymore. Not in the MC, not by Preacher, not by anyone.”

I cocked my head slightly.

“It’s been a while since even the prospects would touch you, huh?”

The snap was instant.

“You bitch—” She lunged, spitting at me, but I was already moving, stepping out of the line of fire before she could do anything.

She was way too predictable.

Before she could open her mouth again, the door creaked open, and Preacher stepped inside.

Store stilled immediately.

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“Well, isn’t this interesting,” he murmured, his voice deceptively calm as he strolled toward me.

I had to fight the instinct to move away from him, but I forced myself to stay still. We had to present a united front for her. Preacher grabbed a chair, flipped it around, and straddled it, resting his forearms against the back.

She latched onto him like a lifeline.

“She’s lying,” she whined, her voice turning desperate. “She’s lying, Preacher. I went to see Dragon because I needed a break?—”

The door opened again, and in walked Dragon himself. I didn’t remember him much from my childhood, but he was the kind of man you didn’t fuck with. And the look he was giving Store? Well, that look would make most men shit themselves.

I’m fairly certain it had the same effect on her because her entire body went stiff.

Behind me, Hunter walked in, followed by Coleman and Mace. I didn’t turn, but I could feel the shift in the room as even more bodies filtered in.

Preacher leaned back slightly, looking at her with lazy disinterest. “You were saying?”

Store’s mouth opened and closed, and for the first time, I watched real fear settle in her expression.

Jagger let out a low, disgusted noise. “JesusChrist, Preacher.” His voice was rough, tinged with somethingoff, something I couldn’t quite place. “Youfuckedthis?”

The room went eerily silent. I refused to take my eyes offher, but I couldfeelthe weight of Jagger’s words, and I had the sickest feeling thatthiswas just the beginning.

The guys all let out low chuckles at Jagger’s jab, but something about it hit a nerve deep inside me. Yeah, this was what had led to my mom putting a bullet through her skull.

And no, Store wasn’t fucking worth what I really wanted to do to her. No one was, including Preacher.

I forced myself to push past it, to bury it under the disgust and hatred I had carefully cultivated for my sperm donor. With a slow inhale, I squared my shoulders, letting my expression go completely blank. Every ounce of training, every lesson incontrol, every brutal experience that had honed me into the weapon I was today—I drew on it all, keeping myself composed and prepared.

Because if there was one thing I knew, it was that people struck when you least expected it. And in a room full ofpredators, only fools let their guard down.

Jagger’s comment hadn’t just hit me—it had struck a chord withher, too.

Store snapped.

Her face contorted, twisting in a way that looked inhuman, warped and furious. Maybe it was the layers of cheap makeup cracking, or maybe it was just the reality of the situation finally settling in.

“Fuck you, Jagger.Fuckallof you,” she spat, her voice sharp, manic. “You don’t know

who you're up against. You don't know what he can do." A smug sneer curled on her lips. "He'll come for me, and you'll all be fucked."

Silence. Not a single reaction came from the room to her threat. Not a blink, not a muscle twitch.

Not one person in the room gave a single fuck about what she was claiming, because we all knew the truth—she was delusional. And even worse, she knew it, too. I had studied behavioral psychology as part of my training—language patterns, subconscious tells, the way emotions twisted words and betrayed intent. Right now, her speech, the short, basic sentences, and repeated use of the word fuck, told me exactly what I needed to know.

She wasn't confident, she was grasping. Store hoped he would come, she wanted to believe he would. But deep down, she knew he wouldn't.

Preacher shifted in his seat, getting more comfortable, completely unimpressed by her little tantrum. Then, with the same calm as someone ordering a drink at a bar, he lifted his cell and turned the screen toward her.

"This guy?" A photo of Jose Demingo filled the screen.

Store's expression flickered—recognition, relief, triumph. She nodded, chin lifted slightly like she thought she had us all exactly where she wanted us.

Preacher just looked past her. "Hunter," he asked lazily, "do you think he's on his way?"

Hunter barely stifled a laugh, shaking his head. "No fucking way."

Preacher turned toward Jagger and just looked at him. Jagger smirked, not even

needing the full question before answering, “She’s off her fucking meds if she actually believes that.”

The words landed like gunfire, and Store’s confidence wavered. She felt it now, the shift in the air, the weight of what we knew, and her smile faltered.

I met Jagger’s gaze for a brief moment before turning my attention back to the train wreck in front of me—Jose Demingo. A man with a legacy of deception. He had started as a government agent, a rising star, known for intercepting major trafficking operations, shutting down high-level cartels. The perfect soldier, the golden investigator. All that was until the truth surfaced.

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He hadn't been intercepting shipments to shut them down, he'd been rerouting them. Drugs, weapons, and worst of all—human lives. Instead of stopping crime, he had built his own empire from it.

Hunter had worked the case when two major shipments were hijacked on U.S. soil. A total of twenty-six young women and three billion dollars' worth of drugs and specialized munitions had vanished into thin air. Hunter's team had worked alongside Demingo to recover what was stolen, only to realize, too late, that they were chasing a ghost.

Nine women had been found. Small stashes of the drugs and munitions were recovered. Then three of the missing girls were dumped, their bodies mutilated, a note pinned to them: Back. The. Fuck. Down.

It had taken months for Hunter to see the cracks, and by then, he had come to me. I'd joined the mission to take Demingo down, and we had almost succeeded. But just as we were closing in, just as we were exchanging fire with his men, a fireball erupted where Demingo had been standing.

We thought he'd been double-crossed. To be honest, we'd thought he was dead, but after Perry's snatching, we knew better. The ghost was still walking. And if Store thought she meant anything to him, she was dead fucking wrong.

One by one, those of us who knew Demingo shook our heads.

Store's eyes darted around, panic setting in.

“No,” she whispered. “But... he told me... he said...” The crack split wide open.
“He’s...”

Her voice broke, and her body shook. Tears welled up in her overly made up eyes, but I didn’t feel pity.

I felt satisfaction.

Moving behind her, I fisted her hair, yanking her head back until she had no choice but to look up at me.

“Now,” I murmured, my voice eerily calm, “you’re going to answer the nice men and tell them everything they need to know.”

She almost scalped herself with the ferocity of her nods.

Twenty minutes later

The men were filing out, discussion murmuring between them. Store had given up everything she thought she knew—worthless crumbs, just like we expected. Demingo had never trusted her. She was a pawn, disposable and insignificant, and she’d had nothing valuable to offer. Which meant—she was mine now.

I had been promised this moment with her, the deal had been clear. If I let her live, if I didn’t end her the moment we realized she had been feeding intel back to Demingo, she would be mine to deal with.

And now, it was my turn.

I stepped forward, letting the carefully controlled malice bleed into my expression.

Store saw it.

She felt it.

Her whole body started shaking as she tried to shrink back.

“No,” she whimpered, shaking her head frantically. “No, no, no, please?—”

I grinned. She screamed for help, but no one would come.

“I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry. Sorry, sorry, sorry!” She was hyperventilating, stammering, babbling the same word over and over again.

How pathetic.

I crouched down, staring into her tear-streaked, terrified face.

“Oh, sweetheart,” I cooed mockingly, brushing a strand of hair from her face. Then my smile dropped. “You will be.”

Her sobs turned into a broken, terrified wail.

And I drank in every second of it.

Reaching for the knife on the table beside me, I pressed the tip against my fingertip, testing its sharpness. A satisfied hum escaped my lips as I felt the sting—a small bite of pain, just enough to confirm the blade was honed to perfection.

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Good. The knife was meant for her.

I was just about to drag it across her chest, to carve a lesson into her skin, when she spat out words that stopped me cold.

“I wasn’t fucking him the day your mom killed herself,” she screamed, her voice hoarse, raw. “He wouldn’t touch me!”

I froze.

She wasn’t done.

“He deserved the fucking head of the MC,” she seethed, her face contorted in rage. “He was mine. But that whore—” she sneered “—she knew what she was doing when she got knocked up. She came in, lost her shit, so Preacher kicked me out.”

The fight drained from her in an instant. Her head slumped forward, shoulders sagging. I stared at her, my grip tightening around the knife handle. For the first time in my life, I couldn’t tell if someone was lying. I was trained for this, to read people. To dissect their words, analyze micro-expressions, pick up the nuances in body language that betrayed even the best liars.

But now?

Her words tangled in my mind, looping with the ones from my mother’s letter, overlaying the image of her lifeless body. The gun still clutched in her hand, the blood soaking into the floor. If Store was lying, Preacher would have told me the

truth by now. Or Duke would have. Wouldn't they?

I forced myself to breathe, I couldn't let this get inside my head. She was lying, she had to be.

My face remained unreadable as I stepped forward. I grabbed her by the hair, yanking her head back roughly. Her lips parted in a silent gasp, but I ignored her as I lowered the blade and, with precise, deliberate strokes, began slicing through her dry, bleached strands. Her screams echoed in the room, but I tuned them out.

The knife glided through, separating chunk after chunk until her scalp was nearly bare, the brittle remains of her pride falling in clumps at her feet. Once I was satisfied, I lifted the largest mass of hair, twirled it between my fingers, and then, I dropped it in front of her with a grin.

She stared at it, chest heaving, as if somehow the strands of her own hair on the floor were more horrifying than anything else I could have done to her.

Pathetic.

JAGGER

We all heard what Store had said to Kyle. The door had been left slightly open, just in case Kyle needed backup, and her words had carried through to where we waited outside.

And Preacher, well, he had tensed the second she started talking. I had never seen him that still before. His body was locked up tight, fists clenched at his sides, his jaw like iron. But the moment Kyle didn't believe what was being said, the moment she rejected the possibility that her entire life had been built on a lie, that tension doubled.

His face might as well have been stone, but his whole presence was screaming. He wanted to correct her, to tell Kyle something, but he didn't. And that silence spoke volumes.

Duke was the first to break it. He stepped directly in front of his brother, his usual easygoing nature replaced with something sharp. Unforgiving.

"You need to sort that shit out," Duke said, voice low but lethal. Preacher barely blinked, but Duke wasn't backing down. "It's killed me lying to her all these years," he went on, his tone vibrating with restrained anger. "And before you start your shit, yeah, it is a lie—even if it's one of omission."

Preacher's mouth parted, an argument already forming, but Duke cut him off with a raised hand. "No. Grow up and put that poor girl out of her misery."

And then, without another word, he turned and stalked off in the same direction as Kyle.

Preacher stood motionless, staring at the floor.

I wasn't done with him either. Taking a slow step forward, I met his gaze, speaking to him in a way I never had before.

"She's filled with hurt," I said, my voice measured. "And she's putting herself into insanely dangerous positions just to avoid thinking, just to avoid feeling. She's diving headfirst into situations that could get her killed—because of this." I let that sink in before delivering the final blow. "You know what I'm talking about, Preacher. I told you what she told me about her mom. You know what this is doing to her. You know how much of a cancer it is, eating away at her from the inside."

His jaw locked. He knew, and he wasn't stopping it.

I leaned in, lowering my voice, making sure my next words hit their mark. “It’s the same cancer eating away at you.”

Preacher flinched. His head turned sharply, gaze snapping away from me.

Bingo.

“You might be able to live with that, but I can’t,” I continued, my tone dropping into something cold and totally unforgiving. “I won’t keep this much longer. She trusts me, and I care about her, so I’m not about to fuck that up.” I took a step back, straightening. “Either you tell her...” I let it hang there, waiting, making sure he was really listening. “...or I will.”

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And then I walked away, leaving him standing there alone. Forced to absorb every damn thing I had just said.

But this? This wasn't just a warning.

It was a promise.

Chapter 7

Kyle

Dragon and his men had a building set aside for guests at the back of their compound, separate from the main clubhouse. It was private, quiet and the ideal place to think.

After my one-on-one with Store, I'd joined the rest of the Ghosts and the newly formed Valiant MC, settling into the familiar rhythm of strategy and conversation.

Hunter had been through hell. The mission that ended his career in the Marines had nearly broken him, but he was here now and healing. It was still surreal seeing him as a dad, though. The man who had spent years running from his own demons had somehow found his way back to Piper, and now, he had a family.

I wasn't surprised that he'd gone after her, though. We'd had plenty of deep and meaningful talks about Piper over the years, so when he got her back, it had just felt inevitable. Like something written in stone long before either of them had ever realized it.

But right now, the hell he was going through waiting for Bo to call with an update on Piper's location was brutal—and it was written all over his men's faces who were all feeling it for him.

We would get her back. There was absolutely no question about that.

After a couple of drinks and going over possible strategies, I felt the weight of everything pressing down on me. The shit Store had spat at me still clung to my skin like filth I couldn't wash off. Normally, I'd deal with it by beating the shit out of one of the guys or taking my rifle apart piece by piece until my hands stopped shaking.

But tonight, I needed something else. Something that wouldn't leave blood on my knuckles or keep my mind tangled in the past. I made my way to the room I'd been given, shrugging off the tension as best as I could. I didn't doubt that in the next few days, I'd get to work my stress out the way I always did—with a mission, with my rifle, with controlled violence.

Right now, though, I needed a moment where I could just switch off.

I had barely stepped into the shower, letting the hot water pour over me, when a warm body pressed up behind mine. I didn't flinch. I'd heard him come in minutes earlier, and I'd known he'd follow.

His arms wrapped around me, his head burying itself in the crook of my neck, his breath warm against my wet skin.

"You okay, baby?" Jagger's voice was low, soothing, like he knew the answer already.

Something inside me that had been wound too tight for too long loosened just a little, and I let my body sink back into his.

The way his arms tightened around me in response told me he felt the shift—that he appreciated the way I had allowed it.

I sighed, my head resting against his shoulder. “Yes and no.” I hesitated, trying to find the right words, but it wasn’t easy. Sharing wasn’t something that came naturally to me. “She was the reason so much happened, Jagger. Now, where do I focus that shit?”

Store was out of the picture. And seeing her defeated should have given me satisfaction. To be fair, it did, in a way. But there was nowhere for the emotions I had carried for so long to go. No direction for the anger, no enemy left standing to focus them on.

I still had Preacher, but even that was now a tangled mess. For years, I had hated him for abandoning me when I needed him. For years, I had resented the way my mother had taken it all out on me. For years, I had lived with the image of walking into that room, the walls splattered with blood, the gun still clutched in her lifeless hand.

That kind of pain never leaves you.

Jagger exhaled against my skin. “I heard what she said about Preacher.”

A sharp spike of tension went through me. Part of me was relieved—because I didn’t have to repeat it. On the other hand, it made me defensive. Would he expect me to forgive Preacher now?

“How do you feel?”

I shrugged, because fuck if I knew how to answer that. I felt everything, I felt nothing. It was all too much and not enough at the same time.

Jagger tried a different approach. “Were you close to your mom?”

A bitter snort left me before I could stop it. “No. She was a bitch.”

I had told him pieces of it before. But not everything. Maybe if he knew, he would understand why I could never trust Preacher again.

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Jagger didn't push. Instead, he reached for the shampoo, poured some into his hands, and started lathering it into my hair. The simple act was grounding, it was a quiet offering. I tipped my head back, letting him work his fingers through my hair, the pressure of his hands helping to steady the storm inside me.

