



# The Edge of Intensity

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**Category:** Romance, Western

**Description:** Lives cross and gazes collide, causing an intense and delicious rush to overtake your mind and body. The extraordinary, one-of-a-kind connection which others may refer to as “love at first sight” will kick off the ride of your life to set a path for the future.

Eastlynne – I keep my circle small for a reason; for both my mental, and physical health. The cowboy biker who enters my life manages to slip through my defenses and brings a huge found family with a whole different kind of danger along with it.

Rourke – Meeting an intriguing woman awakens a primal instinct to claim, along with a protective streak to flare up inside me. Then an unfortunate turn of events forces us to work closely together. Choices are taken away when lives are at stake as danger threatens to burn down all our hopes and dreams.

The Edge of Intensity is a standalone novella in the second-generation Cowboy Bikers MC series. Each story features a new couple and can be read together or separately.

**Total Pages (Source):** 29

## CHAPTER ONE

– EASTLYNNE –

I breathe in the fresh morning breeze and feel the sun breaking through the morning fog as it hits my face. This might be my favorite time of the day. The faint sounds of nature and the low whinny of my horse, Fletch, lighten my mood as he curls his head around me.

This serenity right here is why I bought this ranch and moved in a little over a week ago. The place needs a little work but has a load of potential, and even more land surrounding it; exactly what my line of work desires.

I love what I do and consider it a privilege to be able to live my dream. My fingers glide over Fletch's neck. He's my first, and the only horse I own at the moment. Though, I've worked with many. The connection Fletch and I share is why I finally acted on my dream.

My grandfather had a unique approach when it came to training horses. He created partnerships with horses based on their emotional and psychological needs, and using non-verbal communication resulting in mutual respect. He's my biggest inspiration, following in his footsteps.

My father died when my mother was pregnant with me. My mom moved in with her parents and they were the support system she needed as a single mom. Growing up on a ranch, surrounded by horses, gave me the drive to one day own my own ranch, which I finally made reality.

My mother helped us settle in, but she left yesterday. She practically demanded to stay a few days to make sure everything was okay. I'm not a kid, but she worries about me, so I let her stay for a few days so she can see with her own eyes that I'm doing more than fine, especially since my sister moved in with me.

Now my mom is off to paradise with my stepfather. They will be traveling for the upcoming few months and their first destination is Hawaii. I'm happy for her, and even happier it's not me who's doing the traveling. This move has been stressful, and more than enough excitement to last me a lifetime.

I don't do change well. Hell, I don't function well at all. At least, not like a neurotypical person. I'm a highly sensitive person which means I process everything in great detail. There are definitely advantages to it, but the downside is sensory overload which results in migraines along with other things like stomach issues and joint pains. I'm also autistic which also complicates social communication and interaction.

You could say my anxiety skyrockets from time to time and my mood is a bouncing ball. It's yet another trigger that causes headaches. The normal headaches can build up to a migraine, and then there are the ice pick headaches. The name basically explains it; like an ice pick jammed into your brain. That's what it feels like. The sharp pains can be instant and short, or sometimes longer.

The headaches and migraines started when I was about twelve years old. The list of the "what's wrong" question is long when it comes to me. I was a germaphobe when I was younger, but I have it somewhat under control now. Though, I do hate it when people touch me or having them in my personal space. I never answer a phone call and would love to ignore the world around me if I could.

I know that's impossible, and I'm thankful to have a job that allows me to work by myself with as little outside confrontation as possible. That's also thanks to my sister,

who only has a small dose of the crazy running her brain. My mother always said we inherited it from our father.

“Did you have something to drink yet?” my sister’s voice breaks through my mind-rant moment.

I get to my feet and rub Fletch behind his ear. He’s still lying on the blanket I put on the ground for us and stays like that while my sister strolls toward us.

“No, Mom,” I quip, sarcasm dripping from those two words.

Cosima rolls her eyes. “Don’t give me attitude, East. You know a headache is right around the corner if you don’t get any fluids inside you.”

I know she’s right, and it’s annoying. I like coffee, but too much caffeine can trigger a migraine, and I don’t exactly crave anything else in the morning. Most times I simply forget to drink something and only realize I haven’t put any fluids inside me until I have a headache.

My sister is the one who reminds me most of the time, and I’m thankful for her annoying interference. She’s also the one who handles all the social interaction, communication, and financial parts of our business. I’m the one who trains the horses and we both take care of them.

I might have started out as a normal horse trainer, but when I started working with Fletch, I found a challenge in teaching him tricks. Tricks that the movie business appreciates. My sister was the one who got us the first assignment for a commercial and it took off at lightning speed after that.

It’s why I could afford to buy this ranch and, in the future, take on horses that have been traumatized by events or have developed bad behavior, suffered abuse, or have

been neglected. Did I mention I love my job? The gratification of taking away the torment in their eyes and making sure they enjoy life is something I will never get tired of.

“What time will the new mare arrive?” I question in order to steer the discussion away from my lack of a beverage this morning.

This mare will become my second horse, one I will buy, and isn’t a foster or traumatized.

Cosima pins me with a stern look. “Are you asking so you can disappear on me? You do know these guys want you to be there when they hand her over, right?”

“I know,” I grumble, and my mood takes a nosedive.

“We met with Weston a few weeks ago.” Cosima winces and adds, “His son will be delivering the mare because he was the one who bred and trained her.”

Oh, goodie, interacting with a stranger. I release a deep breath and try to remember the interaction will only be for a small amount of time. Besides, Cosima will handle the discussion and I’ll ignore everything and everyone around me...except for the horse.

This mare is from the same bloodline as Fletch. I’ve been searching for five years to find a...not so much a replacement, more along the lines of a future second in line. Fletch is getting old and I want another horse with the same character. My search brought me to the Iron Hot Blood Ranch. They breed both Long Horns and Quarter horses and their ranch is a few miles down the road from mine.

When I went to check out the mare they had for sale, I instantly fell in love with the three-year-old. Her chestnut coat and bald face, the white not covering her blue eyes

resemble the same markings as Fletch, even her two front legs have matching half stockings. Yes, letting my sister handle the social part so I can get Fletch a young sibling without fuss sounds great. I just have to endure a little head bobbing and that'll be that.

"I'll go change," I mutter and take a step in the direction of the house.

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Cosima snorts. “Here I thought you didn’t give a damn and would welcome the guy in your jammies.”

“Don’t tempt me, Cosima. You know I don’t give a flying fuck what others think.” Lies. All lies, because if I need to be on set to make the horse do his thing? I make damn sure my appearance is utter perfection.

Another notorious demand I place on myself. I have routines for everything and this too adds to the stress life gives. I haven’t even mentioned the many other triggers that can set off a migraine or shove me into a mental tailspin. Scents, bright light, flashes, people in general, just to name a few.

“Uh.” Cosima firms the tone of her voice to add with a little snap, “Be sure to grab some decaf I made you along with the crackers I placed on the counter.”

“Thanks, sis,” I grunt with a hint of annoyance.

She knows me all too well. Forgetting my water intake goes hand-in-hand with not eating and only realizing by the end of the day, so I eat a big meal...resulting in my stomach acting up. My stomach isn’t amused most of the time due to the different meds I have to take and have taken in the past.

At least I’ve managed to get somewhat of a handle on my headaches to keep the migraines to a minimum. Which involves ignoring social activities, keeping to myself, and making sure I take my meds along with a steady flow of food, fluids, work, and relaxing activities.

“You’re welcome, sunshine,” she replies with laughter in her voice.

The corner of my mouth twitches. I love my sister. She’s my best friend, support system, business partner, and roommate all rolled into one. I’m thankful to have her in my life and she knows it. I wouldn’t even know what I’d do without her. It’s also why my mother liked the idea of me buying the ranch, but only if my sister would move in with me.

Cosima is also the one who always gets me grumpy. For one because she’s always around, but mostly? I can be myself and not have to hide when I’m in pain or don’t want to talk or be nice.

I take a deep breath and steel myself for what I’m about to do. Turning, I walk back to Cosima and give her a hug. She freezes for a second and then returns the hug full force. I rarely want people in my personal space and only want it on my terms...which is almost non-existent.

“Okay, you can let go now.” Cosima chuckles. “I love getting one of your rare hugs, but I also know you’re silently counting inside your head to endure it.”

Pulling back, I grin and tell her in all honesty, “I love you.”

“Yeah, yeah, I love me too. Go and change, and don’t think that I’m letting you off the hook by talking to the guy who brings your horse. The hug was special, but not special enough to bribe me.”

I roll my eyes and smile as I jog in the direction of the house. I kick my boots off before entering and wander through the kitchen and the hallway until I get to my bedroom. The first things I grab are some clean clothes along with a fresh towel. I take a quick shower and blow-dry my hair when I’m done.



The light-blue flare jeans hug my curves. That's putting it mildly since my ass is double size. My sister has a completely different build. I'm more like a pear figure while Cosima rocks the hourglass. We're completely different. I mentioned the social and mental part, along with our figure, but where Cosima never steps foot outside the house without lip gloss, I never so much as own or touch makeup.

I do however obsess over my clothes. They need to be clean and perfect. My slight obsession to dress the part of a cowgirl adds to the obsession. A blue-checkered flannel shirt with a white tank top underneath, a red bandana, my flare jeans, light-brown cowboy boots, and my cowboy hat. Perfect. I smile at myself in the mirror and stroll out of my room.

"He's early," Cosima yells from the front porch.

