



# The Biker and His Bride

**Author:** *Jax Hart*

**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Adult, Biker

**Description:** I left my diamond ring and my privileged past in the rearview mirror.

He found me behind the bar of a biker club — broke, brave, and pretending not to care.

But Rogue Thorne? He saw right through me.

Hard. Inked. Dangerous.

He runs this town from the seat of a Harley and the heart of an outlaw.

I came to escape a man who nearly broke me...

And fell for one who could burn me alive.

He gives me freedom, fire, and the kind of love they write books about.

Only now, the past I ran from is coming for us.

Rogue says I'm his old lady now — ride or die.

But with secrets, enemies, and war on the horizon...

Can a runaway bride and her biker king really have a happily ever after?

**Total Pages (Source):** 46

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:06 am*

## PROLOGUE

## ROGUE

The whiskey burned, but not as much as the sight of Brielle's overstuffed closet spilling across the hardwood like the aftermath of a storm. Leather skirts, sequin tops, three different pairs of red stilettos—souvenirs from nights she swore she spent “with the girls.” Lies, all of it.

“Logan, baby, please—” Her voice cracked as she tried to yank a satin dress from my fist.

“It's Rogue,” I snapped. “And I'm done repeating myself.”

Suitcase number three lay open on the bed, zipper teeth glinting like a threat. I shoved the dress inside, uncaring if it wrinkled. Another drawer yanked, more lingerie I'd never seen. My jaw clenched so tight my molars ached.

Brielle scrambled after me, mascara streaking down her cheeks. “It was one mistake.”

“One?” I barked a humorless laugh, tossing lacy scraps after the dress. “Try three. Different guys, different lies. Club business is one thing—my woman screwing a rival patch? We're finished.”

Her hands shook as she clutched the suitcase lid. “I love you.”

I stilled, the words slicing deeper than I wanted to admit. For one stupid second I

pictured the early days: her sitting on my bike, hair whipping, my cut slung around her shoulders like she'd earned it. Then I pictured the photos Diesel showed me—Brielle wrapped around a Reaper's Pride executive, lips on his throat. The hurt iced over, hardening into something cold, unbreakable.

"You love the lifestyle," I said. "You love the attention. You never loved me."

She sobbed, reaching for my arm. I stepped back, letting her fingers close on empty air. "Get your shit. You're out."

I hauled the suitcase off the bed, snapped it shut, and wheeled it to the hallway. She followed, barefoot, pleading. Each apology washed over me like cheap booze—bitter, useless.

Downstairs, the brothers lingered near the front door, arms folded, faces stone. Not here to humiliate—just to make sure she actually left. Trigger opened the door when he saw me. Summer night air spilled in, thick with pine and diesel.

"Rogue, don't do this," she rasped, mascara streaks shining in porch light.

I grabbed the other case, handed it off to Pitbull. "Load it."

"On it, Prez." Pitbull hauled the luggage down the steps toward her cherry-red Mustang.

Brielle clutched the doorframe, eyes wild. "You'll regret this. No one will love you like I?—"

"Save it." My voice came out flat, deadly calm. "You're done here. Club property, club secrets—keep your mouth shut."

She hesitated. I raised one brow. Even she knew that look. She swallowed, wiped her cheeks, and stormed down the steps.

I watched her taillights flare, engine roar, gravel spitting as she jerked onto the road. Red dots shrank between the pines until darkness swallowed them.

Trigger closed the door. Silence settled like dust.

Inside my chest, something twisted—part betrayal, part raw grief—but I stamped it down. Couldn't show that to the brothers. Couldn't let another woman carve me open like that again.

“Get some rest,” I told them, voice rough. “Church at nine.”

They dispersed without a word. I locked the door, leaned my back against the wood, and exhaled a breath that felt like it'd been trapped forever.

Heartbroken? Maybe. But colder. Stronger.

Lesson learned: Don't trust easy smiles and cheap promises.

From here on out, my heart was off-limits.

Or so I thought.

PROLOGUE

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:06 am*

RILEY

Riley stood on the pedestal of the Charleston bridal salon, surrounded by soft lighting, mirrors, and the hush of couture. The gown was perfect—sleeveless with a plunging back, handmade lace, a river of crystals flowing down the skirt, and a train that shimmered like moonlight. She looked like a princess. Elegant. Envable. A thousand-dollar dream spun from silk and status.

But she didn't recognize the woman staring back at her in the mirror.

Her reflection blinked, tilted her head, smiled faintly—just like her—but she felt like she was watching it all from outside her body. A hollow, third-person experience. The gown fit perfectly. So why did she feel like she couldn't breathe?

The ring on her finger—an heirloom diamond halo, passed down from Caleb's family—suddenly weighed a thousand pounds. Not a celebration. A shackle.

Her mother chattered in the background, oblivious to the panic rising in Riley's chest. "The ceremony is going to be flawless. The gardenias are arriving from Savannah the morning of. Senator Hastings will be sitting next to the governor. I had them rearrange the seating chart so the press will catch all the best angles when you walk down the aisle."

Walk down the aisle. Into what?

Riley forced a smile and nodded. "It's all perfect."

It wasn't.

The chandeliers sparkled above their heads, casting golden reflections over the polished cutlery and long-stemmed wine glasses. Everything about the restaurant screamed old money — from the crisply starched linens to the discreet staff that hovered like ghosts. Riley sat still, her spine straight, her napkin folded neatly in her lap, trying to still the churning in her gut.

Across the table, her mother was beaming. “This is the perfect place for the rehearsal dinner, don't you think, Caleb?” she cooed, already envisioning the flawless photos, the magazine-worthy memories.

Caleb raised his glass lazily, half-full of aged Scotch. “It'll do,” he muttered, eyes skimming the wine list like he was bored with everything around him — including Riley.

Riley's gaze dropped to the massive diamond ring glinting on her finger. It caught the light beautifully, but tonight, all she could think of was how heavy it felt. Her hand felt foreign. Her whole life felt foreign. She glanced up at the tall, marble-backed mirror behind her mother and caught a glimpse of herself. Elegant, polished... empty. The woman staring back at her didn't look like someone in love.

As her mother and Caleb carried on about caterers and florals and drone videography, Riley tuned them out. Her thoughts drifted, vivid and intrusive—she pictured herself in a beat-up car, her hair pulled into a messy ponytail, windows down, driving somewhere new, nameless, faceless, free. She imagined herself laughing. Really laughing.

Guilt slithered up her spine.

She had everything a woman was supposed to want: a handsome fiancé from a good

family, a career in place if she wanted it, and a wedding that would rival a royal event. And yet...

“...don’t be late this time, Riley.”

Caleb’s voice snapped her back.

She blinked. “Sorry?”

He leaned forward, his voice low but cutting. “You were late for the florist last week. My mother said it was disrespectful. Show up next time, or just don’t bother.”

Her mother shifted uncomfortably, glancing at Riley like she wanted to smooth it over but said nothing. Just pursed her lips and took another sip of her rosé.

Riley smiled tightly, cheeks burning, and nodded. “Of course.”

But inside, her daydream was growing louder. Stronger. More vivid. And for the first time, it didn’t feel like a betrayal. It felt like a possibility.

1

RILEY

He passed out with a tumbler of scotch in one hand and his phone in the other, half-dressed in a tailored suit and sprawled across the leather chaise like a king after war.

Caleb always looked like money. Even drunk.

But the shine was long gone.

I stood in the hallway, silent as a ghost, one hand gripping the strap of my worn-out backpack that I picked up at the thrift. If I was going to run, I had to go unnoticed. My heart thudded against my ribs. Not from fear—at least not the kind I used to feel when he raised his voice. It was adrenaline now. The kind you get when you're about to jump off a ledge and hope the wind catches you before you splatter.

He called me an ungrateful bitch tonight. Said I was lucky he hadn't traded me in for someone younger. Said his father could ruin me with a single phone call.



## Page 3

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The same old song.

Only this time, he hit me with his phone after squeezing my wrist so hard I dropped the wine glass. It shattered against the marble floor.

He didn't even blink.

That was the final straw.

Who knew a cell phone could be used as a punching glove? Again, he was careful not to hit me where any bruises or cuts would show in public. The spot between my shoulder blades as I tried to walk away from him suited him just fine.

The ring still sat on the nightstand beside the bed, three carats of cold diamond and lies. I tucked it into a zippered pouch along with the emergency cash I'd been saving from the designer handbags and jewelry I secretly pawned over the last few months.

Caleb never noticed. Why would he? When you grow up with generational wealth and power, you don't count the small bills. You assume the world's already yours.

I slipped on a hoodie over my silk pajamas and made my way to the servants' entrance at the back of the plantation-style mansion. Past the butler's pantry. Past the wine cellar. Past the gilded portrait of Caleb's father hanging above the staircase like a silent, watching god.

The security gate was still disabled—something I arranged earlier that day when I told Caleb's assistant the system needed a software update.

He believed me.

Rich men rarely question pretty women when they smile sweetly.

Outside, parked beneath the shadows of the oaks, was my way out: a beat-up gray Honda Civic I'd bought for cash under a fake name. No Bluetooth, no GPS, no tracking tech. She had 233,333 miles on her and sounded like a blender full of rocks when she started, but she was mine.

And more importantly — she wasn't his.

I climbed in, buckled up, and whispered, "Please just get me the hell out of here."

The engine sputtered, coughed... and roared to life.

I didn't look back.

The welcome signread Sable Creek, North Carolina, and the town looked like something out of a country song — dusty roads, fading paint, pickup trucks, and an air of don't-ask-too-many-questions.

Exactly what I needed. It was rural. Secluded. Close enough but yet I felt unreachable here.

I rolled into the gas station on fumes. The A/C didn't work and my hair was a sweaty mess, but I was free. My back still ached from sleeping in rest stops while I stared at old Triple A maps trying to figure out the best place to land. My stomach growled like I hadn't eaten in days.

But the relief?

That was real.

Being a runaway bride wasn't like the movies. I had no horse, limo or fancy honeymoon to go solo on. Something in my gut warned me I 'd have to make a run for it before saying—I do', but I wasn't fully prepped. Maybe I thought Caleb wasn't that bad and I was selfish and spoiled. Who wouldn't want to marry money into money and raise Ralph Lauren—boat shoe wearing baby from the cradle.

I swallowed hard, feeling the walls close in. Marrying Caleb felt like going to prison. For life. The once sexy, charismatic man was nothing but a bad drunk with zero personality. But he played his part well, wining and dining and caressing me up for almost a year. Once he slipped the diamond ring on my finger and the deposits were all paid for our wedding—the mask came off. One slip at a time.

But Caleb didn't know where I was.

Yet.

I knew he wouldn't take being jilted weeks before our wedding lightly. Men like him don't like to be embarrassed. He'd rather chain me up inside his mansion then face being stood up at the alter.

The town square was a simple four-way cross with a bar, a diner, a hardware store, and a tattoo shop. But it was the bar that drew my eye.

Fire Skulls.

Big black letters. Tinted windows. A row of bikes gleaming out front, like chrome wolves basking in the heat.

I'd never been inside a biker bar in my life.

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But I needed a job. A place to hide. A new life until I figured out how to get my things and go home as the girl who left Caleb Whitmore III jilted weeks before the big day. I wasn't ready to face that... not yet.

So I walked inside like I belonged.

The music hit me first — gritty, angry rock — followed by the scent of motor oil, whiskey, and leather. Heads turned. Voices paused.

A woman behind the bar eyed me like she couldn't decide whether to card me or punch me.

"You here to meet someone?" she asked, tone cool but curious.

"No," I said, lifting my chin. "I'm here to work."

She smirked. "You serve?"

"Yes."

"Fight?"

"If I have to."

That made her laugh. "Then grab a rag and prove it."

I was wiping down sticky counters and dodging grabby hands within minutes, trying

not to notice the man sitting at the corner of the bar — all broad shoulders, tattoos, and silent intensity.

Black shirt. Leather cut. A beer in front of him he hadn't touched.

He was watching me.

Not like the others did.

No, he looked at me like he could smell the fire I thought I'd buried.

Like he knew I wasn't here by accident.

And for the first time in a long time, I didn't feel like a pawn.

I felt like maybe I'd just walked into a new game.

And I was ready to play.

My mother made sure I knew how to mix drinks. Grooming a good social club bride was part of the deal she made with the Whitmores. I had taken a bartending class the summer I turned sixteen. Most of the bikers wanted bottleneck beers but the older MC men preferred scotch, whiskey, or the occasional mixed drink. It was hard work. But it kept me too busy to think about the shit-show I left behind. Too exhausted to process I blew my life up.

My French manicure was long gone. Caleb would be appalled to find his fiancée tending a biker bar.

Well, ex fiancée.

Leaving is the same as breaking if off.

I giggled, imagining his horrified expression— if he only knew.

My muscles ached. But in a good way. Not in the my ex hit me again...way my body was used to.

Truthfully, I was ashamed. Ashamed I let him hit me. That I didn't leave sooner... I didn't want to disappoint my parents who raised me to be the society bride I was about to become.

I'd never gone hungry or without designer... everything. I had a golden life or a gilded cage. Being here gave me the chance to just breathe for once.

And fresh air is exactly what I needed.

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### ROGUE

The back lot was quiet, the kind of quiet that only settled in after the noise died down and the music inside the clubhouse bled into memory.

I lit a cigarette and leaned against the cinder block wall, letting the smoke burn slow in my lungs. The sky was thick with stars, but they didn't mean shit to me. Nothing romantic about constellations when your heart's been dragged through the mud and lit on fire.

Inside, the usual scene played out—girls in barely-there shorts laughing too loud, brothers tossing back beer and throwing darts. Trigger was probably trying to get laid again. Maddox had some new flavor on his lap. It was all background noise now. It used to mean something. Now it just felt... tired.

A door opened behind me. Boots on concrete. Heels, too. I didn't look.

"Rogue," came a voice like sugar and smoke. "You coming back in?"

"No."

"You sure? We were thinking a little three-way action. Could take your mind off things."

I turned just enough to shoot her a look. One that made her blink and step back, eyes dropping to the gravel.

“Not interested.”

She muttered something under her breath and vanished, heels clicking back inside.

I exhaled again and let the silence creep back in.

Truth was, I hadn't touched anyone in weeks. Hell, maybe months. I could've had any of 'em — the hangers-on, the club girls, the new ones always trying to catch my eye. But they didn't get it. They didn't know what it meant to carry weight. To have your trust shattered and still keep the mask on.

Brielle had taught me that.

She was the first woman I let past the walls. The only one who saw the man behind the leather cut. I was gonna propose. I'd picked out a ring. I even had Maddox help me set it up — candles, a rooftop, the whole damn thing.

Then she went and spread her legs for someone wearing a different patch.

I found out when Diesel saw them coming out of a cheap motel and damn near wrecked his bike trying to call me.

She didn't even try to deny it.

Said I was “too closed off.” That she needed to feel “alive.”

I felt plenty alive when I put my fist through a wall and almost broke my hand.

Now I felt... nothing.

Just smoke, sweat, and the hollow ache of what could've been.



I ground the cigarette out with my boot and looked up at the stars again.

Maybe something was coming.

Maybe not.

But I was tired of the emptiness.

I just didn't know what the hell I needed to fill it.

She walked in like she wasn't afraid of the devil himself.

I saw her before she even opened the door. Tight jeans, boots, hair up like she didn't have time to bother making herself pretty—and didn't need to. She had that look, like she'd survived something. Maybe a few somethings. I'd seen that look in the mirror more than once.

I didn't trust her. But damn, I noticed her.

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Most women who wander into a biker bar by accident either scurry back out or try too hard to prove they belong. Not her.

She walked straight up, chin high, and asked for work.

Like she owned the place.