"How much do you know about my parents' relationship?"

Jagger paused, just for a second. Then, he continued his careful movements.

"It wasn't a good one," he said carefully. "She played the cliché move—got pregnant and tried to use it to control him."

He was diplomatic in his choice of words, but the truth was there. I nodded, stepping under the spray to wash the suds away, giving myself time to think. After a beat, I leaned back again, waiting for him to do a second round of shampoo. After so many trips to hot, sandy countries, one wash was never enough, and Jagger knew that by now.

"From as far back as I can remember, my parents fought," I said finally. "Screaming, slamming doors, and drama... There was a constant war." I took a breath. "When I was five, I came home and found my mom wasted. Slurring, rambling about how I'd never find a man who would be faithful. How men lied about everything."

Jagger's jaw clenched, but his face stayed blank. He knew the kind of damage that could do to a little girl. So did she, that was why she'd done it.

"She used to rant about how she had sacrificed everything for Preacher, and how he

didn't give a shit about either of us." I hesitated. "She said the reason I was named Kyle was because he was so fucking disappointed that I wasn't a son, he gave me a boy's name anyway."

That part had always stuck, and today, Store had thrown it in my face, almost verbatim.

Was that what he told everyone?

Jagger rinsed his own hair with one hand, but the other stayed firmly wrapped around my waist.

"You know he named you after his grandfather, right?"

I shrugged. Maybe, maybe not.

Reaching for the shower gel, I poured some into my hands. "It only got worse. I did everything to get Preacher's attention, but he was hardly home. And when he was home, he'd lock himself away from us after the obligatory screaming match with my mom." My hands slowed as I rubbed the soap over my skin. "If I really think about it..." I swallowed. "I did spend a lot of time with him. But then my mom said, the more those memories started to fade. So, I kept trying. I kept needing him to see me."

I looked down, watching the soap slide off my skin, watching the pastry to drain away with it, but some stains never washed off. When Preacher became President of the Knights MC, everything got worse. The rare moments of attention he'd given me before dwindled into almost nothing. I'd show up at the compound, eager, hopeful—desperate—only to be met with distracted glances and half-hearted words. Five minutes of his time, maybe ten on a good day, before something or someone would pull him away.

Mom had told me not to bother and that I was wasting my time. But I'd still tried. Because if I just did something right, if I just made him see me, he'd stop brushing me aside.

Jagger took the shower gel from my hands, his fingers brushing over mine as he turned me so that my back was to him. His touch was firm yet careful as he ran his hands over my shoulders, massaging the tension that had been embedded there for years.

"Do you think you got his attention?" he asked, his voice low.

Jesus. This man had magic hands.

I let my head fall forward slightly, letting him work on the knots that had settled deep into my muscles.

"I got Red to teach me how to ride a motorcycle when I was fourteen," I said, shaking my head as a laugh escaped me. "I was such a pain in the ass about it, but he finally caved. When I rode it in front of Preacher for the first time, he actually smiled." The memory hit me like a punch to the gut. "He told me I could only ride it on the compound, and then he said, 'One day, you'll make a fine biker.'"

That day, I'd felt proud, and like I had a purpose. Like I had something of him to hold on to. That feeling had fueled me. After that, I'd made it my mission to learn everything the guys did. By sixteen, I could shoot like a pro, ride my bike with my eyes shut, and my knife skills were scary. I made sure I was one of them, not just some girl hovering on the sidelines.

Jagger chuckled, his breath warm against my shoulder. "That you did."

I laughed softly, but it faded quickly.

His voice turned more serious. “Sounds like things between you and your da—Preacher were good then. When did it change?”

The shift in my body must have told him everything, because his hands slowed slightly. I didn’t want to say it, but the memories came anyway. By seventeen, I was spending most of my time at the compound—anywherebut home because my mother had been unraveling.

The screaming had turned to fists, the slaps became kicks, and by then, she wasn’t holding back. Black eyes, stitches in my mouth, chunks of hair ripped from my scalp. The worst was the baseball bat.

I swallowed.

“She used to hit me, but I told you about the baseball bat, right?” I felt Jagger nod against my back.

I should stop talking, but something inside me needed this. Only a handful of people knew what had happened next.

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I turned in his arms, wrapping myself around him, pressing my face to his chest, feeling the steady rise and fall of his breath.

And then I went for it.

“After the baseball bat, I started planning a way out. The things she told me about my dad, about the things she did—the women, the illegal shit, the warehouse full of girls—it was all too much. She made sure I knew that I wasn’t enough, that I should never have been born. That I was the biggest mistake she’d ever made.”

Jagger’s arms tightened, his lips moving against my hair, murmuring something I couldn’t quite make out.

I took a steady breath.

“One afternoon, I pulled up to the compound and she was there, running out, screaming, weaving around, drunk out of her fucking mind.” I squeezed my eyes shut, feeling the memory wrap around me like a vice. “I took her home and got her into bed. The whole time, she was spitting at me, clawing my arms. I gave up, went downstairs, sat on the couch—just sat there, wondering how my life had gotten this bad.” The words slowed, thickened. “I was counting down the days until I could leave when I heard the bang.”

A gunshot. I’d heard so many since then. But that one? That was the one I could still feel.

Jagger’s grip on me tightened. “You were in the house when it happened?”

I nodded against his chest. “I walked upstairs. Stood in front of the bedroom door for a while before I walked in.”

Blood. So much blood. The walls, and the sheets were covered with it. The gun still clutched in her lifeless hand.

And the letter beside her, with my name scrawled on the envelope.

“I knew what she was going to say in the letter she was clutching when I found her,” I whispered. “But knowing she used her last minutes alive to write it gave the words extra weight.”

Jagger pulled back slightly, gripping my shoulders, his eyes locked onto mine. “She wrote you a letter just before she killed herself?”

I nodded and shrugged. “Yeah.”

His jaw clenched. “Holy fuck, baby.”

I barely had time to react before he pulled me tight against him, his entire body shaking slightly. But he didn’t know the worst of it, he didn’t know what the letter said. Didn’t know that my mother had used her dying breath to rip my heart out.

That she had told me everything about Preacher. How she had walked in on him that day, screwing Store. How he had begged her to have a kid with him when they first met—only to abandon her the moment I was born because I was a girl. Because I wasn’t the son he had wanted.

How on the very day she put that gun to her head, he had told her to leave and to take me with her. Every word had carved into me like a blade, and I had run.

I'd finished reading the letter that day, turned and packed a bag. Once I had what I needed, I'd driven to the only person I knew I could trust—Uncle Duke. He was Preacher's brother, but he had always been mine. He had always called, always visited, always scared. He was the only one who had ever made me feel safe.

Jagger reached past me, turning off the water, his movements careful, deliberate. Then he took a towel and started drying me off, his touch gentle in a way I didn't know how to handle.

Normally, when I talked about this shit, I felt raw. Exposed. But now? It felt...therapeutic. Like he understood, and maybe he did.

I looked up at him, met his gaze, and what I saw there made my chest ache. Jagger leaned down, pressing his forehead to mine, his eyes closing briefly.

When he opened them again, his voice was low. Certain. "You matter." His fingers tilted my chin up slightly, his thumb brushing over my jaw. "You matter," he repeated, like he needed me to hear it. Believe it. Then, quieter—softer—he whispered, "And I couldn't be prouder to have you as mine."

JAGGER

Listening to her story—truly listening—was one of the hardest things I'd ever done. Knowing what she had gone through, and how much she had suffered. Knowing that while she was baring her soul to me, I was still keeping a fucking secret from her. It was eating me alive.

I wanted to tell her everything. Needed to. But what I knew was only a fraction of the truth. There's a secret, the one that could either break her or finally set her free, was buried deep with Preacher, and only he could tell her. Still, maybe I could give her something. Some small piece of the truth that would make it hurt less.

I was just about to speak, but she beat me to it.

“I don’t want to talk anymore,” she whispered, pressing up against me in her towel.

Her body was warm, damp from the shower, but it was the look in her eyes that gutted me.

Raw. Needy. Vulnerable.

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I saw the storm inside her—the emotions she couldn't voice but was desperately trying to show me.

Her hands reached up, fingers skimming over the towel at my waist, untying it with slow, deliberate movements. The fabric dropped away, and then her hands were on me, tracing my stomach, her nails dragging lightly across my abs, setting off a chain reaction of heat in my veins.

Then she leaned in, her lips ghosting over my chest, nipping, licking—driving me insane.

She stopped just as our lips barely touched. “You make me feel,” she whispered against my mouth. “I feel safe.”

I felt that. Her words weren't just words, they were a confession. A final wall being lowered.

And fuck—fuck—I didn't deserve it.

The guilt nearly crushed me, but everything else? Everything else was real, and this wasn't my truth to tell, regardless of how much I wanted to. Would she even believe me if I tried?

I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her flush against me, letting my grip show her just how deep my own truth ran.

“You are safe with me,” I promised, holding her gaze so she could see how much I

meant it. Her lips parted, her breath shaky. “And you makemefeel too,” I added. “This,” I gestured between us, “issomething different. Youknowthat. This isus.”

I had no better word for it.

But‘us’—that word had weight. It hadmeaning. It was unlike anything I had everfeltbefore, a pull I had no name for, but it was getting stronger every damn second.

And fuck if I knew what itwas, but I knew one thing for sure— I wasn’t going toloseit.

Her eyes darkened, her pupils blown wide with heat. Then she closed the last bit of space between us, her hands sliding into my hair as her lips crashed into mine.

I pulled hercloser, even though there was no space left between us, desperate to feelmore. My tongue swept into her mouth, claiming, demanding, takingeverythingshe was willing to give me. My hand moved up her side, finding the twisted knot keeping her towel closed, and with a sharp tug, I yanked it free. The towel dropped to the floor, and Igroanedas her bare skin pressed against mine.

Kyle’s hands raked down my back, her body grinding against me, her stomach rubbing against my cock, and my controlsnapped. Grabbing behind her thighs, I lifted her effortlessly, wrapping her legs around my waist. The heat of her pussy against my cock wasfucking heaven, her wetness spreading as she rocked against me.

She gasped as I took two steps forward, pressing her back against the cool wall. I barely managed to pull my mouth from hers, needing more—needing all of her. I trailed kisses down her throat, my tongue flicking against the sensitive skin there. Then lower.

Lifting her slightly, I latched onto one of her breasts, rolling my tongue over the peak before sucking it into my mouth. Kyle moaned, her back arching, pressing herself further into me. I groaned against her nipple, sucking harder, my teeth scraping lightly before I flicked my tongue again.

She gasped my name, her hips moving in slow, desperate circles against me.

“Jagger,” she panted through her moans. “Please.” I knew what she was asking for, her body was telling me everything, and I was just as desperate. “Fuck me.”

My restraint shattered. Gripping my cock, I positioned myself against her entrance, lowering her slowly. The moment the tip pushed inside, we both gasped. She was so tight, and so fucking wet.

I clenched my jaw, every muscle in my body straining to keep from losing it right then and there.

“Fucking hell,” I groaned against her neck. I had to take this slow, or I wasn’t going to last.

But Kyle had other ideas. With the strength of her thighs, she lifted herself—then slammed back down, taking all of me in one smooth, perfect motion.

“Kyle!” I shouted at the same time she screamed my name.

My hands tightened on her ass, gripping her as I thrust up into her, slamming her back against the wall with each movement. Her moans, the way she gasped my name, the way her pussy gripped me—it broke me.

Harder.

Faster.

I needed her in my mouth.

Her breasts bounced with every thrust, and I caught a nipple between my lips, sucking it deep, rolling my tongue over it while I pounded into her. She cried out, her walls fluttering around me.

She was close. I moved my hand between us, pressing my thumb against her clit, rubbing tight, fast circles. Her body tensed, every muscle going rigid, as her breath caught. I felt it the moment she let go. Kyle shattered, her pussy clamping down around me so tight that I saw stars.

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“Jagger!” she screamed, her nails digging into my shoulders.

Her orgasm hit me like a fucking freight train, and I lost it. With one last, deep thrust, I came so fucking hard I saw white, every nerve in my body igniting. I barely registered the spots dancing in front of my vision, barely processed the way my body shook with the force of it.

All I knew was her. The feel of her wrapped around me. The way she moaned my name. The way she owned me in a way no one ever had.

Kyle shuddered against me, her body melting into mine. Using the last bit of strength I had, I carried us both to the bed, keeping her wrapped around me. I laid us down, her on top of me, still connected, still breathing as one. Her body was boneless, her head resting against my chest.

“I’m not ready to lose you,” she murmured, sounding half-asleep.

I pressed a kiss to her hair. “I’m not ready to leave you.”

She rubbed her nose against my chest, getting comfortable. Seconds later, she was out, like someone had flicked a switch. In the few nights that we’d spent together, she’d never fallen asleep this easily.

But tonight was different. We had turned a corner. But there was still something standing between us, and I knew that I couldn’t keep it from her much longer.

Tomorrow was going to be a big day. Once Bo sent over the final piece of intel we

needed, we'd be setting the plan into motion.

Piper would be coming home. And after that, Preacher would finally tell Kyle the truth. As much as I wanted that to happen for her, that part had me on edge. I didn't know how she'd react—if she'd explode or shut down completely. But one thing was for damn sure: it was long overdue. She had spent too many years drowning in a lie, chasing ghosts, hating a man who had never given her the full story.

But once it was out, once she knew everything, that was when I'd really get to focus on the next step.

The thing was, I had never been in a real relationship before. I had no clue what “the next step” even was, but I'd figure it out because I wanted all of the steps with Kyle. Every fucking one of them.

I wanted to learn what made her laugh when she wasn't guarded. I wanted to know what her favorite song was and if she'd let me catch her singing off-key in the car. I wanted to see the way her face lit up when she let herself be happy—not just content, not just in control, but carefree. I wanted to learn every curve of her body, not just in moments of heat but in the softness of waking up beside her. I wanted to learn how to be with her in ways that weren't just sex, war, and chaos.

Because Kyle wasn't just another woman in my life, she was the first one who had ever mattered. And that changed everything.

Chapter 8

Kyle

I scanned the room, taking in the expressions of my team as the words left my mouth.

“Jared is coming.”

A ripple of reactions moved through the Ghosts, some subtle, some not. A muscle ticked in Noah’s jaw, Mace let out a slow exhale, his eyes narrowing slightly. Duke’s fingers tapped a steady rhythm against the table, his version of restless energy. No one spoke right away, though, because we all knew.

Jared had been my number three back on our military contracts. At one time, I’d trusted him with my life, same as I did with the men in this room. He was sharp, reliable, one of the best, but then something changed. I couldn’t pinpoint exactly what it was because there were no major incidents, and no obvious betrayals. I’d just a feeling, a slow-growing unease when it came to him. A gut instinct that told me he wasn’t the same man I used to trust. And my gut had never once steered me wrong.

Judging by the way the rest of my team reacted, they felt it too.

There were three reasons I’d invited him here today. First, I needed to see if that uneasy feeling remained when we were back on home ground, working together. Would that itch still be there, the one that told me something was off? Second, he was bringing me my new TAC-50 rifle—a custom setup from a friend in the Canadian Special Forces. That rifle was going to be crucial when we went in for Piper.