"Great," I mutter to myself as I wander over to her.

Cosima points and I have to block the sun with my hand and squint to see what she's looking at.

"Holy hell, is he insane?" I grumble. "Who transports a horse like that?"

Cosima chuckles. "I'm assuming a cowboy biker, didn't you listen to all the details I found out about them when you wanted to buy one of their horses?"

"All I care about is the horse," I murmur with a load of worry in my voice.

The way a man is riding his bike alongside the horse I'm about to buy worries the hell out of me.

"The horse doesn't seem to care all that much," Cosima quips. "I'm guessing those guys ride their bikes all the time and the way she trots shows she's relaxed and used

to it.”

I ignore her because she’s right. Still, I’m not liking it.

“Be nice,” my sister warns as the biker comes closer.

I shoot her a glare and want nothing more than to reply with, “Fat chance,” but I won’t. Cosima might be my sister and always there when I need her, but she has her limits as well. If I piss her off, she’d walk away and I’d have to deal with the biker myself. It’ll drain my battery, so to say, but I’d do it because I want the damn horse too much.

The bike comes to a stop and the guy swings his leg off. His cowboy hat is pulled down to hide his eyes. He’s wearing a leather vest with patches on it and a white shirt underneath it. Wow. The man has some serious muscles.

He tips his head back and I suck in a sharp breath. Damn. The man has some serious bright blue eyes. There’s blond hair sticking out from under his hat, and his scruffy jaw adds to his rugged handsome appearance. He gives me a smile that causes a dimple to appear on his cheek.

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I realize I'm openly ogling him and can feel my cheeks heat. Frustration wells up inside me and I rip my gaze from him to glare at my sister, willing her to say something so we can get this over with.

I want the horse, not the guy delivering her. Though, I wouldn't mind having...no. I'm not a virgin, but it's too long since my first time. My issues have only grown over the past few years, and I simply gave up on men after that miserable first time. Until this guy showed up I never even had sex on my mind. Shit. He needs to leave.

"Get him out of here," I hiss under my breath at my sister.

## CHAPTER TWO

– ROURKE –

"Mornin', ladies," I rumble and keep my eyes on the woman who just dismissed me to whisper something to her sister.

Eastlynne Hazel, in the hot and sexy flesh. Damn. Her pictures and videos on her website don't do her justice. The only contact I've had is with her sister, Cosima. She told me her sister was eccentric, and I shouldn't be insulted if she acted weird, completely ignored me, or walked away mid-discussion.

I have to admit, hearing her warning was fucking intriguing, especially when it involved the stunning woman who has an impressive reputation as a horse trainer. We run a background check on everyone interested in buying a horse from us. Money means shit to us; we want to know if the horses we've bred end up in a good place.

Recently one of our members neglected to mention he bought a horse from us with the main purpose of re-selling him. By doing this he skipped the background check of the new owner and sold one of our horses to a friend of his without our knowledge. When he realized his fuck-up due to witnessing the horse being mistreated, he brought it to the table.

We intervened and retrieved the horse. Thank fuck he did make them sign the contract that allowed us to retrieve the horse, but the poor animal is traumatized so it doesn't help the horse other than making the abuse stop.

The Quarter horses are bred, and trained by us, for a load of different things. We have a long waiting list, and I'm not ashamed to say that I moved Eastlynne up the list just so I could meet her. I was fucking pissed my father took over the first meeting because I was out, retrieving Buckey, the traumatized horse.

"Morning, Rourke. Your father mentioned you were the one swinging by to deliver my sister's horse. I'm Cosima Hazel, we spoke a few times on the phone, and this here is Eastlynne, she'll be the new owner."

I shake the woman's hand and turn to Eastlynne. "I heard you own a horse with the same bloodline. Mind if I have a look?"

Cosima takes the lead of the mare. "Sounds like a perfect idea. Why don't I take this one to her new stable? East will bring you back there once you've seen Fletch."

I turn to East when I hear her mutter a string of curses under her breath before she grunts, "Follow me."

She spins on her heels and completely ignores me as she stomps off, leaving me to quicken my step in an effort to catch up to her. East gives a short whistle and, in the distance, I see a horse that's almost a carbon copy of the mare I just brought whip his

head up in the air. Fletch comes running as if his ass was struck by lightning.

“Damn,” I mutter in awe.

The horse abruptly stops in front of East and almost bumps into her.

“Not funny,” she scolds, and the horse in return pulls up his upper lip as if he is indeed laughing at her.

“Are you laughing at me?” she asks and the horse bobs his head, letting her know he is indeed laughing.

Fuck, their interaction is amazing. I’ve seen some of their videos but seeing it up close shows how these two share a connection as if they speak the same language. I chuckle and the woman hits me with a glare.

“Hey,” I quip and hold my hands palm up. “I’m in complete awe of the way he listens to you and in no way am I laughing at you. Not to mention, this one seems like a carbon copy of Breeze.” East frowns and I clarify, “The mare.”

“It’s why I wanted her,” she states and her voice turns sad when she adds, “I know I can never replace Fletch. The connection we share is unique. I guess with him getting older I just don’t want to be left without some of his legacy. Which sounds stupid, I know.”

The sadness in her eyes feels as if it’s tugging at my fucking heartstrings. Without thinking I step closer and am about to pull her into my arms to comfort her when her eyes go wide.

“Too close.” She gasps and leaps back. “What do you think you’re doing?”

What the fuck am I doing? What about her, overreacting the way she did? In all my life I've never had a woman reject anything I had to give.

"I was being nice," I grit. "You were sad, so I thought I'd give you a hug."

"Well, for future reference, you can be nice and respect someone's personal space," she fires back.

Agitation gets the better of me, especially since I wanted nothing more than to touch the gorgeous woman. "You know what? Keep your personal space all to yourself. This is why we require background checks and personal meetings with potential buyers. I don't care about your reputation with training horses, not when your social skills are lacking from the get-go."

Her hands curl into fists and she grumbles, "You're the one getting in my personal space."

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I shake my head. “Whatever. I retrieved one traumatized horse this week because the new owners fucked up. For damn sure I’m not handing over a horse to a person who can’t even be fucking nice to the former owner for two damn seconds.”

Her jaw drops and I’m about to turn away when Cosima steps up next to me. “East, go and check on the new mare.”

“No need, I’m taking the mare back with me,” I snap at both women, but keep my gaze locked on East who follows her sister’s order and stomps away.

“No, you’re not,” Cosima states and fills my line of sight. “I apologize for my sister’s fierce reaction. I overheard something about getting in her personal space. I hope you didn’t try to get handsy or anything.”

“What?” I grunt. “Fuck, no. She was fucking sad when she explained why she was searching for the same bloodline of Fletch and I—”

“Let me guess, you tried to comfort her.” Cosima sighs. “I warned you about East being eccentric.”

My frustration goes down a notch, realizing she’s right. I guess meeting the woman made me want to get to know her a bit more and having her reject me the way she did? Something that never happens, especially not to me? Yeah, this fuck-up is all me.

I rub the back of my neck and admit, “She’s eccentric all right, and I guess her reaction was mostly my fault.”

Cosima looks thoughtful for a heartbeat or two before she says, “She shouldn’t have snapped at you. Normally she saves the grumpy for me and simply walks away without a word if she’s annoyed or confronted with something that triggers something.”

“Triggers something?” I muse and before I can catch myself, I wonder out loud, “Was she raped or something? Is that why she doesn’t like men in her personal space?”

“No, no, nothing like that. She just doesn’t like anyone getting in her personal space.” Cosima gives me a hint of a smile. “Sorry. I can’t explain the why and how. Medical conditions are personal, and I don’t feel comfortable sharing details about my sister.”

I bob my head. “I understand. Good to know she didn’t suffer any bad shit.”

“I consider a week-long migraine bad shit. So, I guess bad shit holds different kinds of levels. Come on, let’s go find my sister before she escapes. It’s something she’d rather do than muddle through something to get what she wants.” Cosima winces. “Let’s just go before I do share too many details. Sorry. I want her to have this horse, it’s something that gives her happiness and she deserves it. We’re going to take on some traumatized horses, and also buy some other breeds. For one I’d like a gypsy cob ’cause I’ve always loved the breed, but East would love to own a diverse herd. Also, something her line of work would benefit from if she has different horses for different jobs.”

“The traumatized horses, do you mean rescue, foster, save from the kill pen, or help owners with their horses?” I question.

Cosima shrugs. “Some? All? It’s the reason East bought this ranch. She’s a sucker when it comes to staring into the eyes of a traumatized horse, wanting to take away their pain.”



“I might have to bring the one I just retrieved,” I murmur and come to a stop in front of the stables. “Hey, if you’re looking for a Gypsy Cob, you might want to check out The Clyden’s Ranch. Besides making damn fine whiskey, they also breed Gypsy Cobs. I could reach out to Hixon or Shepherd if you know what you’re looking for.”

Cosima holds up her phone. “Let me research them real quick and I’ll let you know.”

When we enter the stable, we see Eastlynne with her back to us as she instantly announces, “She’s so freaking perfect, Cosima. I’d buy a stallion of this bloodline if they had one.”

“The sire is not for sale, but your sister just mentioned you’re gonna take on traumatized horses. Any chance you can help me with a stallion that’s about a year older than this one?”

East pops her head out of the stable and stares at me with her curious blue eyes. “Same sire and dam?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I affirm. “Though, it might not be a good plan to move him just yet. Maybe you could come out to my place and see if it’s something you can work with.”