And for one long second, I let myself imagine what it'd feel like to have a woman like that under me, wild and sweet and snapping back with fire. Then I locked it down and nodded over to Dena that it was cool o put her behind the bar.

If she couldn't hold her own, she'd be gone by closing.

But she held her own.

Even when Maddox knocked over a pitcher of beer and Boomer tried to flirt with her in his usual dumbass way, she didn't flinch. She was fast, sharp with her tongue, and didn't fall for anyone's charm—including mine.

That made me look twice.

Just a girl who showed up in a beat-up sedan with South Carolina plates and too much baggage in her eyes.

And yet she worked like someone with something to prove.

By the time last call hit, she'd already cleaned the taps, sorted the tip jar, and told

Nash he was cut off without blinking. I didn't know if I wanted to kiss her or promote her.

She was the kind of woman you noticed.

I leaned against the bar, arms crossed, watching her from beneath the brim of my cap. Riley moved like she had something to prove, like every wiped counter and every poured beer was a silent challenge to anyone doubting her place here. And damn if I wasn't one of them.

She didn't notice me at first. Too busy making sure she wasn't messing up, too focused on impressing Hawk, and keeping the customers happy. But I noticed her. I noticed the fire in her eyes and the stubborn set of her jaw. The girl didn't scare easy, and in a place like this, that mattered.

After about an hour, she looked up and caught me watching. Her gaze didn't waver. Bold. Defiant. Curious.

She walked right up to me, drying her hands on a bar towel, and stopped in front of me. "You the one in charge around here?"

I raised a brow. "You asking because you want to complain, or because you're trying to flirt?"

She smirked. "Maybe both."

I chuckled, the sound low in my chest. "My MC name's Rogue."

"Fitting," she said, glancing at my leather cut. "And I'm Riley. Guess you already knew that."

I gave a slow nod. “You’re not bad for your first day.”

“Not bad?” she challenged, resting her hip against the bar. “That the highest praise I’m gonna get?”

I leaned in a little. “Keep working like that, I might just keep you around.”

She rolled her eyes, but I caught the small smile that tugged at her lips before she turned away and got back to work. Yeah... this one was different.

And I was already in trouble.

3

RILEY

The Fire Skulls bar smelled like spilled beer, hot leather, and something electric I couldn’t name. I’d been here almost four days.

I was elbow-deep in cold bottles of Coors, my knees on the sticky bar mat as I loaded the bottom shelf of the cooler. The air conditioner was broken again, sweat sticking my tank top to my back, and I was cursing under my breath when I heard boots behind me.

Heavy. Confident. Rogue.

## Page 7

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He crouched beside me without a word, reaching past me for a six-pack. His arm brushed mine—hot and rough—and I jolted a little. Not from surprise. From the electric zing that always seemed to come when he got too close.

“Careful,” I said, glancing up at him. “You might pull a muscle helping out like this.”

He smirked, eyes locked on the cooler like he wasn’t fully looking at me—but I knew better.

“Just keeping my eye on the stock,” he said casually. “And the scenery.”

I rolled my eyes. “Smooth.”

“I try.” He set the bottles in with quiet clinks. “You always this mouthy?”

“Only when someone’s watching my ass instead of doing their own job.”

His gaze flicked to mine. Bold. Teasing. Dangerous.

“Can’t help it,” he said, low. “Your ass is the best thing that’s happened to this bar since I installed the new tap lines.”

My breath caught. I straightened slowly, brushing past him as I rose, heart hammering harder than I’d admit. He stood too, towering, sweat glinting on his arms, eyes drinking me in.

“Keep talking like that,” I said, grabbing a rag to wipe my hands, “and I might start

thinking you like having me around. Maybe I'm the best bartender this place has ever seen."

He leaned in just a little, close enough that I could smell leather and pine soap.

"Best looking one. No doubt."

I looked up at him, chest tight.

"Well," I said. "In that case, boss... maybe I'll stick around."

He grinned.

"You better."

The music thumped low from the jukebox—old-school rock, gritty and restless—and I was starting to find a rhythm behind the bar. Pour, wipe, smile. Repeat. My tip jar was overflowing and at this rate I could keep moving, if I was smart I would. But I felt comfortable here. More cozy in my small pine-framed bed and antique floored room than I ever did at Caleb's state of the art mansion.

Then chaos ripped the air apart.

A fist caught the edge of my cheek—Joe "Pitbull" Harrison swinging at Rookie Nate over a game of eight-ball and an insult about somebody's sister. The cue stick cracked in half like dry bone. Shouts erupted. Glass shattered.

Everything moved in slow motion.

Pitbull lunged again. Nate ducked, overturned a table, and sent beer and ashtrays flying. A chair skidded across the floor toward me. I froze?—

A wall of muscle slammed into my side.

Rogue.

He shoved me behind him, broad arm pinning me safely against the bar. His voice sliced through the roar.

“Stay.”

One word. Commanding. Unarguable.

I clutched the counter, heart pounding.

Rogue stepped into the fray like a storm given shape. He grabbed Pitbull by the collar of his cut and yanked him back so hard the man's boots left the floor.

“What the hell's this?” Rogue growled, shoving him against the wall.

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Pitbull, twice as wide as I was tall, blinked like a chastised kid. “He called my sister a?—”

“I don’t care,” Rogue barked, inches from his face. “You think you bleed in my bar over words?”

Nate tried to scramble up. Rogue’s free hand shot out, fisting the front of Nate’s shirt. “You stay right there, Rookie.”

The room went still, every prospect and patched brother watching.

Rogue released Pitbull just enough to spin him toward Nate. Then he pushed them both until they stood side by side like schoolboys caught cheating.

“I’m feeling generous,” Rogue said, voice low but carrying. “You wanna fight? You do it in the ring tomorrow. Gloves on. Winner buys the loser’s sister a damn apology bouquet. Tonight? You’re mopping floors.”

He turned, scanning the bar. Broken glass, overturned chairs, a pool of beer creeping toward my boots.

“Trigger!” Rogue shouted.

Trigger appeared. “Yeah, Prez?”

“Hand these two idiots a mop. They’re cleaning every inch of this place. Bathrooms too.”



Pitbull opened his mouth. Rogue's stare cut him off.

"Problem?" Rogue asked, lethal calm.

"No, Prez," Pitbull muttered.

Rogue pointed to the mess. "Move."

Muttering curses, the two men stomped off to fetch buckets and mops.

Only then did Rogue turn back to me. His eyes, granite-gray moments ago, softened just a fraction.

"You okay?"

My knees wobbled. "Yeah. Thanks to you. But my right cheek could use an ice pack."

He frowned at my shaking hands, then gently pried the rag from my grip. "You're done for tonight."

"I can finish?—"

"You're done," he repeated, softer but iron-strong. "Go upstairs. My room's unlocked. Use the shower, grab a T-shirt. I'll be up once these clowns finish."

Heat flooded my cheeks. Upstairs? His room? "Rogue, I?—"

He leaned in, voice barely a whisper. "Not for that. You're rattled. And I need to know you're safe."

My chest tightened. I nodded.

He straightened, spun on his heel, and stalked toward Pitbull and Nate, who were now sloshing suds across the sticky floor. He barked orders—where to scrub, what to disinfect—Judge, Jury, Deliverance. The entire clubhouse fell under his command like dominoes.

I slipped behind the bar and headed for the back stairs, Rogue's gravel-soft promise echoing in my ears.

*\*I need to know you're safe.\** He was sincere. No mask. Just raw and honest.

For the first time in years—maybe ever—I believed someone meant it.

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ROGUE

## Page 9

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The bar was finally quiet.

Pitbull and Rookie Nate were inside mopping floors like their lives depended on it—because they damn well did. Trigger stood guard, arms crossed, making sure they didn't half-ass a single inch. The rest of the brothers drifted off to bunk rooms, the hum of engines outside dying one by one.

I snagged two long-neck beers from the cooler, wiped the condensation on my jeans, and headed for the back porch where Riley waited.

She sat on the wooden steps, knees tucked to her chest, my oversized club T-shirt swallowing her frame. Moonlight turned her hair to silver and the bruise blooming on her cheek into something darker. My gut twisted—anger, guilt, want, all tumbled together.

I eased down beside her and offered the beer.

“Peace offering?” she asked.

“Hydration,” I said. “And apology. Should’ve kept that fight from getting near you.”

She twisted the cap off, took a careful sip. “I’ve seen worse.”

“Doesn’t mean you should’ve had to.”

Silence stretched. Crickets hummed. Somewhere beyond the tree line a coyote yipped. Riley traced the label on her bottle with her thumb.

“I notice you made them clean,” she said.

I smirked. “If you wanna brawl in my bar, you damn well better know how to disinfect tile grout.”

A soft laugh escaped her—the kind that made something in my chest loosen. She tilted her head, studying me under half-lidded lashes.

“Big, bad biker with a code,” she teased. “You keep surprising me.”

“Stick around. Might surprise you again.”

She glanced past the porch rail to the patch of earth beside the shop—raised beds, neat rows, tomato cages.

“Is that a... garden?”

I scratched the back of my neck. “Yeah.”

“You grow vegetables?”

“Fresh salsa’s cheaper than store-bought.”

She grinned. “What else you got planted over there, Farmer Rogue?”

“Tomatoes, peppers, herbs. Some flowers too. Good for pollinators.”

“Hard-ass outlaw president who gardens. You are a walking contradiction.”

I shrugged. “COVID lockdown got boring. Needed a hobby.”

“Let me guess—you crochet on rainy days too?”

I turned to her, slow smile spreading. “You’d be amazed what I can do with skilled hands in unexpected places.”

Her cheeks flushed, but she held my gaze. Brave girl.

I took a pull from my beer, then set it aside and leaned my elbows on my knees. The night air pressed close—humid, heavy with the scent of honeysuckle and steel.

“We should talk,” I said.

“About the fight?”

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“About us.”

She tensed. “There isn’t an ‘us.’ We agreed—no relationships.”

“Yeah. Thing is, agreements change.”

She swallowed, eyes darting to the garden like it might save her. “I’m not good at trusting. Last time I did, I got hurt.”

“Join the club,” I muttered, thinking of Brielle’s laugh in that motel parking lot.

“I’m serious, Rogue.”

“So am I, Riley.”

I shifted closer until our shoulders brushed. She didn’t pull away.

“I don’t do casual well,” she whispered. “I catch feelings.”

“Already caught mine,” I said before I could stop myself.

Her breath hitched. “You barely know me.”

“I know enough. You work hard. You don’t scare easy. You fought off a drunk prospect without flinching. And you make the bar shine like new money.”

She huffed. “That last part doesn’t scream soulmate material.”

“Shows backbone. Shows pride. Shows you give a damn. That’s rare.”

Lightning bugs flickered in the grass. Somewhere inside, Diesel barked orders and Pitbull grumbled about bleach burns.

Riley set her beer down and rested her chin on her knees. “I’m still not ready for anything serious.”

“Neither am I,” I admitted. “But maybe we just... see where it goes?”

Her lips curved. “I can handle ‘see.’ But no promises...”

I held up my bottle. “To no promises.”

She clinked hers against mine. “To surprises.”

We drank, letting the quiet settle—not awkward, not uncomfortable, just easy. And for the first time in months, I felt something like peace slide under my skin.

Garden beds. Porch swings. A woman who didn’t flinch when the world went loud.

Maybe the universe had a sense of humor after all.

Because damn if the toughest thing I’d faced in a long time wasn’t a five-foot-nothing barmaid with a bruise on her cheek and steel in her spine.

And I was already thinking about what kind of flowers she’d like come morning.

The air in the bar felt heavier than usual. Like something was waiting to happen.

I'd just finished wiping down the back tables when I turned and nearly ran straight into Rogue. His broad chest blocked my view, his body heat rolling off him in waves. He didn't move.

Neither did I.



## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:06 am*

He looked down at me, his gray eyes unreadable—but burning. It wasn't the first time he'd looked at me like that, but tonight it felt different. Stronger. Closer.

More dangerous.

“You keep working like that,” he murmured, voice low and rough, “you’re gonna make the rest of the brothers fall in love with you.”

I swallowed. “Good thing I’m not here for them.”

That slow, wicked smirk curled his lips. “No?”

“No,” I whispered.

Rogue lifted a hand and brushed a lock of hair behind my ear, fingertips grazing my cheek. The touch was gentle—too gentle for a man who could crush a jaw with one hand—but it set my nerves on fire.

He stepped closer. Close enough that his boots touched mine, close enough that I had to tilt my chin to meet his gaze.

“I shouldn’t,” he said.

“Then don’t.”

But neither of us moved.

His eyes dropped to my mouth. “You sure?”

No. Yes. Maybe. I felt zero guilt for wanting him. Craving his hands on me.

“Just kiss me already,” I breathed.

He didn’t hesitate.

His mouth found mine slow, deliberate, like he was savoring every second. His hands tangled in my hair, fingers threading through the strands as his body pressed into mine, guiding me gently—yet firmly—backward until I felt the rough wood of the alcove wall behind the bar.

He pinned me there with nothing but his presence, his heat, and the command in his hands. It was nothing like Caleb’s calculated cold kisses. This was all real. Fire.

I reached up, fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt. He kissed me deeper, harder, teeth nipping at my bottom lip until I gasped.

He pulled back, breathing hard, eyes searching mine. “You taste like honey and trouble.”

I smiled. “You taste like sin.”

We crashed together again, mouths hungry, hands wandering—but still careful. Controlled. As if we both knew once the switch flipped, there’d be no turning back.

His thigh slotted between mine, one arm braced against the wall above my head, the other wrapped around my waist, pulling me against his chest like he couldn’t get enough. Like he’d waited too long to touch me and now he wasn’t letting go.

He growled low in his throat when I kissed down the line of his jaw. “Riley...”

The door behind us banged open.

We sprang apart.

Trigger stood there, brows raised. “Sorry, Prez. Didn’t realize the hallway was... occupied.”

Rogue cursed under his breath, one hand dragging through his hair.

I wiped my lips, cheeks flaming.

“Back off,” Rogue said to Trigger, voice steel.

Trigger grinned. “Already gone.”

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:06 am*

The door slammed shut again.

We stood in silence, our breath ragged.

“Still sure?” Rogue asked, brushing his thumb along my jaw.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I whispered.

His smile returned, slow and promising. “Good.”

But he didn’t kiss me again.

Not yet.

He just stepped back and said, “Let’s finish closing up.”

And damn if I wasn’t ready to break every rule I’d made for myself just to feel that mouth on mine again.

My life with Caleb in Charleston felt a lifetime in the rearview. I now knew what I’d be missing. Calloused hands felt better than smooth ones. An alpha man sporting a full beard was more refined than smooth skin and satin ties.

6

ROGUE

Ididn't mean to kiss her.

Hell, maybe I did.

I'd been holding back for weeks. Watching her move behind my bar like she owned it. Watching her laugh with my brothers. Watching her keep her walls up, even when she looked like she wanted to let them fall.

And when I finally kissed her, it was like lighting a match in a gasoline-soaked room.

She burned.

And I burned with her.

But now?

Now I couldn't stop thinking about her.

The way her lips tasted. The way her breath hitched. The way she didn't pretend it didn't mean something.

I paced the clubhouse, restless.

The guys were downstairs. The usual noise. The usual bullshit.

But I wasn't in it.

I was upstairs, staring out the window, wondering what the hell I'd just started.

Because Riley?

She wasn't like the others.

She didn't play games. Didn't chase a patch. Didn't ask questions she didn't want the answers to.

She worked hard. Kept to herself. Made the best damn bourbon sour I'd ever had.

And yeah, I was attracted to her.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:06 am*

But it was more than that.

I respected her.

That was rare.