And third, I had spoken to Cookie earlier that morning. Cookie was one of Wolf’s men—his wife had been a victim of human trafficking, and because of that, he never stopped tracking the industry, never stopped looking for information. He had a network unlike anyone else, and when I’d mentioned my concerns about Jared, he’d only given me one piece of advice—keep your friends close but keep your enemies closer.

I knew—deep down—Jared was up to something.

Maybe he was skimming off the top of military contracts. Maybe he was cutting corners, putting us in danger while keeping himself out of harm's way. Maybe he was feeding intel to someone he shouldn't be. There were a million possibilities, and I needed to figure it out, because I knew I'd be getting called back to the pits soon.

And the last thing I needed was to be watching my own back for the wrong reasons.

JAGGER

I sat, my muscles coiled tight, watching Preacher struggle to process what I had just told him. He wasn't a man who lost control easily, but right now, his whole world was shattering.

"She..." His voice cracked, and he swallowed hard. "My baby..."

The next second, he snapped. With a roar, he flipped his desk. The solid wood behemoth that normally took two guys to move went crashing over with an ear-splitting boom, papers were flying through the air, and a bottle of whiskey shattered on the floor.

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I jumped up, barely dodging the wreckage as he stalked across the room, his body vibrating with rage. Then, without hesitation, he started punching the wall, over and over. Fist to drywall. Fist to brick. Blood smeared across the surface, but he didn't stop.

"Preach," I barked, keeping my tone sharp but controlled. "Stop." He didn't. I stepped forward. "Preacher, stop."

His shoulders rose and fell in ragged breaths. His forehead pressed against the cracked wall, his bloody knuckles flexing at his sides.

Then, finally, he spoke. "I failed her, Jagger."

His voice was so broken, so tormented, that it hit me right in the fucking chest.

"No, you didn't."

His laugh was bitter, sharp. "How could I not know what was happening to her?"

Kyle's mom had been a manipulative bitch, we all knew that. She'd damn near started a war between us and another MC. Preacher had stopped that, laid it all out in front of her, and given her an ultimatum. That day, he had told her to pack her shit and leave, or he'd make her disappear.

She had made a lot of enemies. He had known she was a liability. A problem. A psychotic mess that he needed to cut out of his life. But what he hadn't known was that she had been beating his daughter bloody. That she had made Kyle's life hell every

single day. That she had broken her in ways no one had seen.

His grip on the table of liquor was so tight his fingers turned white. He picked up a bottle of whiskey, pulled the top off, and took a deep pull before setting it down with a thud.

“What do I do?” he rasped.

“Tell her the truth, Preacher.” I let the words sink in before adding, “She needed to know.”

His throat bobbed as he nodded slowly, his gaze locked on the floor. “I’m going to lose her,” he whispered.

I had the same fear, but I was going to fight for her, and he needed to, too.

Before I could say anything else, Duke burst through the door, his expression hard.

One word left his mouth, letting us know the shit had officially hit the fan.

“Church.”

KYLE

We were gathered in Church, and the air thick with tension. The name Demingo had been brought up again, and it sent a wave of unease through the room.

Then Duke strode in, his expression grim, and threw a stack of papers onto the table. “We found some shit.”

The room went silent as we passed out the papers he’d thrown around. One by one,

we read through the documents. It was bad, really fucking bad. I felt myself stiffen as I processed what I was seeing. More papers hit the table, Data was still finding more.

My fingers clenched around the pages as my stomach twisted. Then I saw it. The piece that locked everything into place.

“Son of a fucking bitch,” I gasped. My pulse roared in my ears. “He did it.”

Duke’s jaw tightened. “It appears,” he ground out, “that old Demingo was the head of the Diavoli cartel.”

A sick feeling settled deep in my gut.

“He worked his way to the top before joining the FBI,” Duke continued. “Once he got his badge, he used it to become El Jefe. With the combined power of the cartel and his federal authority, he had near total control over one of the major routes from Argentina to the U.S.”

Jesus Christ, that kind of power? It was unprecedented. Normally, traffickers and cartels operated separately, carefully avoiding each other unless necessary, but this was something else.

Most powerful cartels ran their own show. They had control, sure, but they still had to navigate the politics of other crime syndicates, and Demingo had bypassed all of that. With a federal badge in his pocket and cartel muscle at his back, he had built something no one had ever fucking seen before.

And the most terrifying part? No one had noticed. No one had stopped it.

“How the fuck did he pull this off?” Jagger muttered.

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How the fuck didn't one see it before now? Because if we didn't stop him now, there'd be no stopping him at all.

The room was tense, the weight of everything pressing down like a goddamn anvil.

"What does this have to do with us?" Noah, one of Hunter's guys, asked. His voice was sharp, clipped with barely restrained frustration. He wasn't the only one struggling to keep his emotions in check. "We didn't stop him," Noah continued. "We never even got the chance." His fists curled on the table as his gaze locked on the intel in front of him. "Just as we were about to fuck him up, the bastard burst into flames. So why the fuck is he doing this now?"

I wasn't surprised by his reaction. His focus had been solely on Bo ever since we realized she was inside Demingo's operation. His whole body was wound tight, a controlled fire burning hotter with every second that passed.

Hunter, though, well, he looked the same. "It's not just now," Hunter hissed. "Let's be clear about that. With a setup like that, he's been doing it all along, it's just we never knew."

"Well, nothing like this has happened before now," Elijah, another one of Hunter's guys, snapped. "So obviously, it is."

I caught the look Hunter shot at Kyle just before he dropped his head into his hands. His shoulders shook with a deep, ragged breath, his whole body shuddering under the weight of what he now knew.

Then Noah read the next part of the file, and everything changed. His chair scraped violently against the floor as he shot up.

“He planned the bomb,” he snarled, disbelief warping his expression into something primal. His eyes flicked down to the paper again before his head snapped up. His entire body locked up. “He paid that fucking bitch to put her babies in the car and hit the button,” he roared.

The sound of wood splintering filled the room as he hurled his chair against the wall. No one moved. Hell, I don’t think anyone breathed.

On their final tour, Hunter and his team had been ambushed when a woman detonated a bomb with her kids still inside the car. The explosion had ripped through them, killing some, maiming others. It had ended their careers, and now we knew who had been behind it.

Dragon stood off to the side, arms crossed, his sharp eyes taking in every reaction, every shift in energy. The most astute MC President I had ever met, he knew when to interfere and when to let things play out, but right now he knew none of us would be reacting this way if it wasn’t justified. We were lucky it had just been a chair.

“He also planned that RPG attack on us a couple months before that,” Kyle said flatly.

The words barely left her mouth before Jared’s head snapped up. I narrowed my eyes at the weasel. His reaction wasn’t shock.

There was no disbelief, no outrage. Instead, his eyes narrowed slightly, and if I wasn’t mistaken the fucker was trying not to smile. Preacher and I had already had our suspicions about him, this was just confirming that I needed to get to the bottom of whatever the hell was going on with him.

“You can’t be fucking serious,” Blake, one of Valiant’s men, muttered.

“Dead serious,” Hunter gritted out.

Blake shook his head, disbelief written all over his face. “Domingo had his freedom. He wasn’t bound to the government anymore. He could move any way he wanted, wasn’t under the microscope. What the fuck does he want with us?”

“Revenge,” Kyle answered, her voice void of emotion. Heads turned toward her as she leaned forward, elbows braced on the table, her expression unreadable. “He lost the power that working for the government gave him,” she continued. “Now he has to answer to other people. He has to work with other cartels, so he doesn’t get to run the show anymore. He wants to prove his strength and get that power back.”

Silence.

Then—

“What does he have planned?”

Mace’s voice was strained, his body wound tight.

I felt for the guy. If it had been Kyle who had been taken... if I had gotten that photo... I would have lost my fucking mind.

His hands shook as he gripped the edge of the table, his breathing hard and uneven.

Duke rubbed his chin, his expression thoughtful as he mulled over everything.

Mace was barely keeping it together as he waited, but Duke took his time.

“We know he has Ava and Gia,” Duke finally said, referring to Mace’s sister and woman. “And we know he has Scarlett—who was taken from her workplace. That means she wasn’t a direct target like Ava and Gia were.” Duke paused, running through the possibilities in his head. “In criminal psychology, this would be viewed as a multi-motive move.”

Mace looked like he was about to snap.

Duke raised a brow but kept going. “Ava and Gia were undoubtedly aimed at you. But Scarlett wasn’t involved with them, aside from being Ava’s close friend.”

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The realization clicked into place at the same time for both Hunter and me.

“Scarlett is aimed at someone else,” Hunter whispered.

“Someone Demingo is making a point to,” I finished.

The table split off into small groups, quiet conversations bouncing around as everyone tried to piece together what this meant for them.

But Duke wasn’t done. “Or,” he cut in, raising his voice slightly, “someone requested that she be taken to send a message. We can’t ignore the possibility that this is a job for someone else.”

“That actually makes more sense,” Coleman, one of Mace’s guys, muttered. He started explaining the mess going on in their hometown, about how two powerful families were under attack.

“Maybe Scarlett means something to them,” he suggested, referring to the person behind the attacks.

Hunter scrubbed a hand over his face, groaning. “Fuck me, this just keeps getting worse.”

I leaned back, watching and listening. This group was too diverse for knee-jerk reactions. Listening was the only way to see the problem as a whole, instead of fractured pieces.

Then Mace spoke again, his voice hard. “So how do we find them?” No one had an answer. “And why the fuck am I in this?”

Kyle was the one to reply. “You were part of the raid in 2014.”

Mace went rigid.

The room held its breath.

Then it happened.

CRACK.

His fist collided with the wall, punching right through the hole Noah had made earlier. Coleman lunged, wrapping his arms around Mace, restraining him. No one else moved to stop him, because we got it—the anger, the helplessness, and the feeling of having zero fucking control. But he needed to be in one piece to get Ava and Gia back.

Coleman’s voice was low when he spoke, but it held every ounce of command that Mace needed to hear. “We’re gonna find them.” His grip tightened, his eyes locked on Mace’s wild expression. “We’re gonna find all of them, but you need to calm the fuck down.”

Mace’s head hung low as he panted through his rage.

“What good are you gonna be if you’re out of your damn mind? If you have a fucked hand because you’re being a goddamn asshole?” Coleman shook him once, hard. “The answer to that, and you know I’m not bullshitting you, is no fucking good. Now get your shit together.”

The room went dead silent and stayed that way until Kyle's phone rang. She barely glanced at the screen before she spoke.

"It's Bo." Her voice was steady, but the slight tension in it told me everything I needed to know.

The anxiety and the fear were there, because she knew what was at stake. We listened in silence as Kyle spoke to Bo, setting the plan into motion.

And just like that, we had our targets. One group for Piper, and another, larger group for Ava, Gia, and Scarlett.

And Demingo? He was about to find out exactly what happened when he fucked with the wrong people.

I had my eye locked through the scope of my brand-new TAC-50, every muscle coiled tight as I tracked Bo's movements. She was dragging Hunter's woman Piper out of the building, her grip tight despite Piper barely being able to hold herself up. She was getting her out, though, and that's what mattered.

Then all hell broke loose. The second the door slammed open, and they hit open ground, Demingo's men realized what was happening.

Gunfire exploded into the night. Bullets kicked up dirt, shattered windows, and splintered wood as they unleashed hell trying to get them back.

I did what I do best, I dropped the first one before he could even raise his rifle. Then the second. Then the third. Each shot was precise, silent, deadly. But it wasn't enough, there were too many for me to deal with on my own. No matter how fast I worked, I couldn't cover every angle.

I saw the moment it happened through my scope—Bo jerked, stumbling forward, a bloom of red spreading down her side. She'd been hit. My pulse spiked, my finger already squeezing the trigger, taking out the bastard who'd shot her.

But she didn't stop, nor did she hesitate. She kept dragging Piper, moving toward the vehicle, focused on the mission. She'd gotten Piper out, but by the time we reached her Bo was gone. And Piper was in such bad shape we had no choice but to get her to the ER immediately.

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Noah was barely holding it together. His eyes were hollow, and his breathing uneven.

He hadn't spoken since Bo went missing, and no one blamed him. Bo had been inside Demingo's operation for months, feeding us intel, risking her life every single day.

And now she was in enemy hands.

But we would get her back—no man or woman was ever left behind, and Noah knew that.

We all did but knowing it and living it were two different things.

The waiting room in the hospital was silent. In fact, it was too silent. A whole group of us, trained soldiers, mercenaries, fighters—just sitting there, waiting for word on Piper. Mainly for word that she was going to make it, reassurance that she was going to be okay.

Not a single one of us spoke. Not even a breath was wasted.

We had scrubbed the camouflage paint from our faces before stepping onto hospital grounds, making sure there was nothing to tie us to what had gone down. There were already going to be enough questions, we didn't need to draw more attention to ourselves. If anyone—anyone—linked us to what had happened, the risk of the traffickers hunting us down skyrocketed. And we weren't stupid. We had made sure that wouldn't happen.

Now that we didn't have that worry hanging over us, we stayed vigilant, but we were

focused on Hunter's woman, the mother of his son. And while we did that, we worked on our phones looking for Bo and for the assholes who were doing this.

Word had come in—Gia, Ava, and Scarlett were safe. Mace had them.

Relief hit like a punch to the gut, but it didn't erase the tension still coiled in my chest. They were safe now but getting them out hadn't been easy. Not by a long shot.

A friend of theirs had tracked them down, pinpointing their location just hours before our raid for Piper. Timing had been everything. While we fought our way through hell to get her back, Mace and his crew had made their move. But it hadn't been clean.

One of the guards had been strapped with a suicide vest. One wrong move, one slip of the trigger, and the bastard would've taken everyone with him.

That's why Mace had taken the sniper position.

High ground. Steady hands. A scope trained on a walking time bomb.

He had tracked him, waited, breath slow, heart steady. The guy hadn't even known he was being hunted. Then, like some twisted stroke of fate, he had wandered into the woods to take a piss.

That was all it took. One clean shot. One problem down.

But this wasn't over.

Not by a long shot.

We had them safe, but we still had a mess to clean up. And I had a feeling the next

problems wouldn't go down as easy as a lone guard in the woods.

The days crawled by, each hour stretching into an eternity.

Every second felt like a goddamn year.

Piper was still in the ICU, clinging to life, her body locked in a battle she hadn't asked for. She hadn't just been injured—she had been suffering.

A deep wound, carved into her skin by jagged glass days before her kidnapping, had festered unnoticed. Infection had spread through her system like wildfire, unchecked and relentless. The filth she had been kept in, the lack of care, the sheer cruelty of it all had turned a manageable wound into something life-threatening. Septicemia had sunk its claws into her, dragging her down into fevered nightmares and whispered prayers.

She was so fucking sick, but she was fighting.

For days we watched as Hunter visited her and held her hand, until finally she was turning a corner.