She visibly winces as if I offered her to swallow nails or something.

“I recently picked him up and I could tell returning to the stable he grew up in settled him down some. He still needs a lot of TLC, but you can imagine I’m a bit hesitant to pull him out of his safe environment so soon.”

East glances at her sister and releases a deep breath. “Fine. I’ll come by your place tomorrow afternoon.”

I check my watch and see that I have another hour to spare. “We could go now.”

“No. Tomorrow at two,” East insists.

Cosima leans in and whispers, “Surprises or a change in plans is a no-go.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow at two,” I concede. “Shall we get the paperwork in order for Breeze?”

We all head in the direction of the house. Once inside we take a seat at the kitchen table and I pull the paperwork from the inside of my cut. East accepts the contract and starts to glance it over.

Cosima draws my attention when she says, “Thanks for the tip. The Clyden’s Ranch looks very promising. Bone, beautiful head, feather, their Cobs tick every box. Would you mind reaching out to ask if they have any yearling fillies for sale?”

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“Will do,” I tell her.

Normally I’d drink a cup of coffee and chat some more with clients, but nothing is offered and I’m out the door ten minutes later. Even if East and I got off on the wrong foot, I didn’t let it taint my impression of her. If anything, I’m intrigued and captivated by this unique woman.

Instead of riding back to the ranch, I decide to go for a long ride to feel the wind in my face and get my thoughts straight. Three hours later I park my bike in front of the clubhouse and still haven’t gotten her out of my mind.

“Hey,” Parker, my VP, quips. “I expected you back a few hours ago. How did it go with Breeze?”

“Fine,” I rumble as we wander over to the large pasture. Leaning my forearms on the top rung of the fence I add, “I asked her to help out with Buckey.”

“Really?” Parker leans against a pole. “I thought you wouldn’t let anyone near that stallion.”

I stare at the herd of Quarter horses grazing in the distance. “A broken soul needs something, and it’ll become clear what exactly that entails when opportunity strikes.”

“That makes perfect sense.” Parker snorts. “Not. But whatever. Hey, talking about Buckey, did you read my text?”

“Nope. I needed to clear my head and I just got off my bike. What’s up?”

“Winfield asked me if he could buy back Buckey, for himself this time. He offered double the money to make up for his fuck-up and make sure the stallion can live a happy life by himself in the pasture behind his house.” Parker doesn’t sound convinced, and I know why.

“Not a chance in hell. Buckey will live a miserable life on that small piece of land that fucker has behind his house. Besides, letting a traumatized horse stay alone is fucking torture. Not happening. Buckey is mine and he won’t be sold ever again,” I growl.

Parker turns to stare at the horses in front of us. “Agreed. Now, tell me about Eastlynne Hazel. She as fine as she looks online?”

I narrow my eyes at my VP and growl, “She’s off-limits to you and everyone else.”

“Woah there, Prez. No need to get your leathers in a knot. I was just making conversation, but it does make me curious, though. I guess I’ll meet her soon enough if you asked her to help with Buckey.”

Motherfucker.

It’s going to be a pain to keep my brothers away from East, and for me to get close to her. Good thing I never back down from a challenge and deep down I know a woman like East will be the ultimate challenge, and definitely worth it in the long run.

## CHAPTER THREE

– EASTLYNNE –

I throw a handful of meds in my mouth and swallow them down with some water. A handful is an exaggeration, but sometimes it feels like it. A few vitamins, my anxiety

meds that keep some of the rough edges of my triggers at bay, and my allergy medicine. Yes, it sucks big time to be allergic when you work with horses. It's not so much the horses, but the hay, dust, and such.

"Have a fun afternoon," Cosima quips as she breezes past me.

"You're not coming with me?" I somewhat squeak.

She opens the back door. "Nope, we're getting some stuff delivered and I have to be here to ensure everything goes smoothly. Did I forget to mention that?"

I narrow my eyes. "You handle these things which means you knew damn well it was coming. So, you were very aware of the fact that I would have to go to the Iron Hot Blood Ranch by myself when I made the appointment."

"Uh huh." She shoots me a grin. "That's why I said 'have fun.' You've already met Rourke, and even with your grumpy attitude, the guy asked for your help with a horse. Just focus on the horse and ignore everything else, it's what you always do anyway."

I grit my teeth. Cosima knows about my issues and still throws me to the wolves every now and then. Sometimes I think no one really understands while, on the other hand, I know I can't hide or run from everything and have to throw some huge big girl panties on to do something without flipping my shit or taking a mental nosedive. Which eventually leads to a migraine that takes me out for the rest of the day.

"I hate you," I grumble.

"Love you too, sis," Cosima replies with a smile in her voice and disappears out the back door.

With a huge dose of reluctance, I stomp toward the front door and double-check to make sure I have my phone and keys. Snatching my Stetson from the hook, I leave the house and stalk to my truck. My earbuds are in place to dim out some of the outside world. Sometimes I don't even have music on, but it just helps to have a little barrier in place so people think I can't hear them.

I get into my truck and pop a piece of gum—Ice Breakers Ice Cubes Raspberry Sorbet to be precise—into my mouth. There's only one cube left and I make a mental note to add it to the grocery list. Throwing my cowboy hat on the passenger seat, I start my truck and guide it onto the road.

It's a short drive to the Iron Hot Blood Ranch and I make sure to park away from the large building. I'd rather stay in my truck to gather my thoughts for a few minutes, but I notice Rourke striding toward me as if he was waiting for me to show up to corner me so I can't leave. I release a deep breath and step out of the truck.

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“Hey,” I quip, trying to sound casual.

“Eastlynne,” he rumbles and tips his Stetson.

I’ve seen many men wearing cowboy hats of different brands, but the way Rourke wears his Stetson? It’s like the man was born to wear it.

“I don’t mind standing here until you get your fill, darlin’. Though, I did order everyone out of the stables for the next hour to make you feel at ease...so your private time is ticking away.”

The heat blossoming on my cheeks forces me to dive into my truck and grab my hat. What an asshole. Luckily, my annoyance and anger tone down the shame of being caught ogling.

Turning back to face him I snap, “Lead the way.”

He strides away and I make sure to stay a few steps behind him until I abruptly stop at the sight of a man riding a Longhorn.

“Now that’s a sight you don’t see every day,” I muse.

I hear Rourke chuckle. “Parker trains both horses and Longhorns. His father, Roper, is a Bull Riding World Champion. You might say his son followed in his footsteps.”

“Those horns are huge.” I turn to Rourke. “Do you ride bulls?”

His eyes are a twinkling sea of blue. “Nah, I’d rather stick with horses and let Parker and some of the other brothers handle the Longhorns. If I do interact with them it’s to put a herd from one into another pasture.”

“How many brothers do you have?” I wonder.

“By blood one, Cashton. He’s the youngest. We also have an older sister, Magdalena. The brothers I was referring to are my club brothers. My father used to be the president of the motorcycle club that runs the ranch until I took over last year. My parents still live on the property, but they’re enjoying their retirement while the second generation has taken over all the tasks. The older generation still helps out from time to time, though. We’re a solid brotherhood, a family...by blood or not.”

The words he just shared, along with the warmth in his voice, and the fondness written all over his face cause me to smile while I honestly tell him, “That’s nice and rare to have such a solid foundation surrounding you.”

“Definitely.” He starts to walk in the direction of the stables. “Sometimes it’s a pain in the ass, though. We also own a junkyard and I don’t enjoy the work, but we rotate shifts to keep things interesting. Everything is hard work, but I’d rather work with the livestock.”

“I can’t imagine doing anything else than working with horses. Especially when it comes to working with people,” I muse.

Rourke turns his head my way. “You work with your sister, right?”

I shrug. “I don’t mind people once I let them into my circle.”

“So, you do have friends?” he questions.



Wincing I admit, “No, too much work.”

He throws his head back and barks out a laugh. “Ain’t that the truth? But it’s worth having people to fall back on. I guess for me it’s different because I grew up in a huge as fuck found family. It’s not always nice and friendly, though. I would feed some of my brothers to the pigs if we had them.”

Now it’s my turn to laugh. “Maybe I should get some pigs for that reason alone.”

“Nah, girl, stick to those horses you love, and let me know if anyone is bothering you.” He comes to a stop in front of a stall. “I’d make sure they’d never come near you again.”

I gaze up at him and realize by the fierce look in his eyes that he’s dead serious about the statement he just made. “Thanks, I’ll keep it in mind.”

The nervous behavior of the horse in the stall grabs my attention. I can’t prevent the gasp falling from my lips.

“Who would do such a thing?” I whisper and take in all the injuries this poor horse has all over his body.

“A former brother of our MC bought Buckey. We didn’t know he was buying him for a friend of his, we only discovered this fact last week. When I went over to check out the new owner, I found out the fucker couldn’t handle Buckey and tried to whip and beat him into obedience. Needless to say, I took Buckey with me,” Rourke grits.

“How can someone from your family do such a thing?” I whisper, remembering what Rourke just told me about his brotherhood.

Rourke sighs. “Every few years we take on a new prospect or two to grow our

business and family. We do extensive background checks and they have to prospect for over a year or so to prove themselves. Winfield, the one who fucked-up, recently patched in as a full member. He was with us for over a year and lives in town, so he wasn't a complete stranger since he always came into the bar we own. Anyway, we know people can make mistakes, but he fucked-up when he ignored a rule we have in place. This horse." He points at Buckey. "Will forever carry the trauma with him, that's unforgivable."