Maddox knocked once, then barged in. “Prez, we got a situation.”

“What kind?”

“Some outsiders sniffing around. One of them asked about the new girl.”

That set me off like a shot.

“Where?”

“Gas station off Highway Nine.”

I grabbed my cut. “Tell the boys to saddle up.”

“You think she’s in danger?”

“I think anyone asking about Riley without permission is asking for a bullet between the eyes.”

He whistled low. “You’re serious about her.”

I didn't answer.

Didn't have to.

We rolled out five deep, and when we got to the gas station, the outsiders were long gone.

But the message was clear.

Someone was looking for her.

And whoever it was?

They were gonna wish they hadn't.

Riley had been heredays now, and she already moved like she belonged.

Behind the bar, sleeves rolled up, working faster than half the regulars. Never once complained about the hours, the sweat, the mess. She joked with the boys, kept her head down when she needed to, and knew when to bite back when someone pushed too hard.

But it didn't sit right.

Not completely.

Women like her didn't just roll into towns like this. Not with nothing but a backpack and a beat-up car that ran on borrowed time.

Not unless they were running from something.



And I'd seen that look in her eyes—more than once.

So that night, after she'd finished cleaning the bar and went to bed, I called in Diesel.

“Need you to run a quiet trace,” I said, leaning over the counter. “Nothing official. Just dig around. Find out who Riley really is.”

Diesel frowned. “You think she's a plant?”

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“Not sure yet. But something doesn’t add up.”

“She’s been working her ass off.”

“I know. That’s what makes me nervous.”

He didn’t argue. Just gave me a nod and got to work.

By morning, he came back with more than I expected.

“You’re not gonna believe this,” Diesel said, dropping a file folder onto the table in the war room. “She’s not just some drifter.”

I flipped it open. Newspaper clippings, a scanned missing persons report, and a photo of Riley in a satin cocktail dress standing next to a blond man in a suit. Caleb Whitmore III. Trust fund sleaze with a Harvard grin and a snake’s soul.

“That her ex?”

“Yup. She was engaged to him. Family’s loaded. Old Southern money outta Charleston.”

“And they reported her missing?”

“Officially? Yeah. Went cold a few days later, probably to avoid scandal. But there were whispers. Abuse. Control. Some say she bolted before the wedding. Took cash and a car, and vanished.”

I stared at the glossy photo of her. She looked like a porcelain doll—flawless, stiff, and miserable.

Not the Riley I knew. Not the one who cleaned blood off bar floors and didn't blink when fights broke out around her.

“She left that world,” I muttered. “Why?”

“Maybe she had a reason.”

I closed the folder and shoved it away.

Didn't matter why—not yet.

What mattered was whether or not her past was coming for her.

Because if it was, it wouldn't just be her in the line of fire—it'd be all of us.

And that was a risk I wasn't willing to take.

But I wasn't going to confront her about it—not yet. If she was going to come clean, I needed to know I could trust her to do it on her own.

Until then, I'd watch. Listen. Wait.

And pray that whatever she was running from didn't come knocking on our door.

I'd just slid a tray of clean shot glasses onto the shelf when the door swung open and every conversation in Fire Skulls choked off mid-word.

She didn't glide in—she arrived, like a parade float made of blond hair, pink lipstick, and designer denim so tight it should have come with a warning label. Diamond hoops gleamed under the bar lights; stilettos clicked on the scuffed wood like a metronome of self-importance.

And the aura? Pure I-own-the-room royalty.

The crowd parted for her without a single shove. Men stared. Women stared harder. She soaked it up, chin tilted, lips parted in a practiced pout that said admire me.

Who the hell?—

“Brielle,” someone whispered.

My stomach dipped.

She finally stopped—of course—right in front of Rogue.

He’d been leaning against a beam, beer half-gone, trading stories with Diesel. Now he straightened so fast the bottle thunked against the floorboard. Color crept up his neck, staining the high planes of his cheekbones.

Well, well. The man could blush.

“Logan,” she purred, reaching out as if those manicured claws already owned him. “Miss me?”

Rogue froze. The tension in his shoulders could have snapped steel. I wiped my now-sweaty palms on a bar towel and tried to pretend it didn’t stab someplace soft to see her touch him—hand on his chest, nails tracing the ink that peeked from under his tee.

He cleared his throat. “Didn’t expect to see you.”

“No?” She leaned in, cleavage practically weaponized. “I heard you were all grown up—President now. Thought I’d check on my favorite outlaw.”

Favorite. Like she’d ranked him on Yelp.

Jealousy lashed through me—sharp, unexpected. I'd only been here a few weeks. He wasn't mine. Except maybe my heart hadn't gotten that memo.

Brielle's gaze flicked past him and landed on me. One sweep, head to boots, cataloging every sin in my Target jeans.

"And you are?"

I forced a smile. "Bartender. Need a drink?"

"Champagne," she said, like we stocked it next to the well whiskey.

"House special is Jack Daniels or get out," I said sweetly.

Her nose wrinkled. "I'll pass."

She turned back to Rogue, palm smoothing over his chest like petting a show pony.

"We've got catching up to do."

He stepped back; she stepped with him. The knot in my throat pulled tight.

Fine. If the princess wanted attention, she'd get it.

I grabbed two shots of Jack and strode over. "On the house," I lied, handing one to her.

She eyed the glass like it might bite. "I said no, thanks."

"It's rude to refuse a gift," I chirped.

Brielle's eyes narrowed. "You know who I am?"

“Pretty sure.” I smiled wider. “But I don’t know why you’re still touching a man who clearly isn’t interested.”

Her laugh was sugar-frosted poison. “Sweetheart, we have history. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

She tossed the drink—in my direction. Amber splashed my shirt; the glass shattered at my feet. Gasps rippled through the bar.

I blinked. “That was mature.”

“You’ll learn your place.”

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:06 am*

“So will you.” I set my untouched shot on a table, stepped closer, and—very politely—knocked her hand off Rogue’s chest.

Brielle’s face twisted. One second she was all Botoxed composure; the next, she lunged, nails bared.

Instinct kicked in. I grabbed a fistful of platinum extensions and yanked. She screeched, clawing at my arm, catching skin. We crashed into a table; cards and cash flew. Someone shouted bets. Brielle swung—caught my cheek. I shoved her, grip sliding, nails scraping, hair pulling. Her press-on nail peeled back with a gruesome snap.

“My nail!” she screamed, voice breaking.

“Should’ve glued it better,” I hissed, yanking again.

She tackled me; we hit the floor and rolled. She slapped. I punched—short jab to the ribs. She howled, kicking wildly. I pinned her wrists, knees braced on either side of her sequined belt. Her perfume choked my lungs.

“Tap out, Barbie,” I growled.

“Get off me!”

Strong arms hooked under my shoulders and lifted me clear. Rogue’s voice, low and thunderous: “Enough.”



Trigger hauled Brielle upright. Her makeup smeared, hair a bird's nest, one acrylic missing and bleeding at the cuticle. She tried to lunge, but Trigger held firm.

Rogue positioned himself between us, fury simmering behind storm-gray eyes. "Both of you. Stop."

Brielle panted. "She attacked?—"

"She defended," Rogue snapped. He turned to me, gaze sweeping for damage. "You okay?"

My pulse hammered; strands of her hair still clung to my fingers. "Fine."

He nodded, then faced Brielle. "You don't walk in here and lay hands on my people. Ever."

Her lip trembled. "I love you, Logan."

"Loved past tense," he said, voice like ice. "You should go."

Silence.

She wrenched free of Trigger, staggered toward the door—high heel catching on a knot in the floor. She swore, limped out, slamming the door so hard glasses rattled.

A beat.

Whistles, laughter, someone clapping. Rogue ignored it all, focus locked on me.

"Come here," he said.

I stepped close; he caught my chin, tilting my face to inspect the blossoming red mark. His thumb stroked gently over my cheek. “She hurt you?”

“Not much.”

His jaw ticked. “You didn’t have to jump in.”

“I wanted to.”

His eyes softened—just a flicker—but it felt like the sun cutting through storm clouds. Warm. Dangerous. Real.

And right then, jealousy settled into something deeper, scarier.

Because this wasn’t a fling.

This man—this fierce, protective, maddening man—was sinking under my skin, threading himself through scar tissue I thought was impermeable.

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I swallowed hard. “I’m not sorry.”

A low rumble of a laugh escaped his throat. “Good,” he murmured, his thumb brushing my lower lip where her ring had grazed it. “Because neither am I.”

He leaned in slightly, voice rough, husky.

“Also...” He glanced toward the door, then back at me, a crooked grin teasing one side of his mouth. “That whole catfight? Sexy as hell.”

I blinked. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope. The way you handled her? Wild and fierce. Might’ve been the hottest damn thing I’ve ever seen.”

My face flamed. “You’re twisted.”

He smirked. “You’ll get used to it.”

I knew this biker king slipped into all the cracks in my heart. I never loved Caleb—he was a family obligation. But Rogue— I could see myself going all in on loving a man like him.

Everything was coming at me all at once.

Brielle blowing back into town. Riley caught in the crossfire. Cartel whispers in the wind. A rival club poking at our borders.

And now, the one woman I actually gave a damn about was sleeping in my bed, her presence sinking into the bones of my life like she belonged there. It was hell keeping my hand off her. So I took a few cold showers, did what I had to— to bring my libido under control and slept in the bunkhouse.

It was too much.

And not enough.

I stood at the edge of the lot, boots on gravel, watching the fireflies rise from the ground and go over the hills while wondering how the hell I was supposed to protect everyone.

“You good?”

Trigger came up beside me, Glock in hand, eyes sharp.

“No,” I said honestly.

He nodded like he respected that. “You need me to handle her?”

“Brielle?”

He raised an eyebrow.

“She’s not the problem. Not the biggest one, anyway.”

He checked his clip. “You think Riley’s gonna stick?”

“I don’t want her caught up in this.”

“Too late for that.”

I knew he was right.

And when I walked back into the clubhouse, Riley was there, barefoot, wearing one of my shirts and nothing else, her hair messy, her eyes soft as she got into my bed.

She looked at me like she trusted me.

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*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:06 am*

I closed my eyes as a million dirty thoughts came to mind. I wanted to touch her. Claim her... the sparks were getting too hot to ignore.

That was dangerous.

I sat on the edge of the bed, pulled her close.

“There’s a storm coming,” I said. “And I don’t know if I can keep you out of it.”

She touched my face, gentle but firm. “I’m not afraid of storms. Been through a ton of them.”

“Me, too.” I kissed her palm.

“I want you. Badly.”

She bit her lip.

“I-I can’t. I want to but I was involved not too long ago... it feels fast? But Right? I’m confused.”

I breathed in the scent of her freshly washed hair, feeling myself tighten, ready to go. Right fucking now.

“I’ll sleep downstairs. Because right now I hear what you are saying... and I respect that. But you can’t deny what’s building between us forever, sugar. You gotta face it.”

“I know. We haven’t known each other long,” she moaned as my finger trailed over her lower lip. “But I already trust you more than my ex.”

“I won’t let you down, girl. Just wait until you are really mine.” I got up abruptly because my hands itched to touch her all over.

It made a man reckless.

And I was already in too deep to dig myself out.

Sunlight crawled over the clubhouse yard, turning the dew on my tomato leaves to diamonds. I came out with a mug of black coffee and the intent to brood—but the sight stopped me cold.

Riley was crouched between the raised beds, loose tendrils of hair tumbling around her face, knees tucked under that borrowed Fire Skulls tee. She tugged weeds with quick, efficient flicks of her wrist, dropping them into a rusty bucket like she’d been gardening her whole life.

The woman had fought my ex on a dirty bar floor six hours ago, and now she was tender with basil sprouts.

Hell, I was in trouble.

I leaned on the porch rail, watching her. She didn’t notice until she reached for another weed and caught my shadow.

She looked up, squinting against the sun. “Morning.”

“Morning, angel.” My voice sounded rough—sleep, smoke, and too many near-fights.

She smiled—small, shy, and devastating. “Couldn’t sleep. Figured your plants could use some TLC.”

“Didn’t peg you for a gardener.”

“I’m a fast learner.” She stood, wiping dirt on her bare thighs. “Thought I’d throw together a salad for lunch if you’ve got tomatoes ready to pick. Something organic, you know?”

Organic. In a biker compound. I huffed a laugh. “You surprise me daily.”

“Likewise, Prez.”

I sipped my coffee, trying not to stare at the way her tee slid off one shoulder. “Need anything from town?”

She opened her mouth—paused. Hesitation flickered behind her eyes. No family money now. No credit cards. Just what little she’d saved in that backpack.

“Maybe... shampoo? I used the bar stuff. I can pay you back when we get paid next.”



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“You’re covered,” I said, already making mental lists. “Anything else?”

She shrugged. “Couple pairs of socks. I’ll figure it out.”

I watched her tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. Simple gesture. Turned me inside out.

“Stay around for breakfast,” I told her. “Then I’m heading out.”

She tilted her head. “Club business?”

“Of a sort.”

She didn’t push. Just smiled and bent back down to the basil. The curve of her spine, the concentration in her brow—sweet mercy.

I finished my coffee and headed for my bike, helmet hanging on the bar. On the ride into town, I couldn’t shake the warm ache in my chest. Last night, watching her throw down with Brielle—wild, unapologetic—had lit something feral in me. But this morning? Seeing her fingernails lined with earth, wanting to feed the crew leafy greens? That lit something deeper.

I parked outside the only boutique still open at 8 a.m.—a place that sold tourist tees, cheap perfume, and a small rack of women’s lingerie. Trigger would laugh his ass off if he saw me standing among lace boyshorts and pastel bras, but I didn’t care. I picked soft cotton: black, white, pale blue—no wires, just comfort. Grabbed matching panties. Socks, plain white. That shampoo she liked, with the argan-oil label. And on a

whim, a tub of coconut body lotion.

The scent hit me—warm beaches, bare skin, midnight promises. My throat went tight imagining her slick with it, soft under my palms.

I paid cash, shoved everything into a brown paper bag, and kicked up dirt all the way back to the compound.

She was still in the garden, barefoot now, toenails dusty.

“I brought supplies,” I said, holding out the bag.

Her eyes widened. “That was fast.”

“Town’s small. Priorities were clear.”

She peeked inside. Color rose on her cheeks. “You... bought me underwear.”

“Seemed practical.”

“And coconut lotion?”

I scratched the back of my neck. “Smelled nice.”

Heat blossomed across her chest, spreading up her neck. She bit her lip—a wicked, grateful curve that made me want to ditch the bag and haul her straight to my room.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“Welcome.” I cleared my throat. “I’ll, uh, start the grill for lunch.”

She nodded, still staring like she couldn't believe I'd done something so domestic. Hell, I couldn't. But it felt right.

The brothers filtered in, drawn by the promise of food. Riley's salad vanished faster than the burgers. She laughed, cheeks flushed, that coconut scent drifting every time she breezed past with a tray of beers.

God help me.

I stood at the far end of the bar, fingers drumming the counter, watching her pass a plate to Diesel. Her skin glowed, slick with a hint of lotion. She leaned over the counter to grab a napkin; the hem of her shorts rode up. My jaw clenched.

"Earth to Rogue," Trigger teased, sliding beside me. "You staring a hole through that girl."

"Shut up," I muttered.

He smirked. "Just saying—never seen you thirsty."

I flicked him off. He laughed and wandered away.

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Riley finished drying her hands, then reached under the bar—stretching, body curving—and the scent of coconut hit me full force. I imagined my hands sliding over her shoulders, down her back, palms gliding over lotion-soft skin. Heat pooled low and fierce.

She straightened and caught me watching. Her lips parted. Slow, shy smile tugging the corners.

“Like the smell?” she asked.