The beeping of machines still filled the room, the rhythmic hiss of the ventilator reminding me with every breath she took just how close he had come to losing her. But today, there was something different in the air. The doctors had hope in their voices. The fever had broken. Her vitals had stabilized. The war inside her body was shifting, and for the first time in what felt like forever, the tide was in her favor.

She was winning.

And God help anyone who tried to take her from Hunter again.

Duke and I sat at the table, plans sprawled out before us, the weight of the moment pressing heavy on our shoulders. Maps, blueprints, intel reports—every possible scenario was laid out in front of us, and we ran through each one with ruthless precision. There was no room for error. No second chances.

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We had to move fast. We weren't waiting for Demingo to come to us, we were going to him. Jagger and Preacher weren't happy with the plan. They wanted caution, wanted to regroup, wanted to play the long game. Too fucking bad. This wasn't about comfort, this was about war, and war didn't wait for the enemy to strike first.

Every second we sat back, Demingo fortified. Every hour that passed, he had more time to prepare, to disappear, to slip through our fingers like smoke. That wasn't happening, not on my watch.

I could feel the heat of Jagger's glare across the room, the unspoken challenge in his silence. Preacher had his arms crossed, jaw clenched, barely holding back his disagreement. I didn't care.

War wasn't won by hesitation. It was won by the ones willing to throw the first punch—and make damn sure it was the last.

We had intel on a property where Demingo's men were stationed. He had a stronghold that he kept locked down and heavily guarded. It was a place they thought was untouchable. They were wrong.

We hit it hard. The breach was swift, brutal—no warning, no mercy. The first shots rang out like thunder, and by the time the dust settled, eleven bodies littered the ground. Blood soaked into the dirt, the air thick with the metallic scent of death and gunpowder.

As I stared down at the bodies, I noticed with satisfaction that two of them were key players in Demingo's operation. Men whomade his empire run. Men he relied on

heavily. Now they were nothing more than corpses cooling in the night air.

But we didn't stop there. We stripped a phone off one of the bodies, fingers slick with blood as we scrolled through his contacts. And then we sent Demingo a message.

A picture of his men dead. Their bodies twisted, lifeless, scattered like garbage. His drugs and money—his precious empire—up in flames, burning bright against the darkness. Reduced to nothing but ash. We knew it would hit the mark, how could it not?

The Knights had already swept through, cleaning up the weapons. Anything worth keeping was ours. Anything that could be traced back was gone.

And the rest, all of the information and hard drives we found, it ended up in the hands of the authorities after we'd downloaded everything from them. Everything we handed to them was done anonymously, though, and was totally untraceable.

Luck had been on our side, and it'd all been perfectly orchestrated. Demingo thought he ran this city. Tonight, we reminded him who really held the power.

By morning, the news was already running with it. A short segment, barely two minutes long, but it was enough.

Apparently, a letter had "mysteriously" blown away from the crime scene, drifting lazily in the wind until it landed in a bush just far enough from the flames to remain untouched. A miraculous discovery, really. And inside that letter had been confession.

The men who had died weren't just criminals. According to the letter, they had been part of a secret gay cult—led by none other than Jose Demingo himself.

The confession painted a vivid picture of debauchery and disgrace. It claimed that Demingo had shamed his family, had shamed the Lord himself, indulging in drug-fueled orgies, corrupting his followers, luring men into sin with promises of power and pleasure.

And in an act of repentance, they had ended themselves. The whole thing had been a cleansing, and a final attempt to wipe their sins away.

The story spread like wildfire. Not just because it was salacious, not just because it had all the makings of a scandal, but because we had made sure it reached every major news outlet across Central and South America. Every journalist, every tabloid, every headline-hungry media station received an anonymous tip, an "exclusive" insight into the twisted truth of Jose Demingo's secret life.

If there was one thing we knew about Demingo, it was that he took his dick and his reputation very fucking seriously. And now both were in ruins.

We had also finally gotten a clean look at him. On one of the hard drives, there was surveillance footage of him for some reason, like one of his men was going to stab him in the back anyway. Multiple angles at different locations. The difference with these ones was that there were no more grainy images, no more secondhand descriptions. This was him, clear as day.

And the man himself looked like a fucking monster.

One side of his face was completely melted. He looked like something out of a horror movie. Like his flesh had been devoured by fire or acid, twisting his features into something barely human. Scar tissue pulled tight across his skull, warping his expression into a permanent sneer. He had the kind of face that made children cry, the kind of face that haunted nightmares. It was also clear that he hadn't been able to seek medical attention for it, and a scar that'd normally make my heart break for the

person living with it... Well, karma worked in wonderful ways.

Ironically, his appearance wasn't even his biggest problem, because now the entire world believed he was the leader of a gay orgy suicide cult. In his world, that wasn't just an insult, that was a death sentence. His allies would start questioning him, would start wondering if he had gone soft. More than likely, they'd already decided he was losing control.

And once doubt crept in, it spread like a disease.

His men would hesitate before following orders. His lieutenants would second-guess his judgment. His rivals would start circling like vultures, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. And that was more dangerous than anything we could have done to him physically. Because men like Demingo didn't fear bullets, they feared weakness. They feared irrelevance, and losing their grip on power, so we just had to keep pushing. We had to do it hard enough and relentlessly enough until he had no choice but to come out and play.

Chapter 9

Jagger

"You're what?"

We were sitting in the dimly lit church on our compound, the heavy scent of burning wax and dust mingling in the air. Tension sat thick between the wooden pews, pressing in on us like an invisible weight. Preacher hadn't had the chance to talk to Kyle yet, not with all the chaos we'd been dealing with, and now she was dropping this bombshell on us.

"No fucking way."

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Kyle stood in front of me, hands on her hips, her eyes blazing with defiance. The fire in them told me she was ready for a fight.

“Look,” she snapped, her voice low but edged with steel. “These people are part of this bullshit. All I have to do is go to this gathering, blend in, get information, and get out. It’s as simple as that, and also something we’ve all done a million times.”

I shook my head, the knot in my chest tightening. “And what if they recognize you? What if they decide you’re the one they want to send fuck knows where?”

The room felt like it was closing in. I glanced at Preacher, watching him battle with this just as much as I was. It had been only a couple of days since we’d seen the shape Piper came back in, her body broken and bruised, and Bo taking a bullet and disappearing. This was real—it was life and death—and she wanted to walk right into it?

“They won’t,” Kyle insisted, her voice sharp with frustration. “These are the grunts and the errand boys. And I’m a professional, Jagger.” She stepped closer, her chin tilting up defiantly. “I’ve done this a million times.”

I shot up so fast my chair clattered to the ground behind me. “I don’t care if you’ve done it a million times. You could get fucking hurt!” My voice came out as a roar, sharp enough to cut through the tense silence.

The others flinched at my outburst, a few sucking in quiet breaths, but I didn’t care. This wasn’t some game.

Preacher finally broke the silence. “Go with her, Jagger.”

Kyle and I both snapped our heads toward him, disbelief flashing between us.

“No fucking way,” Kyle protested, shaking her head before I even had the chance to say anything.

“I’m in.”

I didn’t wait for her argument. I turned on my heel and walked out of the room, my pulse hammering in my ears. I needed space and needed to clear my head. Something about this felt wrong, like a whisper in the back of my mind telling me this was a mistake. But Kyle was determined, and if she was going in, then I was making sure she got out of it alive.

My jaw ached from clenching it as we approached the building. The high-end cars lined up along the street were a parade of wealth and corruption. Bentleys, Lamborghinis, Rolls-Royces—it screamed money, power, and bad intentions.

Duke had gotten us a Bentley SUV to blend in, and now, seeing the scene in front of us, I understood why. This wasn’t just a casual meetup, this was going to be a fucking production.

Kyle walked beside me, her fingers laced through mine, her demeanor the picture of calm. Her other hand casually brushed through her hair as if the only thing on her mind was whether it was still perfectly styled.

I still wasn’t used to the sight of her like this—long brunette wig, sleek and straight, and a red dress that clung to every inch of her like a second skin. When she’d walked downstairs earlier, none of us had recognized her. She’d smirked at our reactions. “Told you I knew what I was doing.”

And she did, but that didn't mean I had to like it.

Duke had done a number on me too. A goatee was glued to my face, my hair darkened, dark brown contacts covering my usual eye color. When I looked in the mirror, I barely recognized myself. It was unsettling as hell.

As we approached the entrance, the first red flag was waiting for us—the security. They were built like brick shit houses, their expensive suits barely containing their bulk. All of them were visibly armed, alert, and clearly not the type to hesitate. A glance upward as we made our way from the car confirmed it—six men stationed on the rooftop, eyes sharp, rifles slung over their shoulders.

Kyle had told me to park toward the back to scope the place out. I hated admitting it, but it was a smart call.

“Relax,” she whispered as we climbed the stairs.

That was easy for her to say. I was stuffed into a dark gray suit, my red tie matching her dress. I'd never worn anything like this in my life, and it felt like a goddamn costume. But apparently, if you're trafficking people, drugs, or weapons, you do it dressed like a fucking lawyer. Hypocritical bastards.

The guard at the door held out his hand. “Invitación.”

Kyle, ever the resourceful one, slid a small piece of card from the top of her dress, the movement slow, deliberate. His eyes followed the motion, lingering too long on her cleavage, making my fingers flex and my blood simmer.

Kyle squeezed my hand, a silent reminder to stay cool.

The guard barely looked at the invitation, too focused on her. He gave a nod and held

out his arm, waving us inside. But as we passed, his hand subtly brushed over Kyle's ass.

Motherfucker.

"I'm going to kill him," I muttered under my breath, my hand curling into a fist.

Kyle pressed against me, her lips brushing my ear like she was whispering something sweet. But what she said had nothing to do with affection.

"I'll leave a piece of him for you," she promised, her tone dark, deadly. "But right now, you need to focus. Everything else can wait."

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Her fingers touched the large necklace hanging around her throat. It had a hidden camera in it that was feeding everything back to Data, Preacher, and Duke.

Good, I hope they were taking notes and had seen what he'd just done to her. There was no way they'd let him get away with that if, for some reason, I didn't get to him first.

"Let's get a drink," she said, her voice slipping into a sultry tone.

We moved toward the bar, where rows of crystal glasses gleamed under the chandeliers, filled with golden liquid.

Kyle let out a low whistle. "\$450 a bottle," she murmured.

Disgust curled in my stomach. The sheer amount of wealth and indulgence in this room was nauseating, made worse by the fact that it was all funded by human suffering.

A voice cut through the noise behind us. "Hello, there."

I turned, and the moment my eyes landed on the man, something flickered in my memory.

"I am Cristóbal," he said smoothly, a polite, practiced smile on his lips. "And this is Luana."

The woman beside him looked like she'd rather be anywhere but here, and suddenly,

I knew exactly where I'd seen him before.

Remembering the brief Duke had drilled into us, I forced my voice into a smooth, practiced calm.

"I'm Aaron Jones," I said, extending my hand toward Cristóbal, even though every instinct in my body rebelled against the gesture.

His fingers clamped around mine, his grip tightening in an attempt to assert dominance. His eyes locked onto mine, challenging, waiting for a flicker of weakness, but I didn't give him the satisfaction. My expression remained neutral, my muscles loose, my posture relaxed, and on the outside I looked completely unaffected.

A flicker of something crossed his face—confusion, maybe irritation. And then more of the brief I'd read on him hit me—this was one of the sick bastards who ran a brothel in El Salvador. A low-tier scumbag who thought he was a kingpin when, in reality, he was nothing but an amoeba in an ocean of monsters. The Ghosts had raided his operation last year, dragging a six-year-old girl out before the worst could happen. Not all the victims had been so lucky, but the survivors had been placed with the right people, given therapy, a chance at something better.

The fact that Cristóbal was still standing here, sipping expensive champagne like he hadn't been responsible for all that suffering, made my blood turn to acid. Then his gaze shifted to Kyle. Something flickered in his eyes. Recognition? Interest?

No, no fucking way.

Before I could react, Kyle stepped in, closing the distance between them like she was walking into a lover's embrace, and kissed his cheek.

“Daisy,” she purred, her voice low, sultry—the same tone I was used to hearing in the bedroom.

My fists clenched involuntarily. Any other time, that sound would have me pushing her against a wall, but right now, hearing her use it on him had a red haze creeping into my vision.

Cristóbal’s eyes stayed glued to her chest.

What was it with motherfuckers tonight?

“Daisy...” he repeated slowly, rolling the name over his tongue like he was tasting it. “The pleasure is mine.”

He lifted her hand, as if to kiss it like he was some kind of refined gentleman, but before his lips could touch her skin, a loud commotion broke out behind us. Two men stood nose to nose in the far corner, their bodies rigid with tension. One was Hispanic, the other Middle Eastern, both of them draped in gold jewelry like it was supposed to make them important.

Cristóbal chuckled, the sound light, dismissive. “Ah, they are always so hot-headed and eager,” he mused. Then he turned back to us, eyes flicking to Kyle again. “If you’ll excuse me,” his lips curled in something that wasn’t quite a smile. His gaze slid over Kyle one last time, “Daisy.”

I didn’t move until he was a few steps away, then I reached for Kyle, wrapping my arm around her waist and pulling her into me, shielding her from the eyes that had lingered too long. Her body stayed relaxed, unconcerned, like she hadn’t just been inspected like a piece of meat at a butcher shop.

I bent my head to her ear.

“What the fuck was that?” I growled lowly, reaching for the glass of champagne we hadn’t touched earlier. I wasn’t planning to drink it, I wouldn’t trust anything in this place, but appearances mattered so I was going to hold it.

Kyle’s response came with a teasing smile as she lifted her own glass. “I was part of the bust.” She sipped delicately, as if we weren’t having this conversation at all. “If I’d hesitated, it would’ve looked suspicious.” Her eyes flicked toward mine. “I’m here to play a part, Jagger, and that’s what I’m doing.”

My grip tightened around the glass, but I kept my face unreadable.

Duke had drilled the plan into us. Get in, get photos of as many of these fuckers as possible, and get out. To blend in, I was playing the role of a buyer, and Kyle was my arm candy—my ‘flavor of the night.’

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I glanced around the room. Most of the women here were dressed like Kyle—tight dresses, killer heels, makeup applied like war paint. But some weren't as lucky. Some were in nothing but lingerie, collars fastened around their necks, chains leading them like fucking dogs.

One of the men from the earlier fight—the Middle Eastern one—sat now with two women kneeling behind him, their heads bowed to the ground. Their backs were lined with fresh, raw stripes, the skin welted and broken.

A slow, boiling rage built in my gut, and I forced myself to look away.

I had a job to do.

Kyle must've noticed the tension in my shoulders because she leaned in. "Do you think he recognized me?" she murmured.

I studied her, the way she kept her expression light, unreadable, then I looked back toward where Cristóbal had disappeared. "I don't know."

Her small shrug did nothing to ease my worry.

For the next hour, we worked the room, meeting people, exchanging pleasantries, forcing conversation with the worst kind of filth. They spoke freely, too freely, as if they believed they were untouchable. They bragged about their operations, their money, their influence. I hoped like hell Duke and the others were getting this, because I didn't know if I could do this again.