I tilt my head and can't help but wonder, "Maybe Winfield didn't know his friend was going to hurt Buckey."

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Rourke's upper lip curls due to anger because it's loud and clear in his voice when he states, "Oh, he knew alright. I didn't even have to dig deep to find out that fucker, Erwin Desmond, has had over eight horses die on him. I'm sure Buckey would have been number nine if I hadn't taken him with me that day."

I shake my head. "I'll never understand the reasons why anyone would hurt animals."

"I'm not even going to start to understand," Rourke grumbles. "They screw up, they can fuck the hell off and pay the price of hurting one of our own."

"So, I guess Winfield doesn't work here anymore?"

Rourke pins me with a fierce stare. "Work here? Fuck, no. He's out in bad standing. His colors are stripped and he'll never become a member ever again. If he ever so much as steps foot on our property again I'll beat his ass to a pulp."

The anger in his voice along with his fierce words should make me step back, but instead, I find myself inching closer to him. Close contact is something I only do with people who are in my inner circle. However, Rourke somehow makes me feel safe due to the things he just said. How a person treats and behaves around animals says a lot about a person.

It's for this reason I reach out and touch his hand to give it a firm squeeze before I quickly drop my hand again.

"Thank you, on behalf of Buckey," I muse and feel my cheeks heat.

Surprise overtakes his face, but he's unable to say or do anything when there's a woman's voice filling the air. "Is this her, Rourke?"

"Fuck," Rourke rumbles and steps in front of me. "Mom, not now. I've told everyone to stay away from the stables and that includes you. Dad, make her leave."

I take a peek around Rourke to see an older woman along with an older man with the same features and blue eyes as Rourke standing in front of him.

The man shoots me a wink. "Sorry, Eastlynne, but when our son orders the whole MC to stay away all because a woman is coming to visit? Our curiosity shoots through the roof and calls for an investigation to see who the special one is."

Rourke groans and mutters, "You two are ruining things." He firms his tone when he adds, "You've seen her, now go. And no, I won't bring her to the main house for lunch or to meet anyone else. She doesn't do crowds and is here to help me with Buckey. Please leave and make sure everyone else leaves us alone as well."

"Sure thing, Prez," his father rumbles.

His mother gives me a finger wave. "I'm Harlene, this here is my husband, Weston, and you are invited to come and have lunch, dinner, or come and chat with me any time. I'm also a veterinarian and we have a clinic in town if you're looking for a vet. I've heard you own the ranch down the road from here. Well, I do have to say that my daughter, Magdalena, is one of the vets now that I've retired. She's also the one who treated Buckey so if you have any questions or need anything, just let me know."

"Thanks," I murmur and awkwardly give her a finger wave in return.

They slink away and Rourke takes off his Stetson to slide his fingers through his light blond hair before putting it back on. "Sorry, I didn't expect them to barge in like

that.”

“Because you warned everyone away.” The corner of my mouth twitches. “Thank you for that. I do appreciate it and I also understand how it would make your parents curious.” Without thinking things through, I blurt out the thought that pops in my head. “You could have planned to have sex in here, though. That would have been awkward to have your parents walk in on that.”

Laughter escapes me, but it falls short when my breath catches due to the heat in Rourke’s eyes. Shit. My breathing picks up because now I’m thinking about having sex. Strangely enough, the thought doesn’t scare me; it’s actually very appealing when it involves Rourke.

Double shit. What the hell is wrong with me?

## CHAPTER FOUR

A few days later

– ROURKE –

“It’s hard on some and everyone has their own theory about it,” Eastlynne quips and gives me one of her warm, rare smiles.

It makes my heart fucking skip as if I’m a teenager with a huge crush for the first time in my life. I clear my throat and force my mind to keep on track with the discussion at hand. We’ve been talking non-stop during our time together over the past few days.

Weaning horses, that’s what we’re talking about now. “We don’t wean just because an animal is at a certain age. We know each and every horse that’s born here and we

assess their development. Either socially, physically, or mentally, we will always observe and act on what's best for the animal."

"It shows." Her gaze slides to the pasture with four fillies.

"Prez? A word, please," Decker rumbles.

I'm annoyed by the interruption because every single one of my brothers knows to leave me alone when Eastlynne is at the ranch. Decker is still around from the older generation. He used to work for the FBI. He wouldn't have come to me if it wasn't important.

"What's up, Decker?" I question.

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His eyes slide to Eastlynne. “Maybe it’s best to talk in private?”

“East is trustworthy,” I state.

Over the past few days, she’s opened up to me through discussions and working together on Buckey. It’s as if I’ve moved through an invisible wall she has formed around her and entered her circle.

“It involves Winfield,” Decker states with a hint of warning.

Eastlynne is not the kind of person to blabber out secrets to anyone. Hell, as far as I know, she only interacts with her sister and lets Cosima handle everyone while she focuses on what she loves in life; working with horses.

I’m about to explain to Decker how Eastlynne demands people to respect her personal space and how she doesn’t let others close when she touches my arm. “It’s okay, I can give you two some privacy.”

My skin prickles where her palm touches me. It’s as if our connection causes an electric current of awareness between us. Our eyes lock and the sharp intake of breath along with her pupils dilating lets me know she feels it too. Yeah, these past few days have definitely moved me into her inner circle.

Without taking my eyes off her I tell Decker, “East is my person, talk freely.”

What I want to say is, “East is mine,” but that would probably send her running. The discussion we had this morning was about having a person you fall back on without

thinking. For East it was a no-brainer; her sister Cosima. I told her I had more than one...with me telling her right now I consider her my person, it's to let her know I think she's fucking precious. Which I sure as fuck do.

Decker raises one of his eyebrows and I know I've made myself clear; he's aware of my silent claim. East isn't like any other woman, and those I've encountered are clingy, demanding, and have expectations I don't want to live up to.

When it comes to Eastlynne, though? I want to protect her, savor her every touch and closeness because it's fucking special when it comes from her. I see her for what she is; a gem amidst a field of plain rocks. Fuck her weird quirks or reasons to function in her own way. From the time I've spent with her, I can honestly say she's kind, caring, funny, and has a heart of gold.

"Okay, Prez," Decker rumbles and I turn my head to face him as he adds, "Kathleen called. Winfield had a motorcycle accident. Well, it seems that way, but for now, they are sticking to that scenario."

Kathleen, Decker's daughter, is the sheriff of this town.

"What do you mean with they are sticking to that scenario? And why the fuck would I care? He's out, remember?" I rumble, still pissed as hell about what that fucker did.

"He's dead," Decker states. "It might have looked like he went off the cliff with a motorcycle, but where the fuck is his motorcycle? Because it wasn't there. Then there's the little fact that his house was broken into yesterday. Kathleen was off yesterday and only discovered this little fact this morning."

"No coincidence," I grit. "Sounds more like retaliation."

"That's what I was thinking," Decker growls.



“Send a group text. I want a full table in half an hour,” I order. “We have to talk shit through to make sure there’s no risk for us. I was the one retrieving the horse, and it’s a no-brainer that this is all tied to what just happened. ’Cause I don’t think he was wrapped in any other shit that might have backfired on that fucker.”

Decker nods and grabs his phone as he strides away.

“Sorry, darlin’, I have to cut this short,” I regretfully tell East.

Her eyes are on me, and it feels as if she’s trying to read my thoughts. I want nothing more than to spend more time with her today, but this shit concerning Winfield needs to be handled. If what I’m thinking is true, then his so-called friends he sold Buckey to killed him. I hope to prove myself wrong, but the details Decker just shared led both of us to jump to that conclusion.

“Something I can do to help?” she offers.

The corner of my mouth twitches. “You’re not allowed in church.”

“Church?” She frowns. “You guys have a church on the property and are gonna...wait. Is that what bikers call the room they have meetings in?”

I shake my head. “Let me guess, you binge motorcycle club series on TV?”

“Nope, Cosima likes those and I read while she watches but I still overhear stuff. I prefer series, movies and books, with a supernatural twist.”

“Supernatural, eh? Well, I don’t have a lot of time to watch anything on TV. I guess you’ll have to educate me on some of your favorites. I could come over to your place tonight and watch some, or you could come back here. Though, I have to warn you. I mostly sleep in a room at the clubhouse and the main room will be busy tonight.”

Her eyes are wide and I can practically see her mind going into overdrive.

“Never mind.” I sigh, knowing I overstepped.

Too soon, too fucking quick. Even if we spent a few days together chatting and getting comfortable around one another.

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My phone gives a notification, probably the group text Decker sent. “Listen, I’ll just see you tomorrow, okay? I’ll walk you to your truck.”

Her shoulders sag and she silently follows me. She’s frozen in front of her truck with her back to me when I hear her mutter something.

“What was that?” I question.

She opens the door and I hear her loud and clear this time when she says, “You can come to my house.”

I don’t get to reply because she jumps into her truck, slams the door, and has it fired up and spitting dirt from the wheels as she speeds off. A bark of laughter rips from me as I stare at her taillights.

Fuck. Here I thought I fucked it all up, instead, she surprised the hell out of me by being brave and asking me into her house. I know it’s a big deal because she told me how she doesn’t even like it when others hang their coat next to hers or if her sister sits on her bed.

I’m wearing a huge smile when I step inside church. Except, it slides right off when I’m reminded of why we have a full table.

“Kathleen.” I nod at Decker’s daughter.

Women might not be allowed in church, but there are exceptions to the rule. Especially when the woman in question has crucial information.