I pushed off the counter, closing the space between us until her back met the shelf. My arms framed her. “Couldn’t miss it.”

Her eyes darkened. “Too much?”

“Not enough,” I growled.

Her breath stuttered. She glanced at the busy room, then back to me. “You’re supposed to be working.”

“Delegated.” I brushed a strand of hair from her cheek, fingertips grazing lotion-slick skin. “Later tonight, when the brothers clear out?—”

“Yeah?”

“Gonna find out if every inch of you tastes like coconut.”

Color flared across her cheekbones. She licked her lips. “You talk big, outlaw.”

“Never bluff, angel.”

Boots stomped at the doorway. Pitbull hollered for another round. Riley’s gaze flickered to the noise—and back to me, pupils blown wide.

“Go,” I said, stepping back before I forgot where we were. “We’ll finish this later.”

She smirked, grabbed a pitcher, and disappeared into the crowd—hips swaying, scent lingering, knotting me up tighter than any fight ever could.

Brielle had been fake sparkle and hollow promises. But Riley? Riley was soft cotton and buried steel, sunshine and wild storms.

And she sure as hell was mine to keep safe.

The club might not know it yet.

But I did.

9

RILEY

Guilt is a stubborn whisper—it crawls into your ear when the room is quiet and reminds you of every secret you’re hiding from the people who deserve the truth.

For two weeks Rogue treated me like I mattered.

Two weeks of calloused hands leaving gentle fingerprints on my waist when he slid

behind the bar. Two weeks of him leaving protein bars and bottled water on my nightstand after long shifts. Two weeks of him letting me use the laundry machines first—brothers be damned—because he said my delicates didn't belong in a load full of grease-stained denim.

Two weeks of quiet kisses stolen in the walk-in cooler and a promise of more once life slowed down.

And I repaid him with half-truths.

Tonight the clubhouse was unusually calm: no brawls, no Brielle, no blaring jukebox. The brothers were in the rec room arguing over which action movie to stream. Rogue sat through half of it then headed to the garage to finish patching a fender.

I claimed a headache and retreated to his room, phone in hand, guilt in my gut.

The burner screen glowed as I typed: **\*\*RILEY ANDERSON MISSING CHARLESTON\*\***.

Boom.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:06 am*

My engagement photo splashed across page one of every local news site. Caleb in a charcoal tux, me in a silk sheath dress—his hand splayed across my stomach like he owned every breath. My smile didn't reach my eyes. It never had.

**\*\*SOCIALITE DISAPPEARS WEEKS BEFORE \$1M SOCIETY WEDDING.\*\***

**\*\*FAMILY, FIANCÉ OFFER REWARD, PLEAD FOR SAFE RETURN.\*\***

**\*\*GROOM CLAIMS FOUL PLAY: 'SHE'D NEVER RUN WITHOUT A REASON.'\*\***

My pulse spiked. Caleb's quote twisted my stomach. He knew damn well why I ran. And he knew exactly how to spin the narrative: rich golden boy abandoned by his ungrateful bride. All he had to do was aim a trembling chin at the cameras and hint at kidnapping.

Victim. Martyr. Liar.

My burner pinged low-battery. I tossed it aside and pressed the heels of my palms to my eyes. If law enforcement traced me here—and how long until that happened?—they'd kick in the gates, label Rogue's club human traffickers, throw cuffs on every patch.

All because I crashed into their world carrying a suitcase full of secrets.

Door hinges creaked. I jerked upright. Rogue filled the doorway—grease on his forearm, hair damp from the shop sink. Concern flickered in his gray eyes.

“Headache?” he asked.

“Something like that,” I whispered.

He shut the door, crossed the room in three strides, and perched on the edge of the bed. “Talk to me, angel.”

I swallowed. The words clawed at my throat. “You ever look at someone and realize you’re the reason trouble might land at their feet?”

His brows knit. “Where’s this coming from?”

I inhaled past the tightness. “I haven’t told you everything.”

He waited—patient, immovable. I found courage in that stillness.

“I Googled myself tonight,” I said. “My parents—Caleb—they’ve got the media spinning a story. Claiming I was kidnapped. Offering a reward. They’re pushing cops to treat it like foul play.”

Rogue’s jaw flexed. “Figured something like that might surface.”

I blinked. “You... knew?”

“Diesel did some digging.” He lifted a shoulder. “I wanted facts. Didn’t want to judge until you were ready to talk.”

A hot surge of shame flooded me. “I should’ve told you.”

“Should’ve, yeah. But you’re telling me now. Keep going.”



I stared at the threadbare quilt, fingers knotting the fabric. “Caleb isn’t the saint they paint him to be. He drinks. A lot. And when he’s drunk he—” My lips trembled. “He’d bruise me where no one could see. Ribs. Thighs. Arms.”

Rogue’s hands fisted on his knees. Fury rolled off him like heatwaves.

“My parents ignored it,” I continued. “They wanted the wedding of the century. Politicians, CEOs, the governor’s daughter as flower girl. Sponsors for charities. My mom booked the cathedral a year out. My dad ponied up for imported orchids and caviar I can’t pronounce.”

“Million-dollar puppet show,” Rogue muttered.

“Exactly.” I swallowed a sob. “I tried to break it off once. Caleb cried, promised rehab. My parents begged me not to embarrass them. Said love is compromise.”

“Bullshit.”

“Yeah.” My throat burned. “Two months ago Caleb was drunk, cornered me in the wine cellar. Said if I ever embarrassed him he’d make sure no one believed me—that he’d ruin me with one phone call. I saw something in his eyes that night that told me he meant it.”

Rogue’s knuckles blanched. “What did he do?”

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“Slapped me. Hard. Then kissed the bruise and called it foreplay.” I shuddered. “I decided then. I pawned jewelry, disabled the gate alarms, and ran.”

I forced myself to meet Rogue’s gaze. “I left a million-dollar wedding with nothing but a backpack. I thought my parents would cover it up—quiet annulment, hush money. But Caleb loves attention. He turned it into a manhunt.”

Rogue inhaled, slow and lethal. “And you’re worried that heat lands on us.”

“On you,” I corrected, voice cracking. “On the club. He’ll spin a story: poor fiancé abducted by bikers. It fits the narrative.”

He reached out, thumb brushing away a tear I hadn’t realized slipped free. “Look at me.”

I did. Storm clouds and steel.

“You’re safe here,” he said. “No badge, no billionaire, no trust-fund asshole is walking through that gate without eating dirt first.”

My lip trembled. “You can’t promise that.”

“I just did.”

“But if cops come, they’ll leverage everything.”

He leaned closer. “Then we leverage harder. We’ve got eyes on the county board,

sheriff's office, even the mayor's cousin owes us favors. And if Caleb shows up? Let's just say we know how to bury a body deeper than he can dig."

Fear and relief collided in my chest. "I don't want you hurt because of me."

"Hurt?" He huffed a humorless laugh. "Woman, I took a bullet last year over a shipment mix-up and still made church the next morning. We handle hurt. What we don't handle is betrayal. And you just laid yourself bare. That takes guts."

I blinked. "You're not... angry?"

"Angry at him." He cupped my cheek, gentle where others weren't. "Proud of you."

Tears welled. "I'm catching feelings, Logan. Big ones. And I'm scared they'll screw up everything."

His thumb traced my lower lip. "Already screwed, angel. I'm in it. Deep."

A shaky laugh burst out. "Of course you make that sound dirty."

He smirked, but his gaze softened. "You hungry?"

I sniffed. "For food? Or you?"

"Both," he said, grin widening. "But first—you call comes first."

He rose, crossed to his dresser, pulled out a faded tee and a pair of joggers. "Get comfy. I'll heat soup."

I stared—dazed, grateful, hopelessly, stupidly in love. "You cook?"

“Instant ramen counts.”

I laughed through a snuffle. “Deal.”

While he clattered in the tiny kitchenette, I changed shirts, folding my anxiety into neat corners. The fabric smelled like cedar and motor oil—him. Safe.

He returned with a steaming bowl and two spoons. “Careful. Nuclear hot.”

We sat cross-legged on the bed, knees brushing. He spoon-fed me noodles, wiping stray broth from my chin like it was normal. Like men like him tucked runaways into beds and fed them midnight snacks.

Halfway through, he set the bowl aside and brushed a noodle from my cleavage, playful. “Waste of carbs.”

“Pervert.”

“Your pervert.”

Warmth flared. “Yeah,” I whispered. “Yours.”

Silence bloomed—soft, heavy with possibility.

His hand slid to the nape of my neck, tugging me forward. The kiss was slow, reverent, nothing like the greedy collisions we’d shared before. It tasted like trust earned, truths spoken, futures maybe possible.

When he finally pulled back, he rested his forehead against mine. “Sleep,” he murmured. “We’ll plan in the morning.”

I traced the tattoo on his forearm. “You’re really not afraid of Caleb?”

He chuckled—dark, dangerous. “He should be afraid of us.”

Sleep tugged at my lashes. For the first time since I’d fled Charleston, exhaustion felt safe. I let my head drop to his chest, heartbeat steady beneath my ear.

Just before drifting off, I mumbled, “Thank you for believing me.”

His arms tightened. “Thank you for surviving.”

The guilt’s whisper finally faded, drowned by the steady drum of his heart—and the promise that whatever storms hunted me, I wouldn’t face them alone.

Not anymore.

10

## ROGUE

Diesel slapped a thick manila envelope onto the war-room table hard enough to rattle every shot glass and domino tile on the surface. The brothers went silent. Grease still streaked Diesel's jaw; his helmet dangled from his left hand like he hadn't taken time to set it down.

"Courier dropped this at the front gate," he said. "No return address—just my name and the club crest."

A prickle crawled up my spine. I slid the flap open. Glossy eight-by-ten photos spilled across the table: Riley laughing as she served Meadow tequila, Riley perched on the fence while I pointed out the difference between rosemary and thyme, Riley pressed to the stockroom wall—my hands in her hair—her lips swollen from the kiss I'd stolen.

The last shot made my jaw lock. I stood in Maybell's downtown, holding a brown bag of cotton bras and coconut lotion, smile so stupidly fond it hurt to look at.

Trigger whistled. "Somebody's carrying a long lens."

Diesel tossed a folded ivory sheet beside the photos—expensive stationery, aggressive fountain-pen slope:

I thought she'd been kidnapped.

Turns out she traded up for leather and stale beer.

Send Riley home before I take her back in pieces.

Forty-eight hours.

No signature, just an ornate C.

Caleb.

I puffed out a slow breath. “First move: double the gate watch. No brother rides alone. Trigger, shadow Riley. I don’t want her out of sight.”

He nodded, jaw tight.

After midnight Diesel returned with intel. “Caleb’s paying Reaper’s Pride MC—three charters down in Carolina. Word is they’re hurting for cash since the DEA raid. He waved green—they grabbed iron.”

Reaper’s Pride. Rough, reckless, proud of the skull-and-sickle patch on their backs. The kind of crew who burned barns for fun.

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“They’ll strike loud,” I said. “Truck convoy, automatic weapons, maybe a pipe bomb for show.”

Nash cracked his knuckles. “We return favor?”

“In spades,” I answered.

We staged at the south warehouse that same night, reinforcing the fence line with concrete barricades. If Pride wanted fireworks, we’d control the stage.

Riley tried to help sandbag the perimeter until I caught her shivering in the cold. I looped my arm around her waist.

“Inside,” I murmured. “One stray round is all it takes.”

“That’s my choice,” she shot back, though fear flickered in her eyes.

“Then choose to live.” I kissed her temple. “Please.”

She relented but only after I promised to come back breathing.

Pride rolled in at 2:47 a.m.—three matte-black pickups, no plates, headlights off. They assumed stealth; our floodlights proved otherwise. Beams exploded across the lot. The lead truck skidded. A pipe bomb arced from its bed and hit the empty storage shed, blooming into orange fire.

Maddox popped the .50 cal from the roof of the tactical van, shredding the driver side



of truck two. Diesel and Nash flanked on bikes, engines howling, semi-autos barking in short, controlled bursts. Bullets pinged off the armored van, sprayed gravel across my boots. I raised my shotgun, pumped once, and shattered the radiator of the last pickup. Steam hissed. The driver bailed, rolling into weeds.

Return fire cut the air—wild, high. Amateurs with more courage than aim. A round clipped my handlebars, snapping the mirror. Another zipped past my ear with a wasp’s whine. Adrenaline sharpened my focus to a razor edge.

“Prez, flank right!” Trigger’s voice crackled over comms.

I obeyed, sweeping wide to funnel Pride away from the warehouses and toward the drainage ditch. Maddox stitched a line of heavy lead across the asphalt, forcing the second truck to swerve. It nose-dived into mud, axle snapping like a gunshot.

Ninety seconds. That’s all it took. Five men zip-tied to a guardrail, one unconscious from a ricochet. No Fire Skulls casualties—just a graze on Rookie Nate’s calf and Trigger nursing a bruised knuckle from decking a runner.

Message received.

We rolled back through the compound gates at dawn Riley waited under the halogen lamps—pale, wide-eyed. The moment my boots hit dirt she flew forward, smashing into my chest. Her palms skated over my shoulders, searching for blood.

“I’m okay,” I rasped.

Tears glittered, but her voice stayed iron. “They could have killed you.”

“Not tonight.”

She tipped her head back, scanning my face as if cataloguing every line. Something in me snapped then—not anger, not relief. Something raw. Need threaded tight with terror. I could have lost her before I’d even claimed her fully.

“Come with me,” I murmured. I laced our fingers and guided her through the quiet corridor to my room. Lock clicked. World narrowed.

Dim light spilled across the sheets. She stood in its path, trembling. “I should shower. You smell like smoke.”

“The smoke can wait.”

I stepped close, hands cupping her cheeks. Her eyes were galaxies—fear, love, relief. I kissed her soft, a promise, then deeper, a claim. She sighed into my mouth; the sound carved every defense from my bones.

My fingers slid under the hem of her borrowed tee, grazing warm skin. “Tell me to stop.”

“Never,” she whispered.

Clothes fell to the floor in a hush of cotton and denim. My calloused palms mapped each new inch like sacred territory—curve of waist, dip of spine, soft swell of hip. Coconut lotion blended with the tang of gunpowder still clinging to my knuckles.

She traced the tiger ink prowling across my ribs, lips grazing scars I’d collected over years of bad luck and worse choices. “Every line tells a story,” she breathed.

“They all end here,” I answered, lifting her, settling her on the edge of the bed. Her thighs parted; heat radiated, beckoning. I swallowed a groan. “You sure?”

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Her answer was a roll of her hips that had my vision sparking white.

I kissed my way down her throat, tasting salt and sweetness. Teeth grazed her pulse. She arched. The world shrank to the slide of skin, the hitch of breath, the gasp when I brushed the peak of her breast with my thumb. She dragged nails along my shoulders—sharp, pleading.

“Riley,” I growled, voice wrecked.

“Logan. Please.”

I lowered, tasting the coconut glaze on her belly, reveling in the quiver of her muscles. She threaded fingers through my hair, tugging when my tongue swept lower. Her moan fractured the quiet—half-wild, half-wonder. Every sound she gave me seared into memory.

When I couldn’t take any more teasing—couldn’t stand the ache in my veins—I rose over her, foreheads pressed.

“No one’s taking you,” I vowed.

“Prove it.”

I did—slow at first, letting her adjust, letting us breathe. Then harder, deeper, the mattress groaning under the rhythm of desperation. She met every thrust, nails carving crescents into my shoulder blades, breath hitching, breaking into breathless pleas that broke something holy inside me.

Stars burst behind my eyes when she shattered—tightening around me, pulse hammering against my lips where I swallowed her cry. I followed, pouring everything—fear, rage, devotion—into the woman who turned my world right-side up.