Then, finally, after what felt like ten hours, Kyle gave the signal that we could leave. I exhaled slowly, preparing to get the hell out of this place, but before we could take a step, Cristóbal reappeared, this time with the Middle Eastern man from earlier.

“Ah, Aaron and Daisy,” Cristóbal greeted, that false charm sliding easily back into place. “This is Arshad Fathizadeh. Arshad, this is Aaron Jones and Daisy...” He paused, a smirk playing at his lips. “I don’t believe I got your last name, sweet Daisy.”

Something about the way he said it, the way his gaze lingered, sent every alarm bell ringing.

Kyle didn’t miss a beat. “Trent,” she answered smoothly, extending a hand toward Fathizadeh. “Mr. Fathizadeh.” Her voice was softer now, breathy, almost purring.

Cristóbal’s eyes didn’t leave her, and I forced myself to stay still as the bastard reached out and tucked a strand of hair over her shoulder. The moment his fingers brushed her skin, my entire body tensed. He must’ve noticed, because his eyes flicked to me, amusement dancing in them.

Fathizadeh took Kyle’s hand—but he didn’t let go.

“We were actually just leaving,” I interrupted smoothly, stepping in and sliding an arm around Kyle’s waist. “Daisy had a few...ideas.” I let the word drip with implication, smirking. “So, we must sadly leave early.”

Cristóbal stayed where he was, too close, his eyes still locked on Kyle.

Fathizadeh chuckled. “Yes, one cannot pass up suggestions from a woman as beautiful as Ms. Trent.”

His eyes lingered, this time deliberately. First on her chest, then lower. I bit down so hard my jaw ached.

Kyle, ever the professional, only smiled. “It was a pleasure meeting you both tonight,” she purred, tilting her head. “I do hope we see each other again.”

Fathizadeh’s expression shifted, his gaze darkening with interest.

I tightened my grip on Kyle, and then, finally, we turned and started to walk away. I didn’t relax until we were out of that room, and even then, something told me this wasn’t over.

Not even close.

“Mm, yes, sweet Daisy. It has been a pleasure meeting you both, and I have no doubt we will meet again very soon.”

Cristóbal’s voice was smooth as he spoke to our backs, almost lazy, but there was something underneath it now. Something sharper, darker, and it sent a new wave of tension crawling up my spine.

Then he turned his gaze on me. “Aaron, make sure you keep her close.”

This time, there was no mistaking it—a threat, laced with something menacing, something possessive. His eyes burned with something I didn’t fucking like, and my fingers twitched with the urge to break his fucking jaw.

Instead, I gave him a slow, measured nod, took Kyle’s hand, and guided her away, each step controlled despite the violent energy flooding my veins.

As we moved through the parking lot, I kept my grip on Kyle, keeping her close, my

senses on high alert. The people milling around acted casual, but I wasn't stupid enough to believe it. Every instinct told me we were being watched.

When we reached the car without interference, I exhaled, my body itching to get the hell out of there. My fingers reached for the handle, but Kyle's hand shot out, stopping me as she tapped her necklace.

Fuck.

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The Bentley's lights flashed as it unlocked, but not from me.

Right, the protocol. The teams had been watching the car from their screens, running security in real-time. Once Kyle tapped her necklace, a silent signal, they'd scanned for any tampering before unlocking it remotely. I'd been so caught up in getting the fuck out, I almost skipped a step that could've gotten us killed.

Kyle didn't say anything, but I knew she noticed.

I clenched my jaw and got in, the moment we pulled away the anger inside me exploded.

"God fucking damn it, Kyle!" I slammed my fist against the wheel, making the car swerve slightly before I corrected it. She barely flinched, staring grimly out the windshield. "He knows who you are!"

Her fingers tightened around her dress, but her voice remained even. "It appears that way."

"Appears that way?" My disbelief came out sharp.

Before she could answer, the car's Bluetooth system rang, and Preacher's name flashed across the dashboard.

Kyle sighed and hit the answer button before I could. "We know," was all she said.

"Yeah, we figured as much," Preacher's voice was tight with anger. "You've also

got three tails.”

I flicked my eyes to the mirror. I’d already clocked them because they weren’t being as discreet as they thought, but it made me feel easier that the others were onto them too.

“Yeah,” I muttered, gripping the wheel tighter. Until I had Kyle back behind our gates, I wouldn’t relax.

Then Duke’s voice cut in. “Jagger, I need you to drive like an asshole. I want you to swerve, speed, do whatever you can. At the next gas station, pull over and argue, and, Kyle, you take over the driving after.”

Beside me, Kyle grinned. “I’ve always wanted to see what one of these can do.”

My foot instinctively pressed on the accelerator in irritation. How the hell was she excited right now? Most of the time, Kyle was level-headed, tactical, deadly serious. But now she wanted to play with the fucking car?

I shook my head but didn’t argue. Instead, I followed Duke’s orders. The second one of the tails got too close, I slammed my foot down on the brake, jerking the wheel to swerve sharply in front of them. The tires screeched, the seatbelt cut into my chest, but the car behind me had to lurch to a halt, nearly getting rear-ended by the others.

Kyle barely blinked, and my frustration burned hotter. She was in fucking danger, and she was acting like this was a game.

A gas station came into view, and my instincts told me to keep going, to stay in control, and not to stop. But Kyle already knew Duke’s plan. If she trusted it, I had to.

I pulled into the lot, yanking the car into a spot before stepping out.

Kyle rounded the front, ready for the show. “You’re fucking drunk!” she snapped loud enough for half the parking lot to hear. “I told you I would drive, you asshole, but you insisted you had to do it because of your precious car. With the way you’re driving, you’re gonna get us fucking killed!”

My brows shot up. Damn, she was going all in. Then, before I could react, she marched up to one of our tails.

What the fuck?

The guy had pulled in two spots over, his tinted window cracked slightly, and Kyle knocked on it bold as hell. The driver hesitated, but when he rolled it down, she bent over, resting a hand on his shoulder like they were old friends.

She murmured something, getting a nod from him in return. And just like that, she strutted back, making sure to swing her hips.

“I’ve said sorry to the poor man behind us,” she announced loudly, glaring at me. “Now give me the damn keys and get your drunk ass on the other side.”

She didn’t wait for me to do what she’d demanded. She just snatched the keys, jumped in, tossed them into the cup holder, and hit the ignition. I barely got into the passenger seat before she took off, smooth as hell back onto the highway. Within minutes, our tails repositioned, two on the right, one behind.

Kyle just smiled, flipping her hair like she was telling me a damn bedtime story. “We’re going to go a little faster and lose our friends.”

Her fingers danced through the air like she was gossiping, like we weren’t actively being hunted.

“Kyle, I’m not sure?—”

She punched the gas, and the Bentley roared forward. The two cars flanking us surged to keep up, engines growling, but the one behind stuck close, waiting.

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Kyle grinned, then she cut in front of them, nearly clipping one's bumper.

“Oopsy,” she sang, lifting a delicate hand in mock apology.

The next five minutes were fucking insane. She wove through traffic like she was born for it, cutting sharp, squeezing between cars, playing chicken with every lane. The guys following us weren't as lucky. The pissed-off drivers she'd just dodged slowed down, boxing them in.

As soon as I saw them fighting to swerve around, Kyle took a sharp right, killing the lights as we disappeared down a side road. Pitch black, no headlights, just instinct.

I watched what was going on behind us in the rearview mirror, heart hammering. But there was nothing.

Five minutes later, the tension was crushing me. “Pull over,” I ground out.

Kyle's hands stayed steady on the wheel. “We'll be back at the Compound in thirty minutes.”

No, not this time.

“Pull. Over.”

She continued to ignore me, and my pulse spiked, fury curling in my gut, the adrenaline and the absolute fucking terror I hadn't let myself feel until now hitting all at once. I opened my mouth to demand it again, just as the Bluetooth rang.

Duke's name flashed across the dash, and I swear I saw red.

“Motherfucker!” I roared, slamming my fist into the dashboard.

“Jagger.” Duke's voice came over the speakers, sharp, commanding, no room for argument. “Keep your fucking shit together. You need to get back here ASAP.” That was when I knew for sure, we were fucked. “Kyle, we're rerouting the traffic cameras. Put your foot down and come straight here.” Then, in pure Duke fashion, he hung up.

Kyle frowned, her lips pressing together as she followed Duke's orders, driving well above the speed limit with the headlights still off. The engine hummed beneath us, the dark road ahead nothing but a blur as we raced toward the Compound. The tension inside the car was thick, suffocating, and I could feel my own pulse thrumming hard in my ears.

Fifteen minutes, that was all it took to make it back—half the time it should have. The whole time Kyle didn't speak one word. Then again, neither did I.

By the time she pulled through the Compound gates, the walls looming around us like a fortress, my hands were shaking. Not from fear. Not from adrenaline. From the rage still boiling under my skin, and from the worry twisting my insides into knots. Mainly, it was from the fact that we were supposed to be safe, and yet, someone had known.

As we stepped out of the vehicle, I caught movement ahead—every single Ghost and Knight was outside the main building had their weapons drawn.

Fuck.

“Get in!” Duke's voice bellowed across the open space.

Kyle didn't hesitate. She moved fast, too fast for someone in heels, her posture controlled, but I knew her well enough to see the tension threading through her body. I stayed close behind her, glancing over my shoulder every few steps. We may have been inside the walls, but I didn't trust a damn thing.

I hadn't forgotten the feeling I'd gotten when we went to retrieve Perry. Someone had tipped off the enemy back then, and it sure as hell looked like someone had tipped them off again tonight.

No one stood out so far because they hadn't slipped up enough for us to focus on them. Yet.

Then there was Jared, that asshole. He was still here in the Compound. Still setting off every goddamn alarm in my head. I couldn't say that he was the one leaking our information or if he was just acting off, but there was something about him I didn't trust.

I clenched my jaw and kept moving. Inside Church, the doors shut behind us with a finality that made my skin itch.

It was just me, Kyle, Preacher, Duke, and Data. What the fuck was going on?

I could feel Jagger's anger. It had been simmering all night, creeping up my spine, and growing hotter with every second we spent in that room. That was one of the reasons I hadn't wanted him there in the first place. Jagger didn't understand the way these people operated—the way they watched, but I did.

I knew their power plays, the way they pushed and tested boundaries, the silent threats disguised as casual conversation. But what I hadn't accounted for was Cristóbal Santino being there. He was supposed to be in El Salvador, tied up with a massive drug shipment. Not at that party. Not staring me down like a predator who

just spotted his prey.

The moment he figured out who I was, I'd felt it. Roughly twenty minutes after we first met, I'd caught him looking at me—his posture still, his expression unchanged—but I'd still seen it. The exact second it clicked. His gaze had darkened, and his lips twitched in realization.

But I never reacted, not once. I'd just smiled at him like I hadn't noticed a damn thing.

And now, sitting in this room, I was trying to figure out what the fuck to do next.

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JAGGER

The silence was suffocating.

“Santino was tipped off.” Data’s voice was flat. Factual.

And I snapped. I shot up from my chair, rage detonating inside me like a goddamn bomb. The chair exploded against the wall, slamming into the dent that Noah had put there before, making the hole even bigger, making the room shake with the force of it.

“Sit down, son,” Duke ordered, his voice dropping into that no-bullshit tone.

“Fuck that!” I roared.

My hands clenched into fists as I turned, stalking toward him, fury radiating off me in waves. “You said she’d be safe!”

I got up in his space. I had never seen anyone challenge Duke head-on, and a small part of my brain told me I was making a dangerous fucking mistake, but I didn’t care. Kyle could have been killed tonight because someone had set her up.

Duke’s jaw flexed, his body coiled, his patience thin as razor wire. “She would have been,” he ground out, his voice just as lethal as mine.

I caught movement out of the corner of my eye, Preacher. His arms were crossed, but his eyes were locked on Kyle. His face was a mix of anger and something else—something I wasn’t used to seeing from him.

Concern.

Duke's next words hit hard. "Santino got a text at twenty-one hundred hours." Silence. "It was a photo of Kyle along with her name, sent from an untraceable number." He exhaled slowly, his nostrils flaring. "The only message attached was... 'this is who you're looking at.'"

My vision reddened at this information, and Kyle stiffened.

Her fingers curled into her lap, tight enough to turn her knuckles white.

"Now that just pisses me off," she muttered, her voice cold.

My blood was still boiling, still rushing too fast, but I forced myself to step back, muscles thrumming like a live wire. Kyle was in danger, and we definitely had a rat in the Compound.

"What do we do now?" she asked, voice clipped.

Duke's nostrils flared again, his composure cracking for half a second. "I don't know right now," he snapped, the frustration thick in his voice.

I felt my breath slow, my mind sharpening past the anger, into something else. Strategy. Duke didn't say "I don't know" often. Ever. But this wasn't just a bad situation, it was a fucking mess.

I shifted, stepping behind Kyle, resting a hand on her shoulder, needing her to know I was there.

Duke exhaled sharply. "But as soon as I do," he growled, voice like crushed glass, "we're going to fucking end this shit once and for all."

Silence, the kind that was louder than any explosion. Then, Kyle's lips twitched. It wasn't a smile, it was something sharper. Deadlier.

"Good," she said, her voice razor-edged.

Because whoever had done this was going to fucking regret it.

Chapter 10

Kyle

It had been a week since the gathering. A week of waiting, and nothing else had happened.

Well, yet.

But the silence felt wrong.

It wasn't relief that we were all feeling about this—not even close. What we were experiencing was the kind of silence that coiled in your gut like a snake before it struck. A predator circling, watching, waiting for the perfect moment to sink its fangs in. The Knights felt it too. They were used to shit like this, too long stretches of unease before everything went sideways, but even they were getting twitchy. Their movements were sharper, their tempers shorter. Everyone knew the hit was coming.

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It was only a matter of when.

But while we waited for that bomb to drop, we'd gotten something else, a location. Demingo had been found. We knew where he was holed up, and if things weren't already tense enough, Hunter and the rest of Valiant were about to join in on the fun. That should've been a win, but there was bad blood between Hunter and Preacher.

Hunter's prospects had been on watch the night Piper was taken, but instead of doing their fucking job, they'd gotten distracted trying to find shelter from a storm. Basically, they'd fucked up, and in this world, fuckups cost lives.

I ignored the tension thickening the room and unrolled an aerial photo of the property Demingo was hiding in. Time to get to work.

"Data ran a search on high traffic movement in the area," I started, voice steady. "Then isolated the ones tied to Demingo. Twenty minutes ago, we sent drones to three locations and got this shot back from Charlie Drone."

I pointed at the massive sheet of paper on the table. The image looked like a generic forest clearing, if you didn't know what you were looking for, but I knew.

"At oh-nine-hundred hours, this was taken," I continued, tapping an area that looked empty to the untrained eye. Except it wasn't. Beneath the netting designed to blend in with the surrounding terrain, a faint outline of rotor blades could just barely be made out. "There's a helo here." I moved my finger across the image, stopping at another spot. "And here," I pointed at a freshly flattened path in the tall grass, "is where they've been parking their vehicles. Poorly camouflaged but camouflaged

nonetheless.”

I gave them a second to take it all in.