She places her hands on her belt. “They raided his house, Rourke. I went there myself after I became aware Winfield’s house was broken into. Anything of value they took with them and they even tried to cover up their tracks by starting a fire. They didn’t count on Winfield having a sprinkler system, though. Anyway, his truck is gone and so is his bike. There are track marks where he went over the hill and his body is mangled as if he was dragged behind a car or something before they threw him over. If I didn’t know the whole situation with him selling off the stallion and you retrieving the horse, I would have considered it a possible accident. The bike missing does seem fishy, though. Anyway, a lot of things don’t add up. I’ve brought the two case files with all the details we have. Let me know if there’s anything else you need.”

“Thanks, Kathleen, appreciate it,” I rumble and take a seat.

She nods and strides out of the room. Not only is Kathleen law enforcement, she also has a killer voice, just like her mother, Muriel. Decker’s old lady is a country singer and has recorded some songs with her daughter. Kathleen never goes public with her singing though. She’s devoted her life to becoming sheriff of this town and she has been for almost a year now. Thank fuck, because it comes in handy now.

“I did a background check when I found out Winfield sold the stallion,” I explain. “The ranch where Buckey was has a bad reputation. Horses end up dead and are easily replaced if they don’t live up to their demands.”

“Easy enough if you steal horses,” Luke growls. “I did a little digging of my own and it only cost me a few minutes and some keystrokes. There have been a lot of accusations but no binding evidence.”

“I’ve thrown pictures of all the men who are working or have worked on that ranch into the group app so make sure you thumb through them. If any of those fuckers show up around here, we’ll know,” Silas states.

Luke and Silas are not only club brothers, but biological as well, sharing the same parents. Even if they have two fathers and one mother. Alfie, Joaquin, and Greta have a special kind of relationship and the three children that came from them are raised with a truckload of love and two fathers to balance it all out. I can't imagine sharing my woman with another man, but then again, it's their choice, not mine.

"Do you think they'll come after us?" Walker questions, curling his fingers into fists as if he's ready to pounce if they come bursting through the door this very second.

His father, Colt, used to be the club's enforcer. Walker took over two months ago, and he's clearly cut from the same cloth as his father.

"I think it would be foolish not to be prepared." I glance around the full table at each and every one of my brothers of the older and younger generation. "Especially when I've been working with the stallion I took from them out in the open. They might have had their eyes on us for the past few days without us realizing it."

"Which means your lady friend could be under their watchful eye as well," Parker remarks.

The thought of Eastlynne getting pulled into dangerous shit makes me feel as if there's a tight fist gripping my heart, trying to yank it out through my rib cage.

"I'm heading over to her house after we're done here. We need to gather more information about these fuckers. Decker, can you make a few calls to your old contacts or have your daughter reach out, whatever works. Going after these fuckers ourselves might bring heat to the ranch."

"Smart move bringing in the authorities. Kathleen can handle it, but I will make her reach out to make sure she has enough manpower in case shit goes south." Decker takes out his phone and chuckles. "She never likes it when I interfere with her job. So

much fun to make her pissed and have Muriel smooth things over at the dinner table.”

“Whatever,” I grumble, not caring one bit about those details. “I want a team having eyes on the security feed. No one goes off alone until we have this shit handled. I’m heading out to Eastlynne. If something needs your attention right away, talk to your VP.” I turn to Parker. “Text me updates if you have some. I’ll be back tomorrow morning.”

Parker snickers. “Confident you get to spend the night at her place, eh?”

I glare at the fucker. Eastlynne won’t be amused, to put it lightly, and it might fuck things up between us, but I will not risk her safety.

## CHAPTER FIVE

– EASTLYNNE –

I lean against Fletch and try to relax. Why did I invite Rourke to my own freaking home? My head feels like it’s going to implode in my skull. I know I’m stressing and I brought it all on myself, but it just felt like I...wanted and needed to prolong our time together.

Rourke is fun and easy to be around. He doesn’t get close to me without giving me a slight heads-up first. Mostly it’s a touch in a teasing matter; a little nudge with his hand on my lower back, a bump with his shoulder against mine, brushing his fingers against my forearm, that kind of stuff.

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Strangely enough, I crave his closeness and I like touching him in return. Whenever I touch his skin, it feels like I get a slight current of electricity. I'm sure it's only my imagination or my reaction to him, but it feels nice.

In a matter of days, he's managed to jump from a complete stranger to friend status. That's not the scariest part, though. It's the longing deep inside me where curiosity burns. I want to step over the fictitious line and kiss him. Feel his lips against mine...and more.

I close my eyes, tip my head back, and growl out my frustration. "Why am I like this?"

"Like what? Sexually frustrated?" my sister says and snickers when my eyes turn in her direction to give her a death glare.

"What?" She shrugs. "You're easy to read. Besides, you going over to the Iron Hot Blood ranch every day this past week is a good indication that Rourke has slipped under your skin. And if you need my advice? Let him slip under your sheets, way more fun."

"I don't need your advice," I snap. "Besides, it's all your fault, you go and get under the sheets with him."

There's a stabbing pain inside my chest, and a load of anger filling my veins, as soon as those words tumble over my lips. The thought of Rourke with anyone else makes me...angry? Jealous? Ugh. This is insane.

“You should see the look on your face.” Cosima laughs and pats Fletch. “I’m not into Rourke, sis. He’s cute, I’ll give you that, but not my type.”

“A tattooed, rough, cowboy biker who is a gentleman deep down is anyone’s type,” I mutter.

The corner of her mouth twitches. “Ah, but it’s the gentleman deep down part I have issues with. I want the dirty, rough, tie me up, spank my ass, choke my neck bad boy instead.”

“Oh. My. Fireflies. You did not just blabber that stuff out to me.” I shake my head. “Whatever you do in the bedroom is so not meant for my ears, Cosima.”

Cosima snorts. “I prefer it outside of the bedroom. A little outdoor action never hurt anyone.”

I’m about to put my fingers in my ears to stop the oversharing when my sister points at something. “Someone’s early.”

Turning, I notice the stunning creme, golden-colored horse trotting toward us. Rourke explained how Colt, one of the older generation, breeds these rare horse coat colors. It’s called Cremello and with their pink skin and blue eyes, they are definitely a sight to behold. The man riding the horse, though? Just as freaking stunning.

Fletch gives a loud, high-pitched neigh which Rourke’s horse instantly returns.

Rourke chuckles. “Evenin’, ladies.”

“Hey, Rourke, nice to see you again.” Cosima turns to me. “Why don’t you two go out riding since Rourke is all saddled up. I’m gonna head for my bed, early day tomorrow morning and all. Have fun you two.”



She's striding in the direction of the house before I can utter one single word. My gaze bounces to Rourke. He's leaning with his forearms on the horn of his saddle and is piercing me with his blue eyes.

"I like your sister, she has great ideas," he states.

Great ideas, right. "If you think outdoor action is better than in a bed, then yes. 'Cause that's her idea of having sex along with it being dirty, rough, tie me up, spank my ass, choke my neck—"

I abruptly stop rambling when his gaze turns heated. My cheeks are flaming when I realize what my screwed-up mind just threw out in the open.

"I hate her," I grumble. The anger and frustration I feel about myself makes me add, "It's all her fault. Cosima's the one who said you weren't her type. When I told her that a tattooed, rough, cowboy biker who is a gentleman deep down is anyone's type, she started spouting about having issues with that and then threw out those...those—"

The corner of his mouth twitches before he finishes for me, "Things she enjoys."

I wave my hand dismissively. "Yes. That."

"Mind telling me the reason why you described me to your sister the way you did?"

"Yes," I snap. "I do mind. In fact, I just remembered I have things to do. You should leave."

He swings his leg off his horse, ties the reins to the fence, and jumps over it to come to a stop in front of me. "The description you gave of me has flaws, East."

My breathing picks up and he leans even closer to whisper in a husky tone, "I'm not

interested in your sister, darlin'."

I swallow hard and my voice becomes all strangled when I ask, "Why does my description of you have flaws?"

His smile becomes almost feral. "The only times I've been a gentleman deep down is when I'm with you. Believe me when I say I'm anything but. Once you don't get spooked easily anymore? Then all bets are off." He moves his mouth right next to my ear to add on a low growl, "I'd bet my horses to prove you'd also enjoy all the things your sister mentioned when I'm the one doing it to you."

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A shiver runs through me. Not due to the evening breeze, but because I'm overheated by Rourke's words and closeness. He's staring down at me and all I can do is slightly part my lips and keep my eyes locked with his.

My heart is pounding and it feels as if it's slamming against my rib cage. My brain jumped onto a freight train and I'm momentarily locked in whatever trance Rourke put me in. His calloused fingers slide over my bare shoulder, onto my neck until he gently cups the back of my head to pull me close.

At the same time, he leans in and presses his lips against mine. A kiss. Rourke is kissing me. My eyes close and I bury my fist into his leather vest to keep myself from floating away. That's what it feels like. Floating. I have no thoughts at all. I'm caught off-guard, swooped away, and prevented from doing anything other than feeling what he's doing.

Tingling spreads from my lips down to my nipples, my belly, my clit. Sensory overload and the scariest thing? I want more. His tongue breaches my mouth, warm and prodding, swirling against mine. Did I just moan? He definitely growled because I felt the vibration every-freaking-where. I'm now groaning in objection when his mouth leaves mine.

Rourke curses and pulls me flush against his body, his arms wrapping around me as he places his chin on the top of my head. "Fucking hell, woman. You taste like you're meant to be mine, and it's a flavor made to last a lifetime."