We lay tangled in sheets, sweat cooling. My heart finally slowed. She traced a scar along my chest, voice soft. “Does it ever get quiet?”

“Only when you’re on my pillow.”

A shy smile curved her swollen lips. “That was... wow.”

I chuckled. “Technical term.”

She sobered. “What if Caleb tries again?”

“Then we end it on our terms.”

Her brow furrowed. “I don’t want more blood.”

“There are other ways.” I thought of the thumb drive Trigger lifted from Pride’s truck—financial ledgers, scheme money linking Caleb to dirty freight beyond state lines. “And we’ve got leverage.”

She exhaled, relief and exhaustion mingling. “I’m scared.”

I brushed hair from her temple. “Me too. But fear makes us sharp.”

Outside, engines rumbled—brothers changing shifts. The eastern sky blushed pink.

I kissed her forehead. “Get some rest. War starts at nine.”

She caught my hand. “Logan?”

“Yeah?”

“Whatever happens, I’d choose this again.”

Heat surged—but it was the calm kind, the forever kind. “Same, angel.”

She nestled closer. I closed my eyes, heartbeat syncing with hers—two drums preparing for whatever thunder came next.

And if Caleb Whitmore thought last night was his opening salvo, he’d soon learn Fire Skulls played symphonies in a higher caliber.

11

RILEY

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:06 am*

Soft morning light filtered through the blinds, striping Rogue's chest in pale gold and shadow. I traced a beam across the tiger tattoo, letting my fingertip wander until it met the rhythm of his heart. Last night's adrenaline had been worked from our blood—first through bullets, then through desperate, claiming touch. Now only the hum of possibility remained.

He cracked one eye open. "Staring again?"

"Cataloging," I whispered, pressing a kiss to his collarbone. "In case I need a reference."

"Plenty of opportunities coming." He rolled, pinning me to the mattress with a grin that could melt steel. Sheets tangled around our hips; skin slid on skin. I arched, welcoming the slow slide of him—lazy, unhurried, as if the world outside these four walls had stopped. Minutes later I clenched around him, pulse skittering, and the timbre of his groan vibrated straight down my spine. When quiet reclaimed the room, we lay tangled, sweat-slick and grinning like thieves.

I forgot what this felt like. The fire... tingles and throaty moans. He brought back pieces of me I had lost to Caleb. Romance. Lust. Longing... feeling the sweet release and falling into safety after.

A thought speared my post-orgasm haze—cold and sharp. I bolted upright. "I remember something."

He pushed up on an elbow. "Talk to me."

“Caleb’s father took a group of donors to a hunting cabin in the Francis Marion woods—way off the highway. Caleb bragged about it later. Said his dad closed deals there because no one could hear you scream over the coyotes.” I shivered.

Rogue’s eyes narrowed. “You think that’s where they launder?”

“I think it’s where they store ledgers, cash, bribe lists—everything.” I climbed out of bed, snatching one of his white tees off the floor. “They hosted ‘non-profit retreats,’ but it was a cover. They’d pitch projects—veteran housing, reading programs—secure state grants, then funnel the money through shell charities and pay contractors who were really family. The cabin was the meeting hub.”

He swung his legs over the edge, reaching for jeans. “You remember where it is?”

“Roughly. Two hours south of Charleston, near McClellanville. Gravel service road, no signage. My dad complained the suspension on his Benz hated it.” I dug through his nightstand until I found a pencil and a blank invoice. “Give me a minute.”

We spread the sheet on the mattress between us like pirates plotting treasure routes. Eyes closed, I summoned the memory: Spanish moss dripping over a muddy creek; the crunch of oyster shells under expensive tires; a rust-red mailbox with no address—only a turkey feather wedged in the flag.

I sketched: Highway 17 cutting north to south. An unmarked right turn past a derelict gas station that never sold gas. Five miles of ruts and swamp until a fork—left fork chained, right fork open. The cabin sat another mile down, ringed by camellias too prissy for wild land. A generator shed. A steel shipping container rusting behind palmettos. And a cement storm cellar Caleb once joked was “good for storing inconvenient truths.”

Rogue watched, hand on my knee, thumb stroking a soothing line up and down.

When I dropped the pencil, he lifted the sheet, studying. “If this is real, it’s our smoking gun.”

“We’ll need proof,” I said. “Paper trails. Photos. Something that ties Caleb or Senator Whitmore to fraud.”

He tapped the storm-cellar box I’d shaded. “That’s where we look first. Trigger can rig cameras. Diesel’s got lockpicks.”

“Motion sensors, maybe,” I added. “Bring an RF jammer.”

A slow smile curved his mouth—equal parts predator and planner. “You really are the perfect partner in crime.”

Heat rose in my cheeks. “You taught me about shotgun spread. I can teach you about white-collar theft.”

He folded the map, tucking it into his back pocket. Then he cupped my face, thumb brushing the bruise Brielle’s ring had left. “You sure you’re ready to take them down?”

“I’ve been ready since the first time Caleb said no one would believe me.” My voice trembled with equal measures fear and fury. “Let’s become believers.”

He kissed me—slow, sealing a vow. “We ride at dawn. But first—I’m feeding you pancakes. War needs carbs.”

I laughed, tension easing. “Deal. Then we burn their kingdom to the ground.”

Outside, engines rumbled as the brothers switched shifts, unaware a plan was already taking root. Inside, Rogue slipped his fingers through mine—steady, solid—a



reminder that whatever darkness lay on that moss-draped road, we'd face it together.

And this time, no one would hear Caleb scream but us.

12

## ROGUE

It wasn't quiet anymore. We fended off the first attack. But more were coming. Someone else was laying in wait.

It started two nights ago—an unmarked white van parked half a mile up the ridge. No plates, no driver in sight, just headlights cutting through the fog like a pair of dead eyes. Then came the drones, low hums overhead when Riley and I were talking strategy in the garden. Diesel shot one out of the sky with a scoped .22, but two more buzzed past before we could scramble the signal.

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Someone was watching us. Someone was hunting.

I didn't sleep that night. I sat on the porch with my shotgun across my lap, Riley asleep inside, one hand curled in the sheet like she was still dreaming of us tangled up together. Every creak of the wind set my teeth on edge. Every shadow in the tree line made me reach for my weapon. We were being hunted in our own territory, and that didn't sit right.

By morning, I knew what I had to do.

"Caleb's not the only problem," I told Trigger and Nash. "Reaper's Pride won't quit. And Brielle... I don't trust that snake not to slither back in."

I was right.

She rolled in like a queen returning from exile—tight jeans, low blouse, hair curled to perfection, big sunglasses that hid zero shame. She strolled past Rookie Nate at the gate like she still owned the place.

"You look good, Logan," she purred when she found me in the garage. "Tighter. Rougher. That new girl must be giving you hell."

I wiped my hands on a rag, not bothering to look up. "You're wasting gas, Brielle."

She leaned against the tool bench, breasts pushed up, lips painted peach. "I've got a proposal. Take me back. Let me back into the fold, and I'll hand you Reaper's Pride on a silver platter."

I stared at her a long beat. “What makes you think I need your help?”

“Because I know things. I’ve been in bed—figuratively and literally—with the people who want you dead.”

“And now you want back in?” I laughed, bitter. “You’re a day late and a dozen bullets short.”

She stepped closer. “Logan... don’t pretend. You still feel something.”

I met her gaze cold. “I feel a lot of things. Regret. Disgust. Gratitude you showed me who you really are before I put a ring on your finger.”

She flinched like I’d slapped her.

“You want to help?” I asked. “Leave town. Stay gone.”

“You’ll regret this,” she spat.

“No,” I said. “I already did. I’m not making the same mistake twice.”

When she was gone, I called an emergency meet in the war room.

“Caleb’s pushing from the top,” I said. “But Pride’s pressing from the flanks. We can’t set the trap at the cabin until we secure our backyard.”

Nash cracked his knuckles. “So we take the fight to them.”

Trigger nodded. “About damn time.”

Diesel mapped the location—an abandoned quarry ten miles east where Pride had set

up temporary shelter. Half their crew had been crashing there since the last raid, licking wounds, rebuilding arms. We knew they were storing crates of smuggled rifles in a buried boxcar at the south end. That made it a high-value hit.

“Tonight,” I said. “We ride. We hit fast and hard, burn their toys, send a message.”

Riley tried to stop me when I told her. “You don’t have to do this tonight.”

“I do,” I said, brushing her hair behind her ear. “They won’t stop coming. And if I wait, it’ll be our front gate they breach.”

She swallowed hard. “Promise me something.”

“Anything.”

“That you’ll come back. Whole.”

I kissed her forehead, then her lips. “You’re the reason I will.”

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We shared a moment—quiet, like the world stood still. But under it all, I felt her fear. And mine. I couldn't tell her how many times I'd seen men ride off into night battles and never come home. Couldn't tell her how close she'd come to being a widow before she'd even said yes.

She watched me from the porch, arms wrapped around herself as I mounted up, the brothers rolling out beside me. Thunder roared as the engines fired, taillights vanishing into the dusk like falling stars.

Behind me, her silhouette stayed etched against the glow of the clubhouse, fragile and brave.

I didn't look back again.

Tonight, we rode into hell.

And I was going to make sure the devil himself knew my name.

13

### ROGUE

The night of the MC war, the air felt like iron—thick with tension, pulsing with something ancient and brutal that hummed in my veins.

Reaper's Pride had crossed a line. Caleb might've pulled their strings, but they made their own damn choice when they blew up our warehouse and sent bullets screaming

past my brothers' heads. We'd warned them once. This time, we were riding out with one mission:

Crush them.

Diesel handed out extra mags, fingers steady, expression grim. Trigger said nothing as he prepped a silencer for his .45, his jaw tight. Maddox slipped brass knuckles over his fists. Pitbull checked the fuel on the molotovs twice, then grinned like the devil himself.

"We doing this or what, Prez?" Nash asked me, cocking his head toward the row of bikes lined up under moonlight.

"We're not riding to scare," I said. "We're riding to end it."

The boys nodded. That's all we needed.

We thundered out into the North Carolina night, tires shredding gravel, engines howling across the valley like wolves. The coordinates Diesel found led us to a busted-ass quarry out near County Line Road. Reaper's Pride had been holed up there for weeks, thinking no one'd find their little hidey-hole.

They were wrong.

We circled high ground, lights off. Heat vision spotted seven bikes, four trucks, and a hell of a lot of bad decisions. Two guards patrolled the ridge. Trigger took the left. Diesel took the right. No noise, no warning.

Crack. Thump.

Down they went.

Then it began.

Pitbull lit the first molotov and hurled it through the passenger side of their main truck. Flames exploded up, lighting the night in orange and black chaos. I dropped the clutch and shot down into the pit with Maddox at my six, both of us blasting warning shots into the air as the first screams started.

Men ran. Some grabbed weapons. Others dove for cover. But we were faster. Cleaner. Trained.

I aimed for their president, a big bastard called Ruckus. He had a shotgun half-raised when I tackled him from the side. We hit the gravel hard. I grabbed his vest and slammed him into a wheel hub twice before dragging him up, blood painting his cheek.

“You came into my house,” I growled. “Now I’m inside yours.”

He spit blood. “You’re dead, Thorne.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But you’re done.”

By the time the smoke cleared, five of them were zip-tied, three were unconscious, and two were stripped of their cuts and left barefoot by the fire. No deaths—we weren’t monsters—but they’d remember.

The final message came in the form of their clubhouse flag burning in the back of Pitbull’s truck. Pride was over.

I rolled home just before dawn.

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Lights were still on at the clubhouse when I pulled in, gravel crunching under my tires. Riley was sitting on the porch steps, wrapped in one of my flannel shirts. Her bare legs were pulled up to her chest, and her eyes locked on mine the second I stepped off the bike.

She ran to me without a word.

I caught her, wrapped my arms around her waist, lifted her clean off the ground.

“I was so scared,” she whispered, pressing her face to my throat.

“I told you I’d come back.”

“You smell like smoke.”

“Because I lit the match.”

She kissed me like she couldn’t breathe without it, and I knew I was hers, and she was mine.

Two days later, the war behind us, we started planning Caleb’s fall.

Riley pulled out the hand-drawn map and laid it across the bar in the chapel. “There,” she said, pointing to a bend in the woods. “That’s where the hunting cabin is. He and his father used to go out there all the time. Meetings. Bribes. Dirty money. You name it.”



Trigger leaned in. “How sure are you?”

“Sure enough to bet my life.”

I looked at her. “You already have.”

We split into teams. Nash and Pitbull handled the wiretap gear. Diesel prepped the drone. Riley drew a layout from memory—cellar access, solar panels, a hidden generator, even an old canoe dock they could use as a back exit. It was brilliant.

“Tomorrow at dusk,” I said. “We ghost in, plant the bugs, ghost out.”

Simple.

Except nothing with Caleb was ever simple.

We moved under twilight. The forest was wet and dense, sounds muffled by moss and mist. Riley led us through like she’d walked the path yesterday. When we reached the cabin, we split.

The inside was worse than expected. Binders on shelves. Laptops. Cash. Labeled fake nonprofits like “Green Schools of Tomorrow” and “Veterans for Vision.” All fronts.

“We’ve got them,” I whispered.

Nash planted the mics. Diesel left a camera. We stayed twenty-three minutes.

And that’s when everything went to hell.

We reached the trucks, but Nash’s tail car was gone. The keys were still in the dirt.

Then Riley screamed.

I spun just in time to see her being dragged backward by a man in tactical gear. Another shoved a gun in her ribs. Trigger raised his Glock, but Riley screamed, “No! Don’t shoot!”

Three men. One van. Caleb’s men.

“Back off or she’s gone!” one barked.

I froze. My pulse pounded so hard I couldn’t hear.

“Logan!” she cried.

I took a step forward. They shoved her into the van.

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“Midnight tomorrow,” the one in charge said. “Bring the files. Or she disappears.”

And just like that, they vanished.

Riley was gone.

And I’d burn down the world to bring her home.

14

RILEY

I came to in the back of a moving van.

It smelled like oil and mildew and bad memories.

My wrists were zip-tied, ankles too, and my mouth tasted like metal and fear.

The doors opened and two men hauled me out, dragging me into a cabin that looked like every nightmare I’d left behind in Charleston.

And there he was.

Caleb.

Button-down shirt. Polished boots. Same smug, aristocratic smile.

“Riley,” he said like we were bumping into each other at brunch. “You look... well.”

“You’re a psycho,” I spat.

He sighed. “Always so dramatic.”

He waved the others off, motioned for them to leave us alone. Then he sat across from me, legs crossed, hands steepled.

“I’ve missed you.”

I glared at him. “Let me go.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

He stood and moved toward me slowly, crouching to brush a piece of hair from my face. I flinched.

“I loved you, you know.”

“You controlled me.”

“I gave you the world.”

“You gave me a prison.”

His smile thinned.

“You left me for a biker,” he said, disgust in his voice. “A filthy, broke biker.”

I met his gaze. “And I’d do it again.”

He slapped me.

Not hard. Not enough to break skin.

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Just enough to remind me who he was.

But I didn't cry.

"You think you can play with men like me?" he sneered. "You think Rogue can protect you?"

"He already did," I said. "You're the one hiding."

That pissed him off.

He grabbed my face, leaned in like he might kiss me.

"I still love you, Riley. We can fix this. I'll forgive everything."

"It was never love," I whispered. "It was ownership."

His face darkened. "You don't know what you're saying."

"I know exactly what I'm saying."

He stood and backed away, chest heaving.

"I gave you everything."

"And now you're going to lose everything."

He stormed out, slamming the door behind him.

And I knew, right then, that Rogue would come for me.