“They’ve got someone posted here,” Jagger spoke up, tapping at a wooded area where a barely visible barrel of a long-range rifle was peeking through.

“Oh, goody,” Hunter growled, cracking his knuckles. “They want to play rough.”

I smirked. I liked that look on him and my words coming out of his mouth.

Unrolling a second sheet, I laid it out over the first.

“Charlie Drone is a prototype created by the Ghosts,” I explained. “We haven’t pitched it to the government yet. Frankly, we probably won’t.”

I clenched my jaw, reigning in my thoughts before I got too sidetracked with my own issues on that.

“So,” I continued, clearing my throat, “Charlie Drone is a fucking beast. This was the most complex of the three locations, which is why we sent it in. It’s basically the stealth bomber of military drones. It carries extra charging cells distributed evenly throughout the frame, extending its range. Its camera’s stronger, higher-powered than Alpha or Beta models. It stays at an undetectable altitude while still getting us crystal-clear, high-res photos like these.”

I pointed down at eight sharp images. Demingo caught in various intimate moments. Two were of him in the bathroom, one of him peering worriedly out a window. Another two showed him on the porch, smug as hell, eating breakfast while two guards stood watch.

But the next ones were the golden tickets. One of him looking nervous as hell as his guards stepped away.

It was the last one that was my favorite. Him, dead asleep in his bed. That was the photo that would fuck with his head the most.

Hunter chuckled—a dark, hungry sound. “I might have a plan,” he muttered.

I loved working with this guy. Unfortunately, Jared was gone, called away on some job, but something about him still felt off. I’d wanted Hunter’s read on him, but for now, we had bigger problems.

One of Demingo’s so-called “orgy houses” had contained more than just bodies and secrets—it had housed a stash of weapons, and we had made sure to keep some. In our world, you never knew when something would come in handy, and tonight, we were about to put one to the test.

Hunter and his team were locked in position while Data had us patched into an untraceable system, every feed secure, every line clean. I was stretched out at my own vantage point, watching and waiting, my pulse steady as the cool night air wrapped around me. Overhead, Charlie Drone hovered silently, capturing everything in real-time.

The first text landed on Demingo’s phone, and I watched the moment unfold through my scope. A single photo of him, asleep in his bed. His reaction was instant. He lurched upright, the phone slipping from his grasp and bouncing onto the floor as he scrambled to his feet. Panic flickered across his face as he ran a hand through his hair, pacing, trying to steady his breath. Then another text arrived. He hesitated, staring at the phone like it might explode before cautiously picking it up. His expression shifted as panic gave way to something sharper—rage.

And then, the third text came through. His face crumbled, and the phone hit the floor again, his entire body rigid as the realization of what was happening fully set in. A moment later, a familiar sound crackled through my headset, playing softly at first before rising in volume—Danza Kuduro.

I nearly choked on a laugh. The same song we had caught him dancing to in the bathroom footage earlier was now blaring from his phone. Data had overridden his phone, preventing it from locking, and the screen flickered to life, looping the footage on his screen—Domingo, shaking his ass, singing into a toothbrush like a goddamn idiot.

“What the fuck?!” he bellowed, stumbling back as if the device had burned him. His rage boiled over, his voice cracking as he roared into the darkness. “Come out, you fucking coward!”

Grinning, I murmured into my comms, “Well, that’s rich. We’re not the ones hiding in the boonies now, are we?”

A soft ping on my screen signaled it was go time. I confirmed my position, my scope steady, my trigger finger light as I waited for the next move. Then, Domingo’s phone flashed again, but this time, the screen split in two. The top half displayed a live feed from his front camera, reflecting his own wide-eyed, panic-stricken face, while the bottom half showed a night-vision feed, a long-distance shot of his property.

His eyes flickered with confusion before a smug expression briefly returned, as if he still believed his walls and reinforcements would keep him safe. But he was wrong. So fucking wrong. And he was about to find out just how badly he’d fucked up.

The weapon we’d seized was a military prototype—something that wasn’t supposed to exist outside of classified operations. Smaller than an RPG but just as lethal, its explosive rounds carried a payload powerful enough to tear through reinforced

structures like paper. The fact that Demingo's men had them made my blood boil. It meant that somewhere, someone high up had either sold these off or let them slip through the cracks. And when I found out who, they were going to fucking suffer. But that was a problem for another day.

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Right now, I had a shot to line up.

Lying prone, I adjusted the sight on my rifle, factoring in wind speed, direction, and drop. Every movement was precise, every breath measured. When I was locked in, I double-clicked my throat mic. Tonight, this was Hunter's call. His fiancée had been taken, his world nearly ripped apart by the same bastards holed up inside that building, so this was his show.

Through the scope, I tracked Demingo's movements. He was still pacing, still caught up in the mindfuck Data had orchestrated, his phone playing his own humiliation on an endless loop. Then, I heard the click, my signal.

I squeezed the trigger.

The round fired with deadly precision, striking the side of the house just as Jagger and the team detonated the explosives we'd wired minutes earlier. The world fucking shook. A shockwave blasted outward, rattling the ground beneath me, sending debris and smoke into the air.

And then, I fell out of the fucking tree, and the landing was not graceful.

I hit the ground with a hard thud, the impact knocking the wind from my lungs. "Fuck me," I groaned, coughing as dust filled my throat.

My hand instinctively went to rub my neck, and I realized I'd forgotten about my throat mic. The open line meant my moment of humiliation had just been broadcasted to every single person on comms.

There was beat of silence, then, “Kyle!”

Jagger’s voice, sharp with alarm, cut through my earpiece. I groaned again, half in pain, half in sheer fucking embarrassment. Boots pounded against the dirt as he and Preacher ran toward me, but the real insult was Duke. The big, smug bastard stood near the base of the tree that had just betrayed me, arms crossed, shaking with laughter.

“How much C4 did you use?!” I croaked into my mic, still wheezing from the impact. Duke’s laughter only got louder. “Warn me next time, you dickheads.”

That’s when the pain in my arm registered, a sharp, radiating burn that made me hiss out a string of expletives. Jagger and Preacher reached me then, their hands immediately checking for injuries. I hated being fussed over, hated feeling like I needed help. And I sure as hell hated the fact that I had fallen like a fucking amateur.

Swatting their hands away with my good arm, I grumbled, “Fuck off.”

Jagger scowled. Preacher grunted. And Duke was still laughing his ass off.

That son of a bitch was going to pay for this.

JAGGER

Things had finally started to settle. The Valiant team had returned to their compound, the Ghosts were back at ours, and for the first time in a long time, we had breathing room.

For exactly five minutes, then the shit storm we’d all been waiting for hit. It started with a call from Data, and the news was bigger than any of us could have expected. The leak in the MC was the President of the 412 MC.

Turns out, the bastard had a twenty-eight-year-old daughter—Olivia. I vaguely remembered hearing about her, but what we hadn't known was that he had sold her out to traffickers. To the same fuckers we were fighting.

We had trusted him, let him into our conversations, given him intel on our operations. All the while, he had been lining his pockets with blood money, feeding information straight to the enemy.

We barely had time to plan our next move when the first rounds of gunfire struck the side of the building. They had snuck up on us. Somehow, they had gotten past our guards. Worse, they knew the layout of our compound—knew exactly where to hit, where we were vulnerable.

Preacher's roar split through the air. "Fucking shit!"

We ran for the armory, grabbing our assault rifles as standard defense protocols kicked in. Kyle, Duke, and the Ghosts, they knew what to do. But the fact that Kyle wasn't at my side was a distraction I couldn't afford right now. I had to trust her. She was lucky her arm hadn't been broken that night, just bruised, so she could still fight and defend herself.

And fuck, was she fighting.

The second we took position, I got a good look at the sheer number of men that had breached our perimeter. This wasn't just a warning, it wasn't intimidation, and they weren't here to scare us. They were here to wipe us out.

The first shots rang out from inside the building. The Ghosts were already picking them off, moving with practiced precision. I barked orders to the MC, and together, we unleashed hell. Bullets tore through the night, bodies hit the ground, the air thick with gunpowder and blood.

Then, Gauge's voice cut through the chaos. "Anyone else notice they're not shooting at us anymore?"

I blinked, my grip tightening on my rifle. Then, I saw it—their firepower had shifted. They weren't firing at random, they had a target.

And then the explosions hit. I didn't need to look to know it was Kyle.

She had brought out the prototype weapon we'd taken from Demingo's men, and it fucking worked. The force of the blast sent bodies flying, the sheer destruction of it making the attackers hesitate. They realized, too late, that they were outmatched. One by one, they turned tail, bolting for the open gates, scrambling over each other to escape.

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I had one rule—never shoot a man in the back. But these fuckers had come onto our land. Attacked us in our home. These were different rules forced by their decision, so I lifted my rifle back up and started shooting at them again.

I didn't call the stand-down until I was damn sure they were all gone.

As the smoke cleared, I stepped outside and took in the damage. Bullet holes pitted the walls, but none had made it through the thick structure. We had held our ground and had survived. But something wasn't right. My eyes lifted, scanning the rooftop, and that's when I saw it.

Kyle, perched above, rifle still in hand.

And beneath her position was proof of where they'd concentrated their firepower. The deliberate targeting. They hadn't just come for us, they had come for her.

A roar ripped through the air, loud and furious. I turned just in time to see Preacher's face twisted with rage. He had seen it too—they had tried to take out his daughter. That was why they hit us here. They had used the battle as a distraction, long enough to single her out.

Preacher's voice boomed through the clearing, his fury echoing like thunder. "Get the President of the 412." His tone left no room for argument. "Find him and bring him here."

This shit was ending. Now.

Chapter 11

Jagger

The sun was rising, casting long, golden streaks over the Compound, but there was no warmth in it. No relief. Just a grim reminder that we'd barely survived the night. The grounds were secured again, the bodies of our fallen gathered, and the damage being assessed, but it wasn't over. Not even close.

Exhaustion weighed heavy on my bones, but the rage still pumping through my veins kept me upright. My hands trembled—not from fear, not from exhaustion, but from the sheer fury of it all. They had come for Kyle, right under my fucking nose, and five of my brothers had died because of it. Five men, patrolling the perimeter, doing their job, keeping us safe had been gunned down by a pack of perverted, power-hungry fucks.

I clenched my fists, my jaw aching from grinding my teeth. Someone was going to pay. No, all of them were going to pay.

But first, I had to deal with Preacher. He was barely holding it together. I could see it in the way his shoulders were rigid, in the way he couldn't stop pacing, the weight of something heavier than guilt pressing down on him. Kyle could have died tonight, and if she had, she never would have known the truth about him.

I had said it a million fucking times already, but I said it again. "You need to tell her."

Preacher snapped. "Now isn't the time!" he barked, spinning on his heel, his hands fisting at his sides.

My control slipped. If not now, then when?

Duke exhaled sharply from where he stood nearby. “He’s right.” His voice was steely. Final.

Preacher’s frustration exploded. “Look, I know you fuckers think you know everything, but now isn’t?—”

“It’s never been the time!” I roared, cutting him off as I stepped closer. I’d had it. “You’ve had so many chances to come clean, but instead, here we are, sitting around like assholes while this eats away at us, day after day, waiting for the right moment that never fucking comes.” My chest rose and fell hard, my pulse hammering in my ears. “Just tell Kyle the truth.”

A voice cut through the haze of anger and tension like a gunshot. “What truth?”

Everything stopped as our heads snapped in unison toward the doorway.

Kyle stood just inside the room, her stance deceptively relaxed, and her face an unreadable mask of indifference. But her eyes—her eyes were sharp. Unforgiving.

“What truth?” she repeated slowly.

A deadly quiet settled over the room. Duke and I didn’t answer, this was Preacher’s mess to clean up.

I turned to look at him, and for the first time in my life, I saw the fear in his eyes. He swallowed hard, hesitating. “Kyle, I?—”

I lost my patience. “Preacher hasn’t been honest with you, have you, Preacher?” My voice was sharp as a blade, slicing through the silence.

Kyle’s gaze flicked to me, unblinking.

“The shit your mother told you? It was bullshit.” I let it all spill out because Preacher didn’t look like he was going to do it quickly enough. “When she killed herself, it wasn’t because she was running from him. It was because he’d threatened to make her disappear if she touched you again, because she told him she was going to kill you.”

Kyle’s expression didn’t change, at least, not on the outside. But I saw it—that quick flicker in her eyes, there and gone before she turned her full focus on Preacher. She wasn’t going to ask me for more, she was waiting for him.

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Preacher moved slowly, sinking down into a chair like his own body was too heavy to carry. “Your mother—” his voice cracked, and he had to clear his throat before continuing. “She was...difficult. She used drugs and it made it impossible to be reasonable with her. She tried to start a war between us and another MC.” His voice faltered as he realized he was getting off track. “I didn’t know what she was doing to you.” His eyes lifted to hers, pleading. “If I had, I would have stopped it. I would have made sure she never touched you again. I swear it.”

Kyle’s eyes flicked back to me, and this time, I saw something I never wanted to see in them. Betrayal.

Fuck.

I had broken her trust. I could feel it.

Preacher kept talking, his voice rough, but I barely heard it. Because for the first time since meeting Kyle, I realized something, I might have just lost her.

“The day she killed herself, she told me she was going to kill you.”

Kyle didn’t flinch but I fucking did.

“I told her that if she touched you, I’d make sure she disappeared. And then... she did it anyway.” Preacher exhaled shakily, rubbing a hand over his jaw, his voice raw with something that sounded like regret. “You were my world, Kyle. You still are. I would have never let anyone—anything—hurt you.”

Silence settled over the room, stretching too long, pressing down like a weight. Kyle's expression was unreadable, her face carefully composed, revealing nothing. And that was what scared the shit out of me.

I waited and I hoped. I begged in my own fucking head for her to say anything that would tell me we hadn't just lost her.

Then, she finally spoke, but it wasn't what I wanted to hear. "Don't contact me." Her voice was even, controlled. "Don't come near me." She looked at all three of us—me, Duke, Preacher—her gaze unwavering, final. "And for all of your sakes, heed me on this."

Flat. Unyielding.

She turned and slammed the door behind her.

For a second, I couldn't move. The sound of the door closing echoed in my head, a finality I wasn't ready to accept. Then instinct kicked in, and I went to go after her, but before my fingers could wrap around the handle, Duke caught my arm, his grip like iron.

"Give her time." His voice was hard, but his eyes held the same pain I felt in my chest, the same ache I knew was clawing at both of us, Kyle was his family. He had been the one to keep her safe all these years. And now, he had lost her trust too.

I swallowed, my throat tight, my voice barely above a rasp. "I love her."

Duke nodded, his expression grim. "Yeah. That's why you're gonna do what she asks."

He gave me a quick, hard shake, then let go, stepping back as I turned toward

Preacher.

The man who had always been our fearless leader wasn't pacing anymore. He wasn't shouting. He wasn't anything. He just sat at the table, his shoulders sagging, his hands limp in his lap, his eyes staring blankly ahead. The fight was gone. The weight of what had just happened had crushed him completely.

I knew that look because I felt the same fucking way.

Kyle was gone, and I had just lost the only world that mattered to me.

Six weeks later....