He pulls away again and cups the side of my head when he says with a determined voice, "Come on, let's go for a ride. We have much to discuss and what just

happened is only a fragment of it.”

I frown and am still at a loss for words when he asks, “Do you need to saddle up or are you gonna ride Fletch with just the neck rope?”

I shake my head in an effort to clear the fog he created and mutter, “The rope is enough, and I don’t even need that but it’s what I prefer when I’m working.”

Rourke leans forward and gives me a boost.

“I could have made Fletch bow, it’s one of the first things I taught him because he was too big for me to jump on,” I grumble.

“So you’ve told me. I just like helping out my old lady, me being a gentleman deep down and all.” The annoying man shoots me a wink and opens the paddock fence for me.

I glare at Rourke while I guide Fletch out. Rourke closes the paddock and takes the reins of his own horse. I watch his muscled thighs in jeans, along with his tight ass as he mounts his horse when I realize what he just called me; his old lady.

I’m about to ask why he called me that—knowing about the meaning since we talked a lot the past few days and some was about his club and brotherhood—when he says, “We think they killed Winfield, revenge for Buckey, and we could be next.”

“What?” I gasp and bring Fletch to a stop by leaning slightly back.

Rourke winces. “I’m sorry, but with you coming over these past few days, working with Buckey? They might have had eyes on us and saw you. I have no clue if you could be a target as well, but I’m not taking any chances.”

“What does that mean?” I warily ask.

Rourke clicks his tongue and his horse starts to move again. I let Fletch fall in step beside her.

He stays silent for way too long, so I ask again, “What does that mean?”

“That shit is fucked-up,” Rourke states with a pained voice.

“No shit,” I deadpan.

His head turns my way. “I don’t care about the blowback the club will be hit with. We’ll handle whatever comes our way, always have, always will. Hell, my parents did it before me so we’re not going down any time soon. What I’m talking about is me and you.”

I frown and wonder why he’s worried about me and him.

“You should be worried about yourself and all the others,” I mutter and let my fingers slide through Fletch’s manes.

“I’m staying the night at your place, East,” he states.

My eyes widen and I instantly fire back, “No, you’re not.”

“Yes,” he growls. “I most certainly will. I cannot leave you unprotected. Now do you understand why I told you it’ll fuck up shit between us?”

I fall silent and try not to panic. The frustration in his voice, along with the expression on his face, shows he’s struggling with what he just mentioned makes me pause. I like spending time with him and definitely like my body’s reaction to everything he

does to me.

My mind is all jumbled, my body along with it. Maybe I'm hiding behind my beloved wall I made myself to keep everything and everyone out of my personal space. I don't think I'm ready, if I'll ever be ready at all. Though, if I believe that...then I never will.

“Please say something. I can see in your eyes that you're rambling to yourself inside your head.”

I jut out my chin. “You don't know what goes on inside my head.”

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“True, but I would like to.” His smile makes the dimple come out and play, causing my belly to flop.

I release a deep sigh and stare straight ahead. “No, you really don’t. During discussions I have to repeat some lines or words inside my head. Same with watching TV. Inside my head it’s like a tornado touching ground during an earthquake while a tsunami is on the way. Havoc. Then you kiss me and everything hits pause.”

Giving slight pressure with my leg, Fletch instantly replies and we race away, letting the wind hit my face while Fletch’s manes rock wild and free before me. The thrill of going fast, feeling this powerful animal underneath me gain speed while he runs freely is a true adrenaline rush.

My fingers are wrapped around the rope and I close my eyes to relish in the escape this gives me. The sound of Fletch’s hooves hitting the dirt, his grunts, the wind trying to slow us down; everything lightens my mood. I lean back and let Fletch know to slow down. A giggle slips from me as we come to a stop. This is exactly what I needed.

“That’s a perfect sound,” Rourke remarks as he stops next to us.

I give him a big smile. “I love riding. I love this horse, this land, and the path I take to live my life because it’s my damn life. I have a lot of issues, believe me, I’m more than aware of the roadblocks I also place there myself. I can be difficult to be around or embarrass others.”

“So fucking what, East? We all have demons,” Rourke growls. “Some fight them

head-on, others a silent battle inside their head. Some people carry their heart on their sleeve, while some have a tongue as sharp as a whip. Every single person has the fucking right to be who they want to be and do what the fuck they want, okay? We might live in the same world but we all lead our own life. Don't ever let anyone tell you otherwise or make you feel like shit."

His words mean a lot and it's why I tell him, "Okay. You can spend the night. But I'm not having sex with you."

His smile is huge and I swear I hear him mutter under his breath, "Not yet, but we will."

## CHAPTER SIX

– ROURKE –

Eastlynne adds more shavings to the stall we're going to put Miso in when she says, "I had to switch to shavings due to Fletch's respiratory issues. Normally, I'd just leave them in the pasture with the soft weather, but I guess you're right to keep them in the stable tonight."

I let Miso's hoof, which I was picking, slip from my hand. "At least until I can say with certainty that the shit Winfield caused is handled."

"Why can't you let the sheriff handle it?" She's done with the stable yet I'm not ready to answer her question.

Walking around Miso, I let my hand slide down her other leg to lift her hoof in my palm to pick it clean.

"Do you want to kill those guys and bury them on your property? Is that why you



can't involve the authorities?"

Releasing a deep sigh when I'm done picking Miso's hooves, I let go and turn to face Eastlynne. "Kathleen, Decker's daughter, is the sheriff. I'm fairly sure when push comes to shove, she'd pick the club's side, if there's a reasonable explanation."

Her eyes go wide. "You guys have the whole town in your pocket by owning the sheriff?"

"For fuck's sake," I mutter while rubbing a hand over my face. "We might have some influence, but like I said, only if there's a reasonable explanation. Kathleen might be Decker's daughter and tied to the ranch and the MC that way, but she inherited his loyalty when it comes to being a lawman. In return, we won't ever risk her trust, reputation, and career."

Eastlynne sinks down and rests her ass in the fresh shaving. I lead Miso into the empty stall next to the one Eastlynne is sitting in before I sit down next to her.

She stares into nothing when she absently states, "You're in the center of this huge found family where everyone works and lives together. All while I'm the opposite and avoid running into people whenever I can."

"Not when you're at the ranch or working," I quip, getting worried in the pit of my stomach that this conversation is leading up to where she finds reasons why we shouldn't be together.

Trying to steer off this path I ask, "What part about your job doing movie and commercial stuff do you like most?"

A hint of a smile tugs her lips. "When I receive the storyboards, it feels like a challenge. To bring it alive and not just the image, but a better version of it."

“That’s what we do every day,” I muse and gently bump her shoulder.

Thank fuck she doesn’t shy away from my touch and closeness anymore.

“We all have visuals of what we want in life and move forward by trying over and over again until we’ve either perfected it or moved onto something new. The Iron Hot Blood ranch has been evolving for decades. My parents encouraged me to follow in their footsteps and yet they are my boot prints sinking into the dirt. The load of responsibility as the club president weighs heavy at times. Having the found family you mentioned lightens it to a point where I don’t even feel it all pressing down on me. Sure, it can be hard as fuck, especially now when our safety is at stake. But try to compare all those people as a wall we’ve built as a foundation. You have a wall too, except you have no one but yourself to fall back on. I’m not saying this to hurt, insult, or convince you to...fuck, I know it’s mentally draining, and not something you easily step over.” A frustrated growl rips from me.

Taking a deep breath, I add what bothers me the most. “The time we spent together where I got to know the real you showed me I want to be a part of your life, Eastlynne. Which means...for us to be together you’d have to be a part of mine too.”

She lays her head on my shoulder. We’re wrapped in silence as she laces her fingers with mine.

“You’re the first guy who slipped through the walls I’ve firmly set in place to make my life easier.”

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I keep my lips sealed, loving the way parts of our bodies are connected as we bare pieces of our souls to one another.

Eastlynne chuckles softly. “Maybe I’ll get super clingy once we’re together.”

“We are together,” I remind her and give our joined hands a little squeeze. “Besides, you and too clingy? Not a chance in hell. Besides, I’ll take you as you are. No getting out ’cause I’m already fully invested or I wouldn’t have been here.”

Her other hand reaches for the side of my face. With our gaze locked she leans in and brushes her lips against mine. I groan at the feel of her mouth moving against mine. Electricity shoots through my veins, my whole body fully aware.

I’ve experienced lust, the need to get off, but the way this woman lights up my body is a whole new level of intensity. My cock has been hard since I laid eyes on her lush body, and the craving has only grown as I’ve slowly gotten to know her. To have her admit no guy has previously slipped through her walls gives my ego a huge boost.

It also makes me slow down the kiss, swirl my tongue against hers one more time to relish the way she tastes until I pull back. “Will my cock be the first to sink into your tight pussy?”

She wrinkles her nose. “No. My first time was over in minutes. Ted, a boy in school, was as inexperienced as me and I guess...let’s just stick to the fact that it wasn’t a success. With my issues pushed to the foreground I cut myself off from any type of relationship.”

Now I'm the one taking her face in my hands. "There's so much to gain when you come from little to nothing. The way you opened up to me hasn't been easy, and you don't even know half of how much I appreciate the chance you're giving me. I'm going to show, and make you feel the silver lining of sharing your life with me." I make sure to add on a whisper, "Along with the whole brotherhood."