Because what Caleb didn't understand was that I wasn't some pawn in his twisted game anymore.

I was part of something bigger now.

I was part of the club.

15

ROGUE

The night air tasted like gunpowder and rain. I straddled my Harley at the edge of Whitmore land, brothers flanking me in a half-moon of idling bikes. Caleb had Riley. I'd warned him once; now he'd hear me loud.

Trigger's voice crackled in my ear: "Two guards on the porch—armed."

I signaled. Diesel and Nash melted into shadow. Pitbull hefted thermite, grinning like it was Christmas.

"Move."

Gunfire shattered the quiet—Maddox's rifle from the tree line. Guards dropped. Trigger breached the back door; I hit the kitchen, shotgun barking. The house rattled with echoes.

I found Caleb in the study, fist in Riley's hair, pistol at her temple. Her eyes—fear,

fury, faith—locked on mine.

“Drop it,” I snarled.

He sneered. “You shoot, you hit her.”

Behind him, Pitbull kicked in the patio doors. Caleb flinched. Riley drove an elbow into his ribs. The muzzle wavered; I fired.

One round, center-mass. Caleb staggered. Riley broke free. Blood bloomed crimson on designer white.



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He tried to raise the gun again—Trigger’s knife thunked into his chest. End of story.

I gathered Riley close, breathing her in. “You okay, angel?”

She nodded into my cut. “I knew you’d come.”

Diesel tossed me a battered briefcase—ledgers, flash drives, blackmail strong enough to topple a dynasty. It would be Riley and our deadman’s switch. Or our leverage if we needed it. Caleb was gone and hid daddy better not ask too many questions. We called in a clean up crew to frame the Reapers for the hit.

Outside, engines rumbled. I swung Riley onto my bike. I revved the throttle; the cabin burned behind us. “Ride or die,” I said.

“Take me home,” she answered, arms tight around me as we roared into the dark.

16

### RILEY

When the dust finally settled and I was safe again, wrapped in Rogue’s arms, I couldn’t tell where the bruises stopped and the healing began.

I’d never been touched like that—so gently, yet with a fire in every stroke. He didn’t rush, didn’t demand. He kissed the corners of my lips, the bruises on my jaw, and ran his calloused hands over my body like he was memorizing me. Every inch.

We made love like the world had almost ended—and somehow, we were still standing. Then he carried me to the clawfoot tub in his private bathroom, one I hadn't even known existed behind the hidden doorway upstairs. He bathed me with warm lavender soap, kneeling beside the tub, rinsing my hair with water poured from a ceramic pitcher, like I was something holy.

Afterward, he wrapped me in a soft towel and carried me to bed.

"I'm going to feed you," he said with a slow, teasing grin.

He cooked grilled cheese with tomatoes and a little basil—his version of comfort food, he said—and poured me a glass of wine. We sat on the back porch, under the stars, with my legs curled under his leather cut. He tucked a piece of hair behind my ear, leaned in, kissed me on the mouth, and whispered, "I'll be back, baby girl."

And then he was gone.

Two hours passed.

When I heard the low rumble of his Harley returning, my heart flipped in my chest like a teenager waiting for her crush. He walked in with a velvet box and that same unreadable look on his face he always wore when he was feeling everything but didn't want to show it.

He got down on one knee.

The box opened to reveal the most beautiful platinum engagement ring I'd ever seen—cushion cut, bold, elegant, surrounded by tiny diamonds that caught the light like stars. It was everything I wasn't allowed to pick with Caleb. This one was mine. It was me.

“Don’t run from me,” he said, voice husky. “We’re flying out with the whole damn crew. Vegas. Chapel. Champagne. You, me, the altar. No more hiding. No more secrets. You’re one of us now. And once you’re my wife, you can’t ever testify against me in court.”

I laughed and sobbed and said yes all in the same breath.

He picked me up and spun me around, and we started packing that night.

Vegas hit me like a bottle of chilled champagne to the face.

Everything sparkled. Even the air. Neon streaked across every surface. Slot machines screamed. Limos rolled up. The strip glittered under sun and stars, crowds spilling out in sequins and stilettos, bachelorettes hooting, tourists throwing dice and dreams all in the same motion.

We checked into a high-rise overlooking the Bellagio fountains. Rogue got a suite—one with a heart-shaped tub and a mirrored ceiling, because of course he did.

“You sure you want to marry me in a city that never sleeps?” he teased, peeling off his shirt.

“I want to marry you anywhere,” I whispered.

And I meant it.

I splurged. For once in my life, I wanted to be a bride on my own terms. No politics. No guest list of strangers. No cold, pristine Charleston ballroom.

Just me.

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And him.

I picked a gown that made me feel like a goddess—soft ivory silk that hugged my curves, a daring slit up one leg, off-the-shoulder sleeves, and delicate silver beading that shimmered when I walked. My hair was down in waves, lips a wine-stained red. Rogue wore a black suit with his cut over it, boots polished, hair slicked back, and a look in his eyes that made my knees go weak.

We stood outside the Little White Chapel with the MC surrounding us—Diesel, Trigger, Nash, Pitbull, even Maddox, who swore he'd never set foot in Nevada again. They wore black jeans and button-downs, their cuts proud. We were a family.

The ceremony was short, but perfect. The Elvis impersonator gave a nod to the King, but it wasn't a joke. There were tears in Rogue's eyes when I walked down the tiny aisle, bouquet in hand, music playing low behind me. He watched me like a man seeing sunlight for the first time.

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen," he whispered when I reached him.

And I believed him.

We said our vows—honest, raw, unscripted. We kissed like we meant it. And then the chapel erupted in applause.

Outside, Trigger popped the first bottle of champagne. Bubbles flew. I laughed as Rogue dipped me and kissed me again, his arms strong, steady, sure.

“I never thought I’d see the day,” Diesel muttered with a grin, glass raised. “Rogue Thorne, married man. Hell just froze over.”

“To Rogue and Riley,” Nash said, lifting his cup. “May she keep him alive and out of jail, and may she always keep him whipped.”

Laughter rolled like thunder. Rogue smirked and grabbed my waist. “Only one I’m ever letting tie me up is her.”

We hit the rooftop bar overlooking the Strip. Strings of lights glowed overhead. Music pulsed from speakers, bass low and smooth. Someone ordered piña coladas, and we danced barefoot under the stars.

And later, after the crowd thinned, Rogue took me by the hand to the rooftop pool. I still wore my gown. He still wore his boots. But none of it mattered when he lifted me into his arms and kissed me under the neon sky, then pulled me into the pool, clothes and all.

The water was warm. His hands were hotter.

We made love there in the shallow end, half-hidden by steam and shadows and the promise that this time, I was exactly where I was meant to be.

Mrs. Rogue Thorne.

Forever.

The morning sun filtered through the blinds of our Vegas suite, catching the soft shimmer of her skin where the sheets had slipped low across her hips. Riley lay beside me, lips parted, hair tangled from the night before, her breathing slow and steady. I watched her sleep like a man watching salvation and tried to catch my damn breath.

She was mine now. Legally, spiritually, in every way that counted.

The ring on her finger sparkled as she shifted, fingers curling toward my side like she was drawn to me even in her dreams.

I lay back, one arm folded behind my head, staring at the ceiling. It still felt like a dream. The last few days had been a storm of blood, fire, and adrenaline. But in the middle of all that chaos, I'd found her. And I wasn't letting go.

My mind drifted—back to that moment.

We'd raided the cabin like shadows, my boys flanking the perimeter, weapons drawn, hearts pounding. I'd kicked the door in, gun first, and there she was—tied to a chair, eyes wide, lip bleeding. My name tore out of her throat and I dropped the pistol before I even crossed the room. The bastard guarding her didn't even have time to blink before I cracked him across the jaw with my elbow and sent him flying into the wall.

"Riley," I'd breathed, untying her with hands that shook.

"You came," she whispered.

"Always."

Now here we were. Vegas. Married. Safe—for now.

She stirred and opened her eyes, blinking into the morning light.

“Hey,” I said, leaning over her.

“Hi,” she murmured, voice scratchy from sleep. “What time is it?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

She smiled, then stilled when she felt my hand skim along her waist, my fingers tracing the curve of her back.

“Again?” she asked softly.

I didn’t answer. Just kissed her slow, savoring every breath, every inch. We made love like it was the first time all over again—unrushed, honest, tender. I memorized every gasp, every sigh. When I finally pulled her close and held her there, I kissed her temple and whispered, “Thank you for marrying me.”

“I should be thanking you,” she whispered back.

Later, I helped her into a new dress—tight at the waist, soft gold satin that made her skin glow. I wore a black tux, no tie, jacket tailored. My cut hung over it like a crown. She ran her fingers through my beard, grinning.

“You clean up nice, Mr. Thorne.”

I kissed her hand. “Let’s go win some money, Mrs. Thorne.”

We hit the high rollers room at Caesar’s. The MC had taken over a corner, drinks



flowing, laughter echoing. Diesel was charming some tourist in a sequined mini dress. Nash was already three fingers deep into top-shelf whiskey. Pitbull, shirtless, played poker like a goddamn professional.

Riley stood by my side like a queen. Eyes lit up, cheeks flushed, drink in hand. She leaned close. "This is insane."

"You're my wife now. You better get used to insane."

She laughed, but then I saw her expression change. A flicker of thought passed through her eyes, soft and worried.

"What is it?" I asked.

She bit her lip, glancing around like she didn't want to ruin the moment.

"I need to call my parents," she finally said. "They don't even know I'm married."

I took a slow sip of bourbon, giving her the space to speak.

"I know they'll freak out," she said. "But... they deserve to know. And... I kind of want you to meet them."

I raised an eyebrow. "You want to bring me to Charleston? To your Country Club family?"

She gave me a nervous smile. "You'll hate it."

"I'll go."

"You will?"

“I’ll go,” I said again. “Because you’re mine now. And if they want to know the man who married their daughter... they can meet him.”

She blinked fast, getting emotional. “Just... maybe don’t tell them about the tattoos right away.”

I laughed and kissed her temple. “Baby, they’ll see them coming from a mile away.”

“I know.”

“Then let’s give them something to talk about.”

That night, we sat on the rooftop balcony of our suite, the lights of Vegas spread beneath us like a promise. I pulled her into my lap, the ring on her finger catching the neon glow.

She held it up and whispered, “It’s perfect.”

“You’re perfect.”

And I meant it.

Because for all the fires we’d walked through, all the battles we’d fought, I knew one thing:

I’d ride into hell for this woman.

But for once, I was hoping heaven was next.

18

RILEY

Charleston looked different than I remembered. Maybe it was me who’d changed.

The Spanish moss hung heavy over the oaks, gas lanterns flickered outside three-story white-columned homes, and manicured lawns stretched like polite lies across every block. I used to find comfort in the order, the neatness, the hush-hush perfection. But now, riding shotgun next to Rogue on his matte-black Harley, I just felt... itchy.

I adjusted my sunglasses as we turned onto my parents’ street—brick-lined and pristine, with Range Rovers parked in circular drives and not a single oil stain in sight.

“They gonna shoot me on sight, you think?” Rogue muttered with a smirk, glancing at his reflection in the side mirror. He’d done his best—dark dress shirt, pressed slacks, boots polished. He even left the cut at the hotel and buttoned the shirt to the collar. But no amount of starch could hide the tattoos peeking up his neck or the raw power he carried like a second skin.

“You look... respectable,” I said, trying not to laugh.

“I look like a wolf in Sunday school.”

“Don’t bite anyone.”

“No promises.”

My parents' door opened before we even reached the top step. My mother stood stiff and slim in pearls and pale linen, her blonde bob helmet-perfect. My father wore a blazer, white slacks, and a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Riley,” my mother said, stepping forward to kiss the air beside my cheek. “We were so worried. And this must be... your husband.”

Rogue offered his hand. “Rogue Thorne, ma’am.”

She blinked once. “I’m sorry?”

“Rogue,” I repeated. “It’s his name.”

My father took the handshake, clearly surprised by Rogue’s firm grip and the respectful way he used “sir.”

We went inside. The house was spotless and silent, full of old paintings and the kind

of furniture you weren't allowed to sit on growing up. Rogue looked around like he was in a museum.

"You grew up here?" he asked softly.

"Yeah."

He nodded, almost respectfully, and I saw it hit him—how different our worlds were. But he didn't mock it. Didn't sneer. He just took it in.

Brunch was scheduled at the country club, naturally.

By the time we walked through the wide front doors of Charleston Oak Reserve, every eye in the place turned. The women froze mid-bite, mimosas halfway to their mouths. The men looked up, frowns forming even before their wives remembered to close theirs.

Rogue strolled in, hand around my waist, looking like sin in dress shoes. His tattoos peeked out just enough. His jaw was freshly shaved but defiant. He radiated danger wrapped in heat.

The Southern belles didn't know what to do with themselves.

They looked like they'd seen a ghost.

Or maybe a god.

Every perfectly coiffed head in the Charleston Country Club turned when Rogue spoke, leather jacket over a black button-up, boots polished, jaw set like stone. His cut wasn't on, but it might as well have been—the man wore danger like a tailored suit.

The wives stared over their wine glasses and Louis Vuitton clutches, whispering behind manicured hands.

I saw one of them lick her lips.

“Riley,” hissed Ginny, the head of fundraising and number one gossip, eyes wide as saucers. “Who... who is that?”

“That's my husband,” I said, with all the pride in the world.

One woman in Lilly Pulitzer pink let her champagne glass clink too hard on the table. Another's husband nearly choked on his deviled egg. A few younger wives stared openly, eyes roaming from his biceps to his boots to the way he pulled my chair out for me like a damn gentleman.

We sat at the family table by the windows. My parents tried to pretend everything was normal. My mom complimented the quiche. My dad asked Rogue if he watched the PGA Tour.

Rogue, deadpan: “Not unless they start using chainsaws instead of clubs.”

I choked on my mimosa.

“What do you do, Mr. Thorne?” asked Mrs. Becket from the next table, leaning over her shrimp and grits with eager eyes.

Rogue opened his mouth, but I beat him to it.

“He owns several businesses,” I said sweetly, slicing my waffle. “Tattoo parlors, biker bars, strip clubs. You know—places that actually turn a profit.”

Silence.

Then a wave of quiet gasps and awkward sips. One woman fanned herself with the menu. Another blinked twice, clearly reconsidering her marriage.

“You must be very... passionate,” said a woman in pearls, biting her lip.

“Oh, he is,” I replied, grinning.

I swear half the room fainted with their eyes open.

After brunch, Rogue and I stepped out onto the wraparound porch overlooking the golf course. My dad joined us briefly and asked Rogue what kind of engines the club preferred—Harleys or foreign bikes.

“American made, always,” Rogue said.

My dad nodded like that was an acceptable answer. “You know... I never thought my daughter would marry a man like you.”

“I never thought I’d marry,” Rogue said without flinching. “But then again... your

daughter's not like any woman I've ever met."

For once, my father was silent. And in that silence, there was something like respect.

We left shortly after. Rogue helped me onto the bike, his hand slipping under the hem of my sundress. I smacked it playfully, but he only grinned.

As we roared off down the streets of my old life, I didn't look back.

Because everything that mattered rode in front of me, wrapped in leather, marked by scars and loyalty and a heart that beat louder than any country club's applause.

And every time a woman gasped behind us, clutching her pearls and watching my man ride into the Southern sunset like a fallen angel with engine grease on his knuckles, I just smiled.

My mother convinced us to stay one more night so she could show off her runaway bride-missing daughter with her new outlaw husband. My mother craved attention and although she'd never admit it—I knew she knew Rogue was quite the catch and the new talk of Charleston. Like a modern day Rhett Butler, he was sweeping high society by storm.

Mother swore she warned them. Told them not to act surprised when he showed up.