I was going crazy not knowing how she was. I knew from Duke that shortly after leaving here, she'd gone out to the Middle East to do something with the military. Since then, he said there had been radio silence from her. His exact words.

I was struggling to sleep at night and had found myself going into her room just to feel close to her so that I could get a couple of hours. I spent most of my time helping fix up the Compound again after the attack, the first area being where she had been and where they'd focused their attention. Every time I saw the damage and thought of what could have happened, I felt sick. Preacher wasn't doing much better, and Duke was a foul tempered son of a bitch.

I'd just rolled out of her bed and was headed toward my room when Duke came running up to me with Preacher behind him. "Get your shit together, we're leaving in five," Duke barked as he ran past me in the direction of his room.

"What the fuck?"

It was Preacher who stopped, and I noticed that his hands were shaking. "Kyle's

hurt!”

Those two words made the bottom drop out of my world. What the fuck had happened?

KYLE

There are moments in life that burn themselves into your soul, searing into your memory so deeply that no amount of time or distance can fade them. Some are good—ones you cling to when everything else falls apart. But then there are moments like this. The kind that haunts you and that turn into living nightmares.

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I had been in this line of work for years, had faced death more times than I could count, but never—not once—had I lost a member of my team. Until now.

Now, I was lying on a stretcher, my body bruised and battered, staring at the pine boxes lined up before me in the belly of the transport plane. The air inside the cargo hold was cold and stale, but it couldn't touch the fire burning beneath my skin.

Three of my own. Gone.

I tried to move, but the pain was like knives stabbing through my body, reminding me that I was still alive while they weren't. My hands curled into the thin blanket over me, trying to keep the rage at bay, but it was useless.

How the fuck had it gone so wrong?

It had been a routine recce—a sweep of an area we'd cleared two days ago. There had been no warnings, no signs of trouble. Hell, we hadn't even known where we were being sent until the last minute. It was a strategy to prevent leaks, to keep our movements unpredictable.

Except, it didn't fucking work this time.

I should have been the one flying the helicopter, but lately, I'd been spending more time on the ground, burning off the frustration and anger that had been eating at me since everything fell apart. I needed the numbness that came after pushing my body past its limits—needed the exhaustion to keep my mind from wandering where it wasn't supposed to go.

Because the one time I let myself feel it, I'd done something I hadn't done in years. I'd cried and I wasn't letting that happen again.

Yesterday, everything had been fine. The team had been talking shit, the mission had been simple, and Data had even sent me one of his new signal interceptors after I mentioned how some previously quiet areas were suddenly turning hot for no damn reason.

I'd had a gut feeling, and gut feelings weren't something I ignored.

We were hunkered down, taking a break, passing around water bottles when the device suddenly pinged. A message had been sent from somewhere close—too close.

I'd checked the readout and saw that our coordinates had just been transmitted. My stomach dropped, and I'd done a headcount—one missing.

Then the first explosion hit.

Heat scorched the air as the blast rocked the ground beside me, and before I could react, another detonated. Then another. Precision strikes, meant to wipe us out. We'd never stood a chance.

By the time I was loaded onto the plane, my body wrecked, I could barely keep my eyes open. But I had one last thing to do before they took me home. As they wheeled me toward the ramp, I reached out, my fingers locking weakly around the wrist of the Camp's General Administrator—the man signing off on the bodies.

He hesitated, then leaned down.

I didn't need to say much, I didn't even have the strength to if I was honest, yet I forced out one name through gritted teeth. "Jared."

His whole body went rigid.

I didn't need to explain. Didn't need to spell it out. He knew.

And I made sure he saw it in my eyes—the promise, the vow.

Jared had been feeding them our intel the whole time. Betraying us and selling us out. And I was going to be the one to end him when I was ready. But they needed to know so they could keep eyes on him wherever he went.

The wheels of the planes slammed against the tarmac, and I forced my eyes shut. I couldn't cry. Wouldn't.

As the cargo bay lowered, I saw the uniformed soldiers marching in. They moved in unison, their boots striking against the metal as they carefully lifted the first casket. It was then—only then—that my resolve broke, and the first sob tore out of me.

I clamped my jaw shut, but it was too late.

They had been here, beside me, hours ago, laughing, talking about going home. They had kids and families who were now going to live their lives without them. They would never truly know the heroes they were.

The music played softly in the distance, the rhythm of boots against the pavement fading as the coffins were carried away. More soldiers boarded, wheeling out the injured. Five men, barely clinging to life, strapped to gurneys hooked up to oxygen and IV drips.

We should have been flown to Germany for immediate treatment, but our work didn't exist on the record. We had all signed the waivers before deployment—we wouldn't stop. We'd be flown home no matter the risk.

As they rolled me off the plane, the sunlight hit my face like a blade. I squinted, my body still too weak to protest. Then I heard it, a low, familiar growl.

Engines.

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Not the kind from military trucks or med-evac transports. This was deeper, rougher, more powerful. It started soft, but it grew louder, stronger, until I could feel the vibrations in my bones.

The soldier pushing me hesitated, then gestured toward the edge of the airstrip. “I think they’re here for you.”

I turned my head, my breath catching as I took in the line of motorcycles parked in formation behind the fence. Chrome and steel gleamed under the morning sun, a silent wall of metal and men.

I couldn’t see their faces, but I didn’t need to. I knew who they were.

Three figures stood just in front of the lineup, waiting. Watching.

The darkness finally pulled me under, but not before I knew—I wasn’t alone.

Chapter 12

Preacher

The final breach of confidence Duke had done for me was handing me the letter Kyle had given him the day she showed up on his doorstep after finding her mother.

I stared down at the folded paper, taking a slow, measured breath before flipping it over, my gut tightening as I recognized the familiar scrawl of Jill’s handwriting.

People always said you shouldn't speak ill of the dead. Fuck that. She had been avicious, poisonous, psychopathic bitch, and I was glad she was gone.

Now, all that was left was to see what filth she had left behind—whattwisted, venomous words had ruined everything with Kyle.

I unfolded the letter and read it, almost instantly regretting my decision, but I forced myself to read every word.

I've never hated anyone more than I hate you and him. You were meant to be the ticket to everything, but he didn't care.

He hates you. Hates me. Hates that I didn't give him a son, and that he got you instead. I tried telling you, but you wouldn't listen, and now look?

He was fucking that whore Store today, and when I confronted him, he hit me. He told me he was going to kill both of us. He's never been faithful. Hated having you at the MC because he thought it made him look weak to the men when he got caught fucking a slut while you were around.

And he couldn't sell the little girls with you there, so he sent you home.

I hate you. You ruined my life. But as your mother, I will do you one favor.

RUN.

That was it?

This insanity, written by someone who was drunk and under the influence of whatever drug she could get, was what had destroyed everything?

Isnorted, my lips twisting in disgust. The whole damn thing read like a drunken, drug-fueled rant, hastily scribbled between gulps of vodka and whatever high she was riding before she put a bullet in her head.

It was sloppy and pathetic. And yet, sadly, it had worked.

Jill had known exactly what she was doing. She had timed it perfectly—Kyle would have been at her most vulnerable after finding her body, her mind already cracked open from years of abuse. She wouldn't have questioned it, wouldn't have doubted it. She would have done exactly what Jill wanted.

Run.

What Jill hadn't expected—what she hadn't counted on in her fucked-up, narcissistic haze—was that Kyle would run to Duke. I knew where Kyle had been the whole time. I had watched from the shadows, knowing she was safe, to an extent.

If I had known she was contracting for the military, though, I would have put a stop to it immediately because look where she had ended up.

I crumpled the letter in my fist and shoved it into my pocket before shifting my focus back to the hospital bed beside me. Kyle lay unmoving, her face pale against the sterile white sheets. The slow, steady rise and fall of her chest was the only reassurance I had.

She had been in a medically induced coma for two days now. The drugs had been stopped hours ago, but still, she hadn't woken up. Her leg was broken in two places, three broken ribs, and internal bleeding that had been stabilized but was still a fucking risk.

The doctors had debated keeping her under longer, but the psychiatrist had warned

against it. Kyle wasn't the type to do well in a coma. She needed too much control, too much discipline. The longer she was out, the worse the psychological toll would be when she woke up.

If she woke up.

I clenched my fists.

Duke, Jagger, and I had been sitting in silence, waiting, watching her the whole time.

She had twitched a few times since they'd stopped the drugs, murmured something indistinct, but her eyes never opened. The scans showed no brain trauma, but my gut twisted with what-ifs. What if she didn't wake up? What if she came back different? What if she didn't come back at all?

I was about to get up—about to find the doctor and shake some goddamn answers out of him—when I heard it. A rattle of breath, followed by a groan.

I turned fast and held my breath when I saw that her eyes were open. Not only that, but they were focused on me.

I want to say I held it together. That I stayed the man I prided myself on being—the man who didn't take shit, who didn't hesitate to put a bullet between the eyes of the ones who deserved it. But I didn't.

My legs gave out, and before I knew it, I was on the floor—a fucking mess. Curled up, shaking, sobbing like a damn fool, but none of it mattered. Not the way I looked, not the way my body betrayed me, not for one goddamn second. Because my baby was awake. She was alive. And she was looking right at me.

JAGGER

Seeing her pass out after turning toward us was something I would never forget. It hadn't been dramatic—no gasp, no frantic moments of realization. She had simply looked in our direction, her eyes rolling back before she gave in to what she'd been fighting since she'd been injured. She stayed that way through every test, through the hospital transfer, through every update from the doctors.

I had braced myself for the worst. Hearing the extent of her injuries wasn't as bad as it could have been, but it wasn't great either. The internal bleeding had been stabilized, but I had seen a man bleed out a week after an injury like that. The doctors had been wrong before, so I wasn't taking any fucking chances.

Preacher had stayed behind while Duke and I grabbed something to eat, but when we returned, something had changed. The man who had looked broken for so long, who had carried the weight of the past like a chain around his neck, now had a fire burning in his eyes.

Preacher was a complicated man—fiercely loyal, level-headed, calculated—but he was also a slow burner. I had watched him shake hands with men he later slit the throats of, had seen him joke with a trafficker, light his cigarette for him, and then snap his neck the second the guy looked away. And now, that same fire, that same cold, calculated rage, burned behind his eyes. If Jill hadn't already been dead, I would have been counting the minutes until she was.

Duke had told me what was in the letter, and at first, I hadn't understood—how could something so sloppily written, so obviously manipulative, have hit its mark? But then I thought about it. About Kyle at seventeen. A girl who had been abused for years, who had just found her mother's body blown apart in front of her. That conniving bitch had known exactly what she was doing. And she had won.

For a while.

Because now Kyle was awake, and we weren't done yet.

It was a couple hours since Kyle had opened her eyes, and although she was awake, she hadn't spoken yet.

I finally asked the one question I had been avoiding—the one I had been too damn scared to say out loud because the answer could be worse than anything I had ever faced before. Duke and I had been sitting outside, cradling cups of that vile sludge they called coffee, both of us lost in our own heads, when the words finally slipped out of my mouth.

"What if she doesn't forgive me?"

Duke didn't respond right away. He just stirred his coffee in slow, deliberate circles, staring at it like the answer might be at the bottom of the cup. For so long, he didn't say a thing, and I started to think that was my answer right there—silence.

Then, he sighed heavily and leaned back, the cheap plastic chair beneath him groaning under his weight. "Kyle came to me years ago," he said, his voice low and raw. "She had no one, and fuck me..." He dragged a hand down his face, exhaustion carved into every deep line. "She was broken, Jagger."

I swallowed, waiting.

"I knew, deep down, she knew the letter was bullshit. But how do you make sense of everything—every fucked-up thing you've ever been through—when the last image you have of your mother is her brains splattered on the wall?"

His voice was rough, carrying the weight of years spent trying to help her heal. The last few days had aged him more than I had ever seen before, and if that wasn't proof of how much Kyle meant to him, I didn't know what was. She would never

understand how special she was, how much she meant to the people who had fought beside her, protected her, bled for her.

"She needed time," Duke continued. "And once she makes sense of it, she'll move forward." He shook his head, exhaling. "She's complex as hell, Jagger. You know she's never let anyone in, feelings give her the willies."

We both chuckled at that. That was an understatement.

"But she let you in. She let me in. And she was starting to let Preacher in."

I nodded slowly, holding on to his words like a lifeline, because that was all I could do—hope he was right. I had never been a religious man. A guy like me, who had done the things I had done, would be a fucking hypocrite if he was.

But if I had ever been the kind of man who prayed, I would have been praying right then.

When we got back to Kyle's hospital room, Data was already there. He stood by the bed, fists clenched, his entire body vibrating with restless energy. I had never seen him pissed before, at least not like this.

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Data had always been the definition of controlled chaos. With his short mohawk, big gauges, tattoos snaking down his arms, and thick-framed glasses, he looked more like a cool nerd than the tech genius he was. He was always typing, always building something technical, and always moving. His ADHD made him restless, but he had found an anchor in his work. This, though, this was different. This wasn't just his usual wired energy, this was pure fucking fury.

Preacher beat me to it. "Jared?"

Duke stiffened beside me. My jaw clenched. I fucking hated that guy.

"What about him?" Duke snapped, patience gone in an instant.

Data bounced on the balls of his feet, his jaw tight, and then he dropped the bomb. "It was him."

Silence. The kind of silence that suffocates a room, thick and choking, heavy with unspoken rage.

"It can't have been, Data." Duke's voice was low, edged with something dangerous. "He wasn't there."

Duke knew the details of Kyle's mission, knew who had been deployed and who hadn't. When he told us weeks ago that Jared wasn't involved, we had been relieved. Now, that relief was gone.

Data reached into his bag, pulled out a thick folder, and handed it to Duke. "He

arrived six days before the op.”

Duke’s fingers tightened around the file as he flipped through the pages, his eyes scanning the reports with the intensity of a man bracing for the worst. Then he froze. Yanking out the last page, he stared at it for half a second before his face twisted into something murderous.

“You didn’t think to tell me she asked for this shit?!” His roar exploded through the hospital room.

Data didn’t even flinch.

“Did you read what it says?” Duke snarled, shoving the paper toward him. “He gave away their exact fucking location!”

“She asked me not to,” Data replied, holding his gaze, his voice steady. “She was worried that the rat in the MC would pass it back.”

Preacher got up and paced toward the window, his shoulders tense, his fists clenched. Jared had handed them over. Threemen had died, and two more had lost their fights after making it back. Kyle had almost bled out on foreign soil because of him.

I flexed my fingers, trying to keep my rage in check. “What the fuck is he up to?”

Duke’s face was stone. “I don’t fucking know.” Then his expression darkened, his voice dropping into something lethal. “But I’m gonna find out.” He turned, already moving. “Data, with me.”

We didn’t say a word as they left. Preacher and I sat in silence, knowing there were ears everywhere. But when our eyes met, we didn’t need to say a fucking thing.

Jared was a dead man.

And I was going to make damn sure he felt every second of it.

Chapter 13

Jagger

A week had passed since Kyle woke up, and though she was stable and cleared for discharge, nothing else truly mattered until she was home. Security at the Compound had been reinforced—every weakness patched, every vulnerable spot fortified. We even had more men coming in, men we could trust.