She huffs out a breath and mutters, "Just so you know? The first day of school was the worst and I hated interacting with others. By the end of the year, I was finally at ease and then I'd have to do it all over again after the summer."

I brush my nose against hers. "Good to know. But at least you've had your first day at the ranch and over the past few days you've met a lot of them. In time you'll find your way as the president's old lady."

Eastlynne gasps and I realize I fucked up by reminding her of what it entails to be mine. I take her mouth in a scorching kiss to distract her. She melts into my arms and I close my eyes to sink into the pleasure this woman gives me with a mere kiss.

My whole body feels as if it's recharging for pleasure combustion and I'm only seconds away from detonation. I pull her on top of me, and she comes willingly. Her hips start to move, allowing her pussy to grind down on my hard cock.

She gasps into my mouth and moans, so fucking sexy. I move my hand to open the button of her jeans, allowing the room I need to slide down and tease her pussy. Her panties are clinging to her folds.

Her lips move down my jaw and she buries her head into the crook of my neck, surrendering to the way I rub her clit while sliding a finger into her tight channel. I feel her mouth on my neck sucking, teeth nipping while I finger-fuck her.

My cock is painfully hard, wanting where my finger is right now. She moans and

rotates her hips as she rides my fingers. I wish I could see her face right now. The way she groans and is completely absorbed in chasing pleasure is sexy as fuck.

If she keeps grinding down on me, I'm going to come in my damn pants. I swipe some more wetness from her pussy and press down on her clit. She throws her head back while at the same time, she clenches rapidly around my fingers. A gush of wetness coats my hand and she screams out her release.

All I can do is stare at her neckline as she slowly comes down from riding the bliss we created. Stunning. Gorgeous as hell with her chest rising and falling, eyes filled with the lust that's still simmering through her body.

"Wow," she breathes with a load of awe.

"Magnificent is more like it," I huskily tell her. "I can't wait for you to do it all over again. Except, next time you'll have that tight pussy of yours wrapped around my cock."

Sliding my hand out of her pants, I bring my fingers to my lips and taste her. I hum in appreciation. A chuckle rumbles through my chest when I see Eastlynne wrinkle her nose.

"Believe me when I say you taste delicious, darlin'. Sweet, tangy, all you. Now, if we were in bed, I'd put my mouth on you and make you come again on my tongue. I bet you won't be wrinkling your nose ever again once you've experienced me eating you out."

Curiosity has replaced the wrinkles. "I've never...and no one's ever done...that."

"You've never had an orgasm before the one I gave you? No one has tasted your pussy? What are you trying to tell me, darlin'?"

She sags against me and her mouth returns to my neck. The feel of her in my arms, molded against my body, feels damn good.

Eastlynne's voice is soft and sated when she says, "I've had orgasms by my own hand before, but nothing like this. And no, the only experience with sex was some fumbling and a few humps and that was that."

A satisfied grin slides across my face. "We're going to have lots of fun exploring."

"If exploring means I'll have more orgasms then I'm all in," she murmurs against my skin.

I knead her lush ass in my hands. "Keep that mouth of yours on my neck and I'll do anything you want, babe. Damn. You feel good."

She giggles and when she leans back her eyes collide with mine. There's no shyness, no evading; only honest and open feelings. It's as if her defenses are down and it's just the two of us in this fucked-up world and nothing else.

Deep down, I knew she was the one as I slowly got to know her. Eastlynne is the kind of woman who won't give herself to anyone, but if she opens up? It's like entering a vault stocked with a treasure of impeccable value. I know I haven't won her heart and we're still on the admiration and exploring level.

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Though, her heart will be mine, no doubt. I'm not giving her up, not when we've barely gotten started. One taste made me realize this is the woman who has everything I admire in an old lady. She might think she has issues, but it makes her unique. I admire the way she lives her life and manages to thrive in her career.

She's my match, and I won't let anything or anyone stand in my way to explore a future with this woman.

### CHAPTER SEVEN

– EASTLYNNE –

“Did I enter the Twilight Zone or have you decided overnight it's worth facing your fears and anxiety? 'Cause I just saw someone sleeping in your bed and since you're standing here, I know it wasn't you sleeping in there,” Cosima states as she strolls into the kitchen. “Or did you order a blow up doll for some practice before you go for the real thing? You do know they have vibrators, right? Less space, more efficient and all.”

I tear my gaze away from the window and take a sip of my coffee before I can think of how to answer her. Placing my mug on the counter, I decide to share some of my thoughts because it's a rambling mess inside my head.

“I made him shower first. He tried to put his shirt and boxers on, something about not wanting me to think he'd demand sex. They were dirty and my bed was clean. I forced him to be naked.” I bite my nail to stop the rambling, but the dam seems to be broken when I add, “We didn't have sex, and I slept really good, all warm and cozy

in his arms. He gave me an orgasm when we were in the stables last night. Not very sanitary, but he shuts out the havoc and turns it into static when he kisses me.”

Cosima wanders to the coffee pot, grabs one of the mugs from the cabinet, fills it, and takes a few sips. I keep staring at her while I’m now feeling self-conscious and wonder if the oversharing was a huge mistake.

She places her mug next to mine and gives me a grin. “Static is good. Orgasms too. The whole need to get naked in bed because it’s clean and no worn clothes getting near it part? Brilliant, sis. I need to remember that one and will use it if I can get a hot man to spend the night. But then again, if I have a guy over it will be for sex so we’d definitely be naked.”

I release the breath I didn’t realize I was holding. “He wants me to be his old lady.” I frown and rephrase. “He told me I’m his old lady, but I don’t know if I can handle being around all those...brothers.”

My sister waves her hand and grabs her coffee again. “Nonsense. You’ve made new friends over the years while working on jobs. You might block those parts out and ignore most people, but you’re not completely dysfunctional. I’m still here, Mom too for that matter. You wouldn’t have let Rourke give you an orgasm if you didn’t have—” She frowns. “Wait. We are talking about Rourke, right?”

“Yes,” I gasp in outrage. “I wouldn’t let anyone else this close.”

Cosima points a finger at me. “Right. That right there makes him special, sis. He’s managed to make you open up to him. Rourke doesn’t seem like the type of guy who would spend days getting to know someone just for a little action between the sheets. Oh, and like you mentioned, you didn’t even get action between the sheets. Good girl, taking a page from my book, getting action outside of the bedroom.”



I groan at the reminder of our earlier discussion about how Cosima had her own kink when it comes to sex.

Grabbing my empty mug and the coffee pot, I tell her as I let the dark liquid flow, “I need more coffee and this discussion is over.”

Laughter bubbles from her. “Whatever. Just know I’m happy for you, and very proud, sis. Now, I’m going to groom me some horses and clean some stables.”

“I’ll help,” I offer.

Shaking her head, she points at the hallway. “Naked man in your bed, woman. Go and seize the day, dick, whatever gives you an orgasm first. Go, hustle hussy.”

My jaw drops and more laughter flows from her as she dashes out the back door. I’m still staring at the door when I hear footsteps coming down the hallway.

“Mornin’, darlin’,” Rourke rumbles as he strides toward me.

He places a kiss on the top of my head, and steals my mug to take a sip before he hands it back.

“Hey,” I manage in a soft whisper.

How can he render me speechless? Maybe it’s his muscles, covered with tattoos, his scruffy jaw, blue eyes, the rough hands that are gripping my hips as he leans in close. Any, all, or maybe it’s the fact that I’ve let him in and know I’m safe in his arms and can be myself completely. He never holds judgment and indulges my weird demands.

“I like you,” I blurt.

His husky chuckle makes me realize how corny that sounds, even to my own ears.

“Good, ’cause I more than like you, Eastlynne,” he murmurs and nips my bottom lip before kissing me hard.

I let my fingers glide over his muscles and love the way his warm skin feels under my palms. He grips my waist and without any effort, he lifts me up and onto the counter. He steps between my legs and without thinking I wrap them around his waist.

He doesn’t give me a chance to think; he simply frees me from my mind and lets me feel. I automatically raise my arms when he tugs my shirt free and over my head to let it drop onto the floor. His mouth goes straight to my nipple.

A hungry growl vibrates through him and the feeling makes my nipples harden as a moan slips from me. His hand teases my other nipple and I let my fingers sink into his light blond hair to keep his mouth where I need him.

Electricity is sparking through my veins and warmth settles low in my body. I want the same pleasure he gave me yesterday. Except this time, I want to feel him inside me when I explode.

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“Rourke,” I croak.

He hums and switches nipples. “Fuck, darlin’. You have perfect tits.”

“Uhhh, thanks?” I mumble, and groan when he sucks hard.

The feeling goes straight to my clit and for a moment I wonder if I can orgasm while he’s playing with my breasts. At this point I don’t even care about the why and how; I want him to make me come.

No. That’s a lie. I want him inside me because I can’t be selfish, not when he’s making me feel this amazing. He didn’t come yesterday and now all his focus is on me again.

“I want you,” I whisper.

“You have me,” he instantly replies against my wet and hard nipple.

A growl rumbles through me and I tighten my fingers in his hair to rip him away from my chest and fiercely tell him, “I want your dick inside me, Rourke. Now. I need to feel you and come with me.”

“Fuck, woman,” he growls. “I love the mouth on you.”

He leans back and quickly opens his jeans to take out his dick. The air gets stuck in my throat when I catch a glimpse of shiny metal. Holy hell, is that why he kept it in his pants?

“You’re pierced?” I gasp. “And huge. Oh, shit.”