But they weren't ready.



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No one was.

A group of pearl-draped ladies gathered near the bar, swarming like bees. One of them touched Rogue's arm.

"So... what do you do for a living, Mr....?"

He smiled, slow and dangerous. "I own a bar."

"A bar?"

"And a tattoo parlor. And a strip club."

They gasped.

One clutched her pearls.

Another giggled like she was sixteen again.

Rogue leaned down and whispered, "And I make your daughter very, very happy."

I thought someone might faint.

He found me across the room, pulled me close, pressed a kiss to my temple in front of everyone.

"I don't belong here," he murmured.

“You belong with me.”

We left the gala early.

“Ready for our second wedding night?” He growled, nipping my ear with a tooth.

“More than ready,” I whispered back, playfully slapping his muscled butt.

And I never looked back.

19

RILEY

We’d dealt with bullets, bribery, and a Vegas wedding that made Elvis blush. After Charleston, after the country club spectacle and a half-dozen whispers trailing us out the door, Rogue and I needed air—salty, sun-swept, no pearls or spinach quiche in sight. The Isle of Palms felt like a different planet: dunes rolling soft like tan velvet, pelicans gliding overhead, sweetgrass nodding in the sea breeze.

The Airbnb was a weather-worn cedar house perched on stilts, white shutters, wraparound deck, and a hot tub that looked directly over the Atlantic. Inside it smelled like driftwood and sunscreen. A welcome note sat on the counter: \*Kick off your shoes and stay awhile.\*

We didn’t need to be told twice.

First thing, Rogue walked straight onto the deck, peeled off his shirt, and tipped his head back as if he meant to swallow the horizon.

“Better than neon?” I asked, stepping out behind him.

“Better than breathing,” he answered, and then he pulled me into a kiss so deep I forgot about tide charts and dinner plans.

We spent the afternoon barefoot. I unpacked tuna steaks from the cooler and Rogue fired up the charcoal grill on the deck, humming an old rock ballad while the coals turned ember-red. He seasoned the fish with salt and lime, all simple perfection, then grilled corn until kernels popped and splashed juice. We ate on the deck steps, legs dangling, sun sliding lower. He fed me forkfuls, licking juice from my chin.

When the plates were scraped clean, we brewed French press coffee with beans Trigger swore were “roasted by Satan himself.” Strong enough to make the mug shake. Rogue cooled mine with ice, swirling it in a mason jar until condensation beaded. We clinked glasses and watched violet shadows stretch across the sand.

“Card game?” he asked, producing a dog-eared deck from his back pocket.

I raised a brow. “You haul that everywhere?”

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“Only when I plan on stripping my wife of her clothes after she loses.”

“Bold of you to assume.”

We played three rounds of gin rummy at the rickety picnic table. He won the first; I won the second; the third disintegrated when he slipped a queen of hearts up his sleeve and I accused him of cheating. He tried to bribe me with kisses. I countered with an ice cube slipped down the back of his shorts. The game ended in a tickle war that tumbled us onto the weathered planks, both breathless with laughter, sunburn blooming.

“You’re trouble, Mrs. Thorne,” he murmured, teeth grazing the curve of my shoulder.

“And you love it.”

He kissed me quiet.

By dusk, the ocean called. We left our phones inside, grabbed a faded beach blanket, and wandered down the private wooden walkway. Sand squeaked under our feet. The tide was rollin’ heavy, waves cresting white. Moonrise painted silver on the water.

I stripped first—sundress over my head, nothing but a black bikini beneath. Rogue’s eyes tracked every inch, darkening like a storm bank. He lost the tank top, the board shorts, followed me into the surf.

The first wave hit waist-high, cool and insistent. I squealed and splashed him; he lunged, swept me against him. Salt spray kissed my cheeks, his lips tasted of sea and

hunger. He cradled the back of my skull, tilting me into a kiss that was all tongue and tidal pull.

Another wave broke, pushing water up to our chests. He caught my thighs, lifted me so my legs wrapped around his waist. I clung, laughing into his mouth.

“Rogue, we’ll get caught,” I gasped when he nipped my earlobe.

“Only if they have night-vision,” he growled.

Water rushed between us; I felt him hard against my center even through wet fabric. Heat spiraled low in my belly. I rocked once—small, testing. His grip tightened.

“Off,” he ordered, reaching behind to untie the knot of my bikini top. Saltwater slicked his fingers but he worked the knot free, then another. The top fell away, floating like dark seaweed. His palm covered my bare breast, thumb brushing my nipple until it peaked from heat and chilled night air.

Lightning streaked far out over the ocean—silent, spectacular. He watched the flash flicker across my skin, made a raw sound in his throat.

“Never seen anything this beautiful,” he said.

I believed him because his voice broke on the word \*beautiful\*.

He carried me out past the breakers until water came to his ribs, then let gravity slide me down. I treaded water, legs brushing his. He reached, hooked fingers in the waistband of my bikini bottoms. I shivered as he peeled them down, the fabric sliding off my ankles, disappearing into the dark.

“Now you,” I whispered.

He pushed his trunks down, letting them drift away. Wordless. Waves rocked us. He cupped my face, kissed me slow, letting me taste his confession—the relief of survival, the promise of forever. Then I felt him guide me, the press of him slipping between my legs with the gentle inevitability of tide meeting shore.

I wrapped arms around his neck, legs around his waist. He thrust shallow at first, adjusting to balance and waves. Water splashed against shoulders, stars spun overhead. The ocean was warm silk against our hips and thighs.

“Logan,” I murmured, nails digging into wet skin.

“Say my name again,” he demanded, voice ragged.

“Logan,” louder this time, and he thrust deep. Pleasure cracked through me like surf against jetty. I buried my moan in his mouth, tasting salt and want. He angled deeper, rhythm syncing to the push-pull of waves. Our bodies found a cadence—ebb, flow, surge. Far-off thunder rolled as lightning lit our drenched, naked forms in electric white.

Climax hit like undertow. My breath stuttered. He swallowed my cry, hissing my name as he followed, hips driving once, twice, then shuddering to stillness. We clung there, drifting, hearts pounding.

When our legs trembled from treading water, he carried me ashore. Sand stuck to our wet skin. He laid me on the blanket, kissed the grains from my shoulders, down my chest, across my belly.

“I’m not done,” he said, grin feral in moonlight.

We made love again, slower, on soft sand while waves hissed mere feet away.

Later, wrapped in the blanket, we watched moonlit foam paint silver ribbons on the beach. He rubbed my legs, murmuring nonsense until chills faded.

“I need to tell you something,” he said.

“Mmm?”

He pulled a jar from the tote bag—my coconut lotion. “Dream ended too soon in Vegas.”

Heat flushed. He squeezed a dollop into his palm, warmed it, then began spreading it up my calves. The scent of coconut bloomed, thick and sweet, mixing with salt and sex.

His slick hands glided over my knees, thighs, hips. He massaged my belly, across ribs, up to breasts. Everywhere he touched left my skin glowing. My pulse galloped. By the time he reached the curve of my neck, I was molten.

“You smell like paradise,” he said, voice gravel. “Paradise that belongs to me.”

I pulled him down, whispered filthy promises. He fulfilled every one—on the blanket, then against the porch railing back at the house, then in the heart-shaped hot tub just before dawn.

—

Daylight found us sprawled in bed, muscles languid. Rogue rose first, brewed coffee strong enough to revive the dead. He brought two mugs, set them on the bedside table, and crawled under the sheets.

“Morning, wife.”



“Morning, outlaw.”

We sipped coffee, feet tangled. After caffeine we rummaged through the pantry and found pancake mix, chocolate chips, maple syrup. He manned the griddle while I chopped strawberries. We ate on the deck, chocolate smeared on mouths, sticky fingers licked clean.

The afternoon rolled hot and slow. He read an old paperback western in a hammock. I lounged beside him with a dog-eared thriller. Occasionally we swapped books or kisses or both. When sweat beaded under my bikini, we took the kayaks out and paddled through marsh channels, herons bursting into flight ahead of us.

At sunset, he fired the grill again—steaks this time, searing over open flame, asparagus wrapped in foil with garlic. He mixed bourbon and sweet tea in mason jars. We clinked to sunsets, to scars, to second chances.

And after we ate, he carried me back to bed, coconut lotion in hand, eyes smoldering, moonlight slicing across muscle and ink.

We didn’t leave the island for three days.

We loved until the lotion jar emptied, until the sunburns faded, until laughter stitched every bruise.

And on the fourth morning, when we finally packed up to ride back to Sable Creek, Rogue pulled me against the bike, kissed the ring on my finger, and said, “Next time I buy property, it’s gonna face the ocean.”

“Beach house?” I teased.

“Beach house,” he affirmed. “For our future.”

I thought of sun-bleached porches, tiny coconut-scented footprints, maybe a little Harley trike engine revving on the sand.

Paradise had never felt so possible.

And for the first time in my life, I understood what it meant to be home wherever his arms were.

20

## ROGUE

Leaving the Isle of Palms felt like trying to crawl out of a dream that still clung to my skin.

Sunlight streamed through the bedroom's sheer curtains, turning the waves outside into molten silver. Riley lay sprawled across the sheets, naked, brown as honey, the tan lines of her bikini painting pale ribbons over her hips and the swell of her breasts. Her hair had picked up gold streaks in the salt and sun—wild highlights that shimmered every time she moved.

I propped myself on an elbow and took my time looking. She always said I stared too much. She never understood it was because I still couldn't quite believe she was real, that after everything—gunfire, broken vows, country-club sneers—I ended up here, with her, in a house that smelled like sunscreen and coffee grinds.

She sighed, rolling toward me, sleepy smile curving her lips. "Why are you awake?"

"Can't sleep." I brushed a lock of hair off her forehead. "Dangerous angel in my bed."

Her lashes fluttered. “You’re cheesy.”

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“Only for you.” I leaned down and kissed her shoulder, tasting salt and coconut. My hand followed the pale triangle of her tan line down to the small of her back. Even that contrast turned me on—proof of long days tangled in the sun with nothing between us but heat.

She gasped softly when my palm cupped her hip. “Again?” she whispered.

“Always.”

We’d christened every surface in the beach house over the past week—blankets, counter, hot tub, sand. But the outdoor shower on the deck had become our chapel. A cedar stall half open to the ocean breeze, big enough for two if we didn’t mind bumping into each other—and we never minded.

I coaxed her upright, her body pliant in my hands. A sunbeam feathered over the arch of her spine; I traced it with my mouth, feeling her shiver.

“Logan, the neighbors?—”

“No neighbors for two lots.” I grinned. “And if they complain, I’ll buy the place.”

She laughed, low and throaty. “You would.”

In the shower, warm water hit our shoulders, steam swirling away into blue sky. She braced her palms on the cedar wall, back arched, and I pressed kisses down her neck, across her tan line, worshipping the contrast. My hands slid to her hips, thumbs stroking the hollows there. She made a sound—half sigh, half moan—that tightened

every muscle in my body.

I took my time, lathering soap along her arms, across her breasts, watching suds streak brown skin. Every curve, every freckle glowed under sunlight shards cutting through the slats. She pushed back against me, and I felt the heat between her thighs, a silent plea. I slid inside her slowly—no rush, no fight, only that perfect fit that made the world drop away.

Water beat down like warm rain. Her hips rocked. I guided her pace, one hand pressed flat to her belly, the other tangled in salt-damp hair. She moaned my name, soft and urgent. I bent, teeth grazing her shoulder just enough to make her gasp.

I thought about seed and soil—how maybe life grew easiest in sunshine and storms. About the idea of a baby with her smile and my stubborn streak tearing around club grounds on a tiny bike. It filled my chest so full it hurt.

When we both tumbled over the edge, her cry lost in the roar of the surf below, I held her tight, burying my face in her damp hair. “Mine,” I whispered.

“Yours,” she breathed.

We stayed under the spray until water cooled, then wrapped ourselves in oversized towels and padded into the kitchen. I brewed coffee strong enough to wake the dead, added a splash of sweetened condensed milk the way she liked it. She fried eggs in the cast-iron skillet, humming some pop song off-key.

After breakfast we started packing—tossing swimsuits, sunscreen, and half-read paperbacks into duffel bags. I found her bikini buried in the sandy laundry pile and held it up, twirling it on one finger.

“Keep this somewhere safe,” I said. “Tan-line maker.”

She blushed. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Ridiculously in love.”

Her smile faltered, eyes shining. “I don’t want to go back yet.”

“Neither do I.” I came behind her, arms slipping around her waist. “But the club needs us.”

“And the house?”

“We’ll build it.” I kissed the top of her ear. “First the cabin behind the clubhouse. Then—whatever you want. Porch swings, ocean view, nursery.”

She leaned back, breath hitching at the last word. “You think?—”

“I hope.” My palm spread over her flat stomach. “Been planting seeds.”

Color rushed her cheeks. “Mr. Thorne, you are a romantic.”

“Don’t spread that rumor. I’ve got a reputation.”

We loaded the bike. She straddled behind me, arms looping my waist. Before I revved the engine, I glanced back at the house—the cedar, the deck, the outdoor shower still dripping. An ache tugged at me.

One more night, I thought. One more moonlit hour with her taste on my tongue, her laugh echoing off the dunes.

But war and love share one truth: the world doesn’t wait.

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I kicked up the stand, and we thundered off the island bridge, wind whipping her hair into gold flames.

Four hours later we rolled through Fire Skulls's gates. Engines idled. Brothers gathered, nodding greetings. Trigger handed me a beer. Diesel whistled low at Riley's sun-kissed legs.

"Damn, Prez," he said. "Island life looks good on both of you."

Riley blushed; I glared, and Diesel backed off, chuckling.

Inside, the clubhouse felt smaller, louder, rougher after our week of surf and hush. Riley bit her lip, scanning the bunk rooms, the bar, the row of helmets hung on pegs.

"This used to feel like home," she murmured. "Now it's... loud."

"We'll build quiet," I promised, steering her toward the back door. Beyond the fence, a rough patch of pines sloped down to a creek. I pointed. "Cabin goes there. Two rooms, big windows, wood stove. Privacy. Until the main house."

Her eyes shone again—hope, relief, love all tangled. She turned beneath my arm and pressed her lips to mine, simple and sweet.

"Thank you," she breathed.

"For what?"

“For giving me everything I never dreamed I could ask for.”

I kissed her again—deeper this time, tongues tangling, not caring who saw. The club hollered behind us, whistling, catcalling. I flipped them off without breaking the kiss.

“Get a room!” Pitbull roared.

“Building one!” I shot back.

Riley laughed into my mouth.

That night, after the clubhouse quieted, I sprawled on the cot with her curled against me, and planned the cabin walls in my head—plank by plank, nail by nail. I pictured a porch swing, a baby cradle, a life strung between ocean breezes and engine growls.

Sleep tugged, but I fought it just long enough to whisper a prayer I didn’t know I still believed in:

Let the seed take root.

Let her carry sun and storm inside her.

Let this outlaw’s heart finally grow something soft.

Then I slept, one hand on her belly, dreams filled with coconut, tide songs, and the laughter of a child I hadn’t met yet—but already loved.



One month.

That's how long it had been since we rolled back from the Isle of Palms with sand still in our shoes and coconut lotion still perfuming every inch of my skin. One month since Rogue whispered promises against my belly about cabins and babies and ocean-view dream houses. One month of me helping stock bottles behind Fire Skulls's bar while construction crews hammered pilings for a one-bedroom cabin just beyond the pines.

I loved watching the cabin rise—loved the smell of fresh-cut lumber and the way Rogue's shoulders flexed when he swung a hammer. But by day twenty-eight, the itch started. An old itch I'd once tried to scratch with debutante luncheons and charity galas—only now, chiffon and white gloves felt like foreign skin. I needed purpose, something that fused my new world and the one I'd left behind.