Preacher was still dealing with Satan, the President of 412, who had his own share of problems, but none of it took priority over her. Kyle was the first move in a game that was about to shift, because everything had already changed.

And now? It was our turn to strike.

We had been prepared for the worst, bracing for the inevitable breakdown that the doctors and shrinks had warned us about. PTSD was a minefield—unpredictable and volatile. There was no straight line, no one-size-fits-all reaction with it either. But as the days passed, it became clear that Kyle wasn't breaking, she was focusing.

Every detail she learned, every piece of evidence she compiled, every breadcrumb she passed onto Duke, it all pointed to one thing: retribution. I wasn't a shrink, but maybe that was the key for her.

Preacher had tried talking to her, easing in where he could, but she kept things strictly business. He didn't push, but he stayed—always nearby, always watching. And I had seen it, those rare, fleeting moments when Kyle thought no one was looking, when her

walls were down just long enough to see what was beneath.

Confusion. Hope. She wanted to trust him, she just didn't know how.

I had stayed with her every night. I wasn't taking chances, not with Jared still out there. The bastard had vanished into the wind, but Kyle had been right, he couldn't hide forever. Duke had put feelers out everywhere, and it turned out we weren't the only ones who wanted him dead. There were people out there who owed the Ghosts, and they were looking.

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Then, last night, the nightmares had come. She had screamed, thrashed, yelled names I didn't recognize.

The doctor had rushed in, wanting to push a sedative, but we had woken her up gently, and eased her back into reality. And that was when I got my first real burst of hope because she had clung to me. Held on tight, and stayed asleep—calm, steady, unshaken for the rest of the night.

She wasn't over it, she wouldn't be for a long time. But she wasn't alone in it anymore.

KYLE

Returning to the Knights compound after being released from the hospital felt surreal. It had only been a few days, but time had blurred, folding in on itself. I couldn't recall every second of what had happened, but I had pieced together enough.

Data had the evidence and the case against Jared was solid. Duke had been spreading the word among our contacts, but I had my own network to pull from—webs I had woven over the years. Jared had nowhere to run, and when I found him, I was going to make sure he paid for every drop of blood he had spilled.

I had lost five incredible men because of him. Worse, he had turned his back on his own country in the process. Death was too good for him.

Duke and I had talked—really talked—about everything that had happened. I wasn't over it yet, but I was calmer. And for the first time, I understood. If Duke had forced

the truth on me back then, if he had brought Preacher into my life before I was ready—before I had built any kind of foundation of safety—I probably would have run. I had spent years looking over my shoulder, so any shift in my reality back then would have sent me spiraling.

Even before everything went to hell, I had been working through my thoughts on Preacher, breaking them apart the way I had been taught. Analyzing, dissecting, trying to rebuild them into something that made sense. I had been a kid, a fucked-up, traumatized kid. My perception of him had been warped by the pain I carried, the lies Jill had fed me, and the desperate need I had for his attention. But now, I could see the truth in the spaces between my old thoughts.

Tommy had visited me last night, one of the old-timers from the club. I had asked him about my childhood, and he told me stories I had never heard before. Stories about Preacher, the man I thought hadn't given a shit.

He had talked about my grades, my milestones, my achievements. How Preacher had always kept the MC updated about me. How he had refused to let me ride a bike when I was younger, terrified I'd get hurt—but when he saw how much I loved it, he had ordered a custom Harley for my eighteenth birthday.

It had never made it to me, Jill had made sure of that. But Preacher had kept it. Stored it away all these years.

Slowly, I was opening myself up to the idea of moving forward. The more I broke down my feelings, the more I could see past the pain, past the manipulation, past the fucking mess Jill had made of me. I hated her for what she had done. And yet, I didn't regret who I had become. If I had never been broken, never been forced to rebuild myself, would I even be here now?

There was no point dwelling on the what ifs.

Preacher had asked for my help with the removal of the MC's rat—the cliché motherfucker calling himself Satan. I remembered his daughter, Olivia, from when I was a kid. She had never fit in with the club because she'd been quiet, distant, and had carried herself with dignity despite being surrounded by a pack of drunken, reckless assholes.

Her own father had set her up to be sold to traffickers. That alone was enough to justify what we were about to do.

We had to get her out, and the plan was already in motion. Preacher would request that the quarterly meeting between the MCs be held at the 412's club instead of neutral ground. It was a risky move, but we wouldn't be going in blind. The Ghosts would be behind us, covering every angle. More importantly, it would make Satan feel powerful and lull him into a false sense of security. He'd think he had the upper hand which meant he'd slip up.

And when he did, Preacher would bring Olivia back here, where she'd be safe.

I wasn't sure if he planned to tell her the truth about what her father had done. I didn't know if she could handle it. Hell, I wasn't even sure if I could. Maybe, in this case, ignorance was a mercy.

And then there was Jagger.

The moment I was wheeled off that plane, I knew I had already forgiven him. I had heard his voice when he told Preacher to tell me the truth. I had seen the pain in his face, the weight he had carried every second since. I couldn't say what I would have done in his place, it had been Preacher's secret to tell.

And when I really thought about it, he had been dropping hints for a while.

That first night in the hospital, when the nightmare hit, and I curled up against Jagger—when I let myself need him—I had known. We still needed to talk. But there was one thing I was certain of, I wasn't living my life without him.

I just didn't know how to tell him that yet.

JAGGER

“You wanna know how to get past this shit, man?” Gauge's voice cut through the night, low and steady, as he walked up behind me.

I didn't turn right away. My eyes stayed locked on the fields stretching beyond the clubhouse, the vast expanse now bordered by a wall that wrapped around every inch of Knights territory. It hadn't always been like this. Before, there had only been a wire fence, a flimsy barrier meant to keep people out but nowhere near enough to stop what had happened. Now, Ghost-designed security systems were embedded across the land. Concealed cameras, motion detectors, and pressure-sensitive triggers. All of them were Data's creations, ensuring no one got the drop on us again.

It didn't mean we were untouchable, though. But the next son of a bitch who tried to come at us, we'd see them coming.

I exhaled and turned slightly, meeting Gauge's gaze. He stood with his hands tucked into the pockets of his cut, his usual calm, unreadable expression in place. He was our Sergeant at Arms, the trusted second to Preacher. The man who always knew when to step in and when to stay the fuck out.

“What shit?” I asked, keeping my voice even.

“Kyle.”

My stomach tightened, but I shrugged, keeping my face blank. “I’m not with you, man. What shit with Kyle?”

Gauge sighed, like he was talking to a goddamn idiot.

“She’s forgiven you, Jag.” Gauge let the words settle, giving them weight. “Anyone with half a brain can see that.” I clenched my jaw but stayed silent. “Don’t dwell on the shit.” His tone was firm, certain, like he was stating the simplest truth in the world. “Just show her the real you, the way she shows you her real.”

With that cryptic-as-fuck statement, he turned and walked away, leaving me standing there, more confused than I had been in my entire goddamn life.

What the hell was that supposed to mean?

Dragging a hand down my face, I exhaled sharply, frustration curling through me. Why did he have to talk in riddles? Shaking my head, I let my gaze drift back to where I’d been looking before Gauge decided to hit me with unsolicited wisdom.

The targets.

Still lined up in the field, in the same spot where Kyle had taken her shots from the roof that day.

And just like that, it hit me. I knew exactly what Gauge was saying.

And more than that—I knew exactly what I was going to do.

Epilogue 1

Kyle

It had been a week since the cast came off my leg, and every day I felt a little stronger. The sharp ache in my ribs had dulled to a manageable throb, no longer making me feel like they'd explode every time I moved. Who would've thought busted ribs take longer to heal than a damn broken leg. But slowly, steadily, I was getting back to myself. Today, I'd even managed a walk with Jagger.

He'd been acting strange lately, distracted and edgy. I figured it had to do with the meet tonight with the 412's. Satan had been pushing it off for weeks, but Preacher made it clear that tonight, there were no more delays. I hated that I wasn't fit enough to help out, and it gnawed at me, but I knew they had the Ghosts backing them up. Besides, we had the upper hand. The 412's had way more weaknesses than strengths, and this wouldn't even be a difficult fight.

"What's this about?" I asked, climbing the clubhouse stairs slowly behind Jagger. We'd just finished a slow lap around the perimeter when he'd suddenly said he had a surprise for me. I hated surprises. The only ones I'd ever had in my life had been the kind that knocked the air out of me had been painful and disappointing. But I trusted him, and damn it, I was curious.

"How are you doing on the steps, baby?" he ignored my question, turning to glance at me. I could feel the sweat forming at my hairline, my body still weak and healing. There was a hell of a lot of stairs, and I was cursing every last one of them in my mind. His eyes flicked over me, catching the effort it was taking. Without a word, he turned, scooped me up into his arms, and took the rest of the stairs like I weighed nothing.

My heart jumped into my throat. “If you drop me and I break something that isn’t even healed yet, I swear I’ll kill you,” I growled.

Jagger chuckled. “Not a chance.”

At the top, he set me down so gently that, if I were a different kind of girl, I might’ve cried. But I wasn’t. I really, really wasn’t.

Shit, don’t cry.

I was about to demand where we were going when he cut me off with the softest, slowest kiss. It caught me off guard—this kind of tenderness wasn’t something I was used to. Normally, I hated stuff like this, but with Jagger, it was different. Over the last couple of weeks, all we’d been able to do was talk and kiss. I never thought I’d enjoy that kind of thing, but with him, I did.

Jesus, tell me this isn’t turning me into a girly girl.

He pulled back, eyes warm with something unreadable. “Do you remember the day you showed us your sniper skills?”

A grin spread across my face at the memory. “You mean when I covered Preacher in watermelon?”

“That’s the one.” He tapped my nose playfully. “Well, I was hoping you’d teach me the basics.”

Most women wanted flowers, chocolates, or some romantic bullshit. Jagger knew me better than that. This was my version of flowers.

“Fuck yes.”

JAGGER

My heart pounded as she settled into position, adjusting the scope with steady fingers. The last time we did this, she had been at full strength, taking down targets without breaking a sweat. Now, she still moved with a little hesitation, her body not quite back to one hundred percent. That's why I'd set this up carefully—I had the prospects place the targets just like last time, but I'd also brought up cushions from her room to soften the hard rooftop beneath her. This wasn't supposed to be painful for her, it was supposed to be fun.

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“Okay, you’re shooting from right to left,” I instructed, watching her closely. She needed to follow that order exactly, or this wouldn’t work.

“Right,” she murmured, already lost in the task.

She wasn’t even explaining what she was doing—this was instinct for her, muscle memory taking over.

“Can you notify people that we’re firing?” she asked, never taking her eyes off the target. I knew her ribs were still giving her hell, and shouting wasn’t happening today. Not that it needed to, the plan was for everyone to be inside.

“Live rounds firing!” I called out anyway. Better safe than sorry.

The sharp crack of the rifle echoed through the air as I tracked the shots through my binoculars. One after another, she took out the targets, each hit making my heart pound harder. The precision, the focus, she was fucking lethal.

When she finished the last shot, she lifted her head and grinned. “That was fun.”

I smirked. “You’re not done yet.”

Her brows knitted together as I nodded toward a crate set apart from the others.

Curious, she shifted, adjusting the scope again. Her fingers moved expertly, making tiny calibrations before she froze.

I held my breath.

She wasn't looking at just any target.

Balanced on top of the crate was a small matchbox, and on top of that was an engagement ring. This addition was vastly different from the last time.

She slowly looked up at me, her mouth opening and closing a couple of times before she finally just... nodded.

That was all I needed.

Epilogue 2

Preacher

It took everything in me not to lay out the fat bastard in front of me the second we pulled up to the 412's compound. My fingers itched for it, but I couldn't blow our cover—not yet.

The asshole put on a big show, all fake grins and open arms, ushering us into the clubhouse like we were old friends. I made a mental note to touch as little as possible—the place was fucking disgusting. The air reeked of stale beer, sweat, and something foul I didn't want to identify. Glassy-eyed whores draped themselves across furniture, barely dressed, their skin glistening under the dim yellow lights. A few of them were still snorting lines off the tables, some so far gone they barely noticed our entrance. It was as cliché as it got, just another group of lowlife bastards playing king of the junkyard.

A movement in the hallway caught my eye, and what I saw shattered the last shred of restraint I had.

A girl—young, barely seventeen—was desperately trying to pull her top together as she backed away from one of the men. The look in her eyes twisted something in my gut. Fear. Humiliation. She wasn't consenting to whatever had just gone down.

That was it.

I gave the signal, and in a blink, my men had their weapons raised. We had the advantage—surprise, sobriety, and experience. And we took it.

Satan, the pathetic excuse for a man, lay bleeding on the floor in front of me, gasping like a fish. I pressed the barrel of my gun against his sweat-slicked forehead, voice steady as I repeated the question.

“Where's Olivia?”

“She's not here,” he wheezed, his breath ragged. A dark stain spread beneath him, and I grinned when the acrid scent of piss hit my nose.

“What do you want us to do with them, Pres?” Gauge asked, dragging the VP across the floor like a sack of garbage.

“Take them to the warehouse.” My grip tightened on the gun. I leaned in close, letting Satan see every ounce of certainty in my eyes. “Then we're going to go get Olivia.”

His bloodshot eyes went wide as the realization sank in. We knew. We knew everything.

“That's right, fucker.”

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“You can’t,” he rasped, his voice breaking. “They’ll kill us.”

I leaned in just enough for him to hear me, my voice nothing more than a whisper. “I know.”

The house was different from where she’d come from. No barbed wire, no locked gates, no stink of rot and desperation. Just a normal house on a normal street, like something out of a goddamn dream. If I’d crawled out of hell, maybe I’d have aimed for heaven too.

I knocked on the door and ran a hand down my shirt. My cut was in the car, left behind on purpose. Dressed in just jeans and a tee, I looked like any other guy on a Saturday night. If she caught sight of the MC connection, she might not answer, and I couldn’t risk leaving her here. Not when I knew who was coming for her next.

The door opened, and for the first time, I saw her in the flesh.

Olivia.

I’d only seen photos of her before, but they didn’t do her justice. She was beautiful, effortlessly so, and when her eyes met mine, something inside me twisted. It had been years since I’d let myself feel anything for a woman. Contrary to what Kyle’s mom had told her, I hadn’t touched another woman while we were together. Not even her. Because it had always been Jill eating away at my life and making it hell. And by the time she was dead, the whole damn female species had lost their appeal.

But Olivia? One look at her and my body responded in a way I hadn’t felt in years.

“Yes?” she asked, her voice husky and smooth.

I nearly groaned at the sound of it.

“Olivia?”

She glanced around, cautious, before giving a small nod.

I hated what I had to do. Every instinct in me rebelled against it, but I couldn't risk her fighting or drawing attention. Moving fast, I pulled the rag from my pocket, clamping it over her mouth and nose. She gasped, but within seconds, she went limp in my arms.

I cradled her close, my jaw clenching. “I'm so sorry, baby,” I whispered, knowing she couldn't hear me. “Just trust me.”