So I took a walk through Sable Creek's tiny downtown.

Three blocks of weathered storefronts, moss-draped live oaks, and streetlamps wrapped in twinkle lights. The florist waved from behind tulips. The antique shop smelled like dust and memories. There was charm here—raw, unpolished charm begging for a lick of paint and a vision.

Vision was something I had in spades.

By the time I returned to the clubhouse, my phone buzzed nonstop. The moment I'd resurfaced on social media post-"kidnapping," Charleston society had gone feral. They wanted to know everything: How did I meet Rogue? Was it true we married in Vegas? Were those *\*real\** diamonds? Every filter-perfect photo I posted of our cabin build racked up thousands of likes from sorority sisters and bored trophy wives sipping lunchtime rosé.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:07 am*

Lightbulb.

That night I found Rogue in the war room, blueprint spread across the table. He looked up, eyes softening the moment they landed on me.

“Angel.”

“Got a minute?”

“For you, always.”

I slid a glossy mood board across the blueprints—images I’d printed at the library: sea-glass palettes, open-air verandas, claw-foot tubs, charcuterie boards draped in edible flowers, muscle-bound men in crisp white shirts.

He raised an eyebrow. “Spa porn?”

“Business proposal.”

He set his pencil down. “Talk.”

I inhaled. “Sable Creek is cute—adorable, really—but there’s nowhere for upscale tourists to stay. My social media is lighting up with people begging me to host retreats, brunches, bachelorette weekends. What if we built a boutique inn? Ten suites, farm-to-table dining, rooftop champagne bar, a tiny spa with ocean-salt scrubs. Think ‘Southern coastal luxury meets outlaw edge.’”

His lips twitched. “Outlaw edge?”

“Picture this: The ladies from Charleston drive up for a weekend getaway. They get pampered with facials and five-star food—” I tapped a photo of seared scallops on microgreens— “and they get to watch big, tattooed biker men carry their luggage and shake martinis shirtless.”

Rogue chuckled, sliding closer. “You’re serious.”

“Deadly. And it’s good money. Legit money. It’ll soften the town’s view of the MC. And it gives your prospects real jobs—hospitality, security, logistics.”

He thumbed the corner of the board, thoughtful. “And you’d run it?”

“I’d curate the vibe—design, marketing, menu coordination. We’d hire a chef—maybe Meadow’s cousin?—and I’d manage front-of-house. The club maintains ownership; you keep oversight. Everybody wins.”

He leaned back, studying me like I was a brand-new bike under showroom lights. “You sure you want to jump into this circus? Running an inn isn’t brunch and hashtags.”

“I ran a multi-million-dollar wedding once,” I said. “This will be fun by comparison.”

He barked a laugh, then sobered. “Funding?”

“My parents set up a trust fund when I turned twenty-five. I never touched it because Caleb hovered. Half a million, plus interest. I want to cash it out.”

His brows lifted. “That’s your hedge.”

“No. \*We’re\* my hedge now. I want to invest in us.”

He cupped my face, thumb brushing my cheek. “Angel, you knock me on my ass daily.”

“Good. Say yes.”

He glanced down at the board again. “High-end spa... rooftop bar... prospects as bellboys.” He smirked. “Imagine Pitbull in a bow tie.”

“Women will tip him just to flex.”

He kissed me—a promise, sealed and signed. “Let’s build your inn.”

I squealed—actually squealed—and Rogue pretended he didn’t melt. Then we got to work.

**\*\*StepOne: Location.\*\***

Two blocks off Main stood the abandoned Magnolia Manor—a Victorian relic with peeling paint, sagging porch, and turrets that looked like crooked party hats. The owner, old Mr. Harris, had been trying to unload it for years. Rogue and Diesel accompanied me to the viewing; Trigger tagged along because he heard the attic was haunted.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:07 am*

Sun filtered through cracked stained-glass windows, painting dust motes in rainbow shards. I padded through scuffed hardwood rooms, seeing possibilities not problems—velvet lounges, antique chandeliers, claw-foot tubs facing sunrise. Rogue noticed the bowing joists, the termite tracks, the plumbing older than both of us combined.

“Money pit,” he muttered.

“Gold mine,” I corrected.

The price? Two hundred grand, as-is. Rogue talked Harris down to one-fifty over one plate of biscuits and a promise to preserve the historical plaque. We paid cash.

Deed in hand, I posted a single photo on Instagram—a sun-drenched shot of the filigree arch above Magnolia Manor’s doorway, captioned: \*The next chapter begins.\*

Within twenty-four hours, we had eighty pre-bookings.

Charleston’s boardwives flocked to my DMs: \*Do you have a suite with a soaking tub? Could we host a charity brunch? Will your husband give tours?\*

Rogue read them aloud at church meeting, laughter echoing off cinder-block walls. Pitbull flexed when he heard “boardwives.” Trigger asked if bellboys got tips or phone numbers.

“Both,” I said, filing the requests in a color-coded spreadsheet.

**\*\*StepTwo: Staff.\*\***

Prospects doubled as demo crew, ripping out moldy drywall with gleeful swings of sledgehammers. Diesel handled permits. Nash oversaw security installing discreet cameras and state-of-the-art locks. Meadow's cousin Poppy agreed to helm the kitchen—Southern fusion dishes plated like art. Meadow herself planned the spa menu—sea-salt scrubs, hot-stone massages, MC muscle on standby to refill water carafes.

I ordered robes stitched with \*Magnolia & Throttle Inn\* across the back—elegant script, tiny skull hidden in the ampersand. Rogue's grin when he saw the proof almost outshone the diamonds he put on my finger.

**\*\*StepThree: Branding & Buzz.\*\***

I posted progress reels: Pitbull in safety goggles knocking down a wall; Poppy tasting bourbon-glazed salmon; Rogue sanding reclaimed barn wood for the headboards. Each clip racked up more followers. A Charleston lifestyle influencer begged for an exclusive preview. Coastal Living reached out for a feature.

Rogue watched the numbers climb, arms folded across inked chest. "You're a damn magician."

"I just sell what's real."

He kissed my forehead. "Real is risky."

"So is love," I whispered.

His eyes softened. "Worth it."

One afternoon, while the roofers hammered slate tiles and Diesel argued with the inspector about fire-code egress, Rogue found me in what would become the Honeysuckle Suite—turret room, three hundred sixty-degree windows, view of the oaks. I was pinning swatches—sea-glass blue, cream linen—onto a vision board.

“Need a break?” he asked.

I wiped paint from my cheek. “Can’t stop. Deadline’s three months.”

He circled behind me, palms sliding down my arms, breath warm on my neck. “Got a surprise.”

I turned. He held up a tiny leather vest—cut no larger than a paperback, stitched with a patch that read BADASS TODDLER. My heart stuttered.

“Logan...”

“Prospect made it,” he said roughly. “Just in case.”

Emotion flooded me—hope, fear, joy. I pressed the vest to my chest. “We don’t even know if?—”

His hand covered my lower belly. “Hope’s enough.”

Tears blurred the room. He kissed them away.

“Now take a break,” he murmured. “Prospects can paint for an hour.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:07 am*

He tugged me downstairs, through sawdust and catcalls, out to the veranda where sunlight dappled the floorboards. He spun me into his arms, music from a work radio drifting through open windows. We slow-danced amid noise, dust, and laughter—outlaw king and runaway socialite turned entrepreneur.

And in that twirl, I realized the inn wasn't just business. It was bridgework—between who I'd been and who I was now. Between Charleston silk and Sable Creek oil. Between the girl who'd run and the woman who built.

**\*\*GrandOpening Announcement:\*\***

I posted a mock-up rendering of Magnolia & Throttle Inn basking in golden afternoon light. White gingerbread trim, double verandas, climbing jasmine. Caption: \*Now accepting reservations for spring. Ten luxury suites. One unforgettable experience.\*

By nightfall, we were fully booked until July.

Rogue scrolled through the reservation list, whistling low. “Boardwives paying five bills a night to ogle prospects?”

“And buy five-star food,” I teased.

He smirked. “Show me the numbers.”

I flipped my laptop. Spreadsheets, projections, gross margins. His eyes widened. “Damn, angel. You just doubled the club's legit revenue.”



I shrugged. “Imagine once we add the rooftop champagne bar.”

He barked a laugh. “Ambitious.”

“Outlaw edge.”

He grasped my hips, pulling me close. “Remind me to give you a raise.”

“I’ll put it on your tab,” I whispered against his mouth.

The scent of jasmine and fresh paint mingled with the aroma of Poppy’s bourbon-pecan pralines as the first guests arrived—Range Rovers and Teslas lining the gravel drive. Pitbull wore black slacks and suspenders, sleeves rolled to showcase biceps as he hauled monogrammed luggage. The boardwives all but drooled.

“Good afternoon, ladies,” he drawled, voice a low rumble.

Swoons.

Trigger, in tailored vest and bow tie, checked guests in at the antique oak counter, inked fingers flying over an iPad. Nash escorted a bachelorette party to the rooftop tiki bar, where Meadow’s spa staff served lavender lemonade in crystal glasses.

I stood at the foot of the grand staircase in a charcoal dress and heels, heart pounding as more guests flowed in. Rogue descended behind me—black slacks, open collar, silver cuffs glinting. Murmurs rippled: Who is he? Is that her husband?

He took my hand, kissed my knuckles. “Look at what you built.”

“What *\*we\** built.”

Flashbulbs popped—smartphones capturing every polished, dangerous inch of him. And I watched the boardwives fan themselves, their husbands shrink, the prospects grin.

Legitimacy looked good on leather.

That night, when the last champagne flute clinked and the final spa appointment ended, Rogue and I stole to the Honeysuckle Suite. Moonlight spilled across the new four-poster bed. He peeled my dress away, lingering over the fading tan lines he loved.

“Successful opening,” he murmured.

“We’re just getting started.”

He pressed the toddler vest to my stomach, eyes burning with hope. “Damn right.”

We fell into bed amid jasmine-scented sheets, the sounds of revelry soft below, the inn’s heartbeat thumping along with ours.

And as he moved inside me, slow and reverent, I realized we’d turned every broken piece into a bridge.

One that led straight to the future.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:07 am*

Our future.

With ocean breeze, clinking glasses, the outlaw king, and me—the runaway bride who finally stopped running and started building.

Brick by brick.

Dream by dream.

Side by side.

### EPILOGUE

Two Years Later

The low-country sunset washed Magnolia & Throttle Inn in molten gold, the kind of light painters chase but never quite capture. Fireflies blinked on in the jasmine, and the distant hum of a baby dirt bike rumbled through the back garden—equal parts lullaby and promise.

Two years had transformed the Victorian manor into a legend. Charleston society spilled over its double verandas every weekend: rehearsal dinners under Edison bulbs, garden weddings where violinists played Springsteen covers, spa retreats that booked out six months in advance. The rooftop champagne bar served oysters and Old-Fashioneds at a pace no one could have predicted, and Poppy's bourbon-pecan pralines had their own Instagram fan club.

Riley paused on the veranda, fingers brushing the antique railing. She wore a pale linen sundress, curls caught in a silk ribbon. From here she could see the new wedding tent glowing at the far end of the lawn—white fabric billowing like a ship’s sail, laughter drifting on warm salt air. Another ceremony wrapped, another pair of newlyweds toasted beneath the chandelier Rogue had hung himself, shirtless and grinning while board-wives fanned themselves below.

“What’s the tally?” came a familiar drawl behind her.

She turned. Rogue leaned in the doorway, tux jacket slung over one shoulder, sleeves rolled to the elbow to reveal ink that still made half of Charleston swoon. His tie was missing—Riley suspected it had been claimed by a bridesmaid as a souvenir.

“Third wedding this week,” she said. “Books are full till Christmas.”

He smirked. “Remember when folks thought we were a novelty?”

“The novelty of shirtless bellboys never gets old.”

He pulled her close, pressing a kiss to the shell of her ear. “Speaking of bellboys—guess who hit number four on Amazon’s romance list?”

Riley’s eyes widened. “No...”

“‘Throttle My Heart,’ by J. J. Booker.” Rogue chuckled. “Turns out Prospect JJ finished that manuscript he was scribbling between night shifts.”

JJ—Jason Booker—had arrived two years earlier clutching a dog-eared copy of *\*Moby-Dick\** and a half-finished sleeve tattoo. Nobody guessed the quiet prospect with a switchblade in his boot was polishing a love story inspired by a runaway bride and an outlaw king. He’d uploaded it to Kindle Direct on a dare from Meadow. Sales

snowballed; the Charleston Courier ran a feature; boardwives doubled their stay just to say they'd slept where the novel was set.

Riley laughed until tears pricked. "Does he know we're onto him?"

"Signed a first-print deal yesterday. Brought me a bottle of top-shelf Scotch as thanks for 'creative royalty.'"

She swatted his chest. "We should charge him location fees."

"Already negotiated: lifetime supply of autographed copies for the lobby."

A shriek of delighted laughter cut across the lawn. Their son—Logan "Cub" Thorne Jr.—zipped through the grass on his battery-powered mini dirt bike, tiny leather cut stitched BADASS TODDLER flapping behind him. Fireflies scattered in his wake like sparks.

Trigger jogged after him, brand-new prospect patch dangling from his pocket. "Slow it down, mini-Prez!"

Cub revved harder, donuts carving dusty crescents near the hydrangeas.

Riley's heart swelled. "He's fearless."

"Like his mama." Rogue slid an arm around her waist. "Speaking of fearless, I'm thinking we start that foundation for at-risk kids next quarter. Use a chunk of the inn profits. Whitmore grants just came in—ironic, huh?"

Whitmore grants. After Caleb's empire crumbled—thanks to hidden ledgers and a well-timed federal raid—the state repurposed seized funds into community programs. Magnolia & Throttle won the bid to renovate the youth rec center. Full circle.

Riley rose on tiptoes, kissed Rogue slow. “From runaway bride to nonprofit CEO.  
Can’t make this stuff up.”

“Apparently you can. Bestseller, remember?”

They laughed. Sunset deepened to rose, then violet. Poppy’s kitchen crew rolled a dessert cart onto the lawn—mini key-lime pies crowned with torched meringue. Guests applauded; a string quartet launched into a bluesy rendition of “Born to Be Wild.” Somewhere near the swing, Diesel flipped fairy lights on, bathing the oak branches in soft glow.

Riley watched her husband move down the steps to scoop Cub off the bike, toss him high while the toddler squealed, engine still sputtering indignantly. Rogue’s laughter rolled rich across the dusk.

She breathed in honeysuckle, diesel, and distant ocean salt. Two years ago she’d fled this city with a backpack and a broken heart. Tonight she ruled it—tattooed king on one side, fearless prince on the other, a kingdom built on reclaimed wood and second chances.

Fireflies bobbed around her like floating wishes. She closed her eyes, whispered a thank-you to whoever was listening.

When she opened them, Rogue was climbing back up the stairs, Cub nestled on one broad hip, toddler cut glowing under string lights.

“Bedtime,” Rogue announced, though his grin said donuts might continue after cupcakes. Cub waved a sticky hand, eyes drooping, face smudged with chocolate.

Riley took her son, kissed his forehead, then tucked him against Rogue’s shoulder.

Together they walked toward the glow of the manor, passing guests who toasted crystal flutes in their wake.

Behind them, the ocean breeze carried strains of laughter and the hum of a story still being written—one wedding, one boardwife brunch, one outlaw lullaby at a time.

And under the hush of fireflies and far-off waves, Magnolia & Throttle Inn kept its lights burning—beacon and haven, promise and proof—that the most unlikely love stories are sometimes the ones that burn the brightest.