I move my ass while Rourke slides my shorts and panties off in one go. Fisting his hard, shiny with added hardware, length and places it at my center.

He glides it up and down through my drenched pussy lips and states, “Wait till you feel them inside you, sweetheart. You’ll love it.”

There isn’t time to reply when his hands grip my hips and he starts to pump with short strokes to slowly fill me up completely. I’m out of breath and have my nails digging into his back when he’s finally lodged deep inside me.

It feels as if he’s everywhere, filling me to the brim while teasing my nipple with his mouth, hands on my hips to keep me in place. All I can do is hold tight and don’t let go as he starts to take me. I have no other words for it.

We both lose control, letting go to chase the bliss. The pleasure builds and shakes my soul when I shatter into a million pieces. Wave after wave crashes through my body. Ecstasy from the inside out, and I’m vaguely aware of Rourke burying his mouth into the crook of my neck where he nips and sucks until he throws his head back and roars out my name.

I can feel him thickening inside me, hot pulses fill me up and all of it triggers another wave of pleasure to crash over me. This. This right here was a thousand times better than what happened yesterday in the stables. If each time with this man is more intense when it comes to pleasure, then I know deep down I made the best decision ever.

Rourke connects his gaze with mine and the open desire, warmth, admiration, and adoration is radiating from him. “Stunningly beautiful. That’s you, darlin’. But what we just did? Fuck.”

Smirking I quip, “Fuck, we sure did.”

He shakes his head. “Nah, what we did wasn’t fucking. It was more like hitting supernova on the sex scale. Damn.”

Laughter bubbles from me and it makes his dick slip from me. A rush of wetness follows and it’s then I realize we’re in the kitchen and my bare ass is on the counter while his sperm slides out. Yuck. I need to sanitize the kitchen as soon as possible.

Then I realize another crucial detail. “I’m not on birth control. I have hormonal migraines and have tried more than a handful, but it only made them worse. Oh shit. I’m so stupid.”

“Hey now,” Rourke murmurs and takes my face in his hands. “I remember you mentioning birth control not being able to help your hormonal migraines. I screwed up as well, it wasn’t just you.”

I groan and let my forehead drop to his chest.

“So, I do hope you’re open to the chance of having kids.” There’s huskiness in his voice. “Because I intend to keep on emptying myself inside you. Damn, I rather not wrap up after knowing what it feels like to be bare inside a woman. You were the first.”

“You were my first too,” I muse. “My first time was with a condom, not exactly comfortable, but it could have been the whole first-time thing too.”

“We’re not going to talk about other men or past fucks when my cum is still leaking out of you,” Rourke rumbles.

I glance down at the mess and realize I’m still sitting on the counter. “My sister isn’t

the only one with the kink to have sex everywhere else except the bedroom.”

Laughter rips from Rourke and I chuckle along with him until knocking on the front door interrupts us.

Rourke lifts me off the counter. “Go clean up, I’ll go see who’s at the door.”

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He doesn't have to tell me twice. I quickly snatch my shirt from the floor and wipe the counter where I was sitting with it. I grab the rest of my clothes and run through the hallway to head for my bedroom.

Closing and locking the door behind me, I jog into the bathroom and throw the dirty clothes into the hamper. I turn on the shower and rush through cleaning myself. I wonder who is at the door and I wish I could hurry up, but my need to follow my routine doesn't allow me to speed through it.

Ten minutes later I'm finally dressed and ready to check on Rourke when I hear multiple loud voices coming from the back of the house. I rush out of the bedroom, through the hall, and find the house empty. A scream that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end pierces the air.

Dread fills my veins because I recognize the voice. Cosima. She's in pain? My fear and anxiety don't keep me from running to the back door, but I do stop in my tracks when I see Parker carrying my sister's bloody body.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

– ROURKE –

"I need the doc to get here right fucking now. Yes, I'm on my way, just send him over." I end the call and shove my phone back into my pocket when I notice Eastlynne running toward us.

"What happened?" she demands in a voice filled with panic.

“Get back inside the house. Now, Eastlynne,” I bark and don’t wait for her to listen but instead, I swoop her up and carry her inside.

I place her on her feet and hold the door open for Parker who carries Cosima inside. He gently places her down onto the couch.

“Grab some shit to clean the blood. Ice. We need something cold to reduce the swelling,” Parker orders and I stride into the kitchen to grab some clean towels.

Eastlynne is right behind me, grabbing the first aid kit along with a bag of peas from the freezer.

“What happened?” she hisses as we both rush back into the living room.

Parker takes the first aid kit from me and pops it open to get busy with treating Cosima’s injuries.

I take the bag of peas from Eastlynne and place it gently over Cosima’s eye when I tell her, “Parker came by to tell me that a herd of Longhorns broke free or that someone caused it. He asked if the animals were okay here, so we went out back to check. That’s where we stumbled onto someone kicking the shit out of your sister. Breeze’s stall was open. We think they might have tried to sneak her out and Cosima caught them.”

“Oh no,” Eastlynne gasps and stares horrified at her sister. “Why isn’t she talking? Is she conscious? Is she going to be okay?”

“Stop squeaking. My head hurts,” Cosima groans and tries to sit up while removing the bag of peas.

Parker wraps his fingers around her neck to keep her in place.



“Do not move,” he firmly states. “You took a few punches to the head and got kicked in other parts when you went down. There’s a doctor on the way and you need to stay in place until he says you’re fine to sit up. Understood? If not? I have no problem tying you down for your own safety.”

“You sound perfect.” I’m sure the woman tries to hum, but it sounds more like a groan. “A hand on my throat and a threat to tie me up. Why now? I finally meet a man who sounds like he can live up to some spicy hot and nakedness, and I look like a punching bag. Eastlynne, at least tell me he’s hot. I can’t open my eyes to check.”

Parker chuckles. “It’s good to hear your sister has enough sass to joke around when shit gets bad.”

Eastlynne huffs and grumbles, “She’s not joking. If anything, it sounds like there’s nothing wrong with her.”

“Is that so?” Parker croons with interest.

“Stop that dirty mind of yours right fucking now,” I snap at my VP. “That’s my old lady’s sister you’re flirting with. Not to mention, she just got the shit kicked out of her.”

Cosima groans. “I’m in pain. At least give me something to distract me.”

“Anytime you need a distraction? Come find me,” Parker fucking whispers to her. “You know where I live.”

Cosima winces when she turns toward the fucker’s voice. “Sounds nice, pretty boy. But we’ll see. Specifically because I cannot see right now and you could be butt-ugly.”

“Then I’ll blindfold you before I hogtie you and fuck you from behind,” Parker states and I’m ready to grab the fucker by the throat and hogtie him my-fucking-self so I can kick him out of the damn house.

Cosima chuckles and abruptly stops to groan, “Ouch.”

“Prez, can you check if the doc is here yet? I want to give her some painkillers ’cause I hate seeing her in pain, but I’m not sure what the doc has in mind. Human meds and bodies aren’t my strong points. Now if she was a mare.”

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“If you’re wishing for me to be a mare, I’d like you to be hung like a horse,” Cosima states.

Eastlynne rubs her temples and is now the one groaning. “Did I mention I’m not the only weirdo in the family? My sister doesn’t have a filter and apparently has no freaking shame.”

“In pain, sis,” Cosima grumbles. “I’m allowed to say these things. There are rules in place if people are in pain or close to dying.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re not dying and it might involve people on pain medication saying stupid shit,” Eastlynne snaps. “Or those with brain injuries. Hey, is one of her pupils blown?”

Parker chuckles. “No, that’s the first thing I checked.”

I notice movement outside of the window. “Doc and backup are here.”

Jogging to the door, I let the handful of brothers inside. Our club doctor instantly attends to Cosima. Eastlynne is standing close to keep an eye on her sister and I reach out to touch her arm.

Thankfully, she doesn’t jump away from my touch and actually steps close enough to bury her face against my chest. I wrap my arms around her and place a kiss on the top of her head. I feel the way she breathes me in and it’s heartwarming to know we’ve fully connected.

“I need to head out,” I regretfully tell her. “And I need for you to stay here and look after your sister.”

She tips her head back to stare at me. “What? Why?”

I jerk my chin in the direction of the stables. “They were after your horse. It’s safe to presume Erwin Desmond was behind this attack. He and his men are known for stealing horses.”

“We have brothers chasing down the herd that broke free from the pasture. I’ll head out and—”

“No,” I tell my VP, cutting him off. “I want you to stay here with my old lady. I’m going to take your bike and cross the pastures instead of taking the road. If I run into any of our cattle, we’ll bring them home.”

Parker nods and I direct my attention to the other brothers standing in the living room. “Walker, Luke, Silas, Elmore. You guys are with me. Alfie and Decker, stay with VP.”

Parker throws me his keys and I snatch them right out of the air. I tip my woman’s head back and kiss her in front of everyone. When we come up for air, I notice her pink cheeks and dazed look.

“Please stay safe,” she whispers.

“Same goes for you, darlin’,” I rumble and jog out the door.

My brothers follow and I straddle Parker’s dirt bike before firing it up. The rumble of bikes intensifies as I ride off around Eastlynne’s house. We all have experience when it comes to riding rough terrain and giving chase through the pastures.

Not only did we grow up at a ranch where we ride and breed horses and Longhorns, but we also love riding our motorcycles. We use both horses and bikes to herd cattle. Our livestock is used to it and it definitely gives us an advantage when it comes to riding hot blood, or cold steel.

I scan my surroundings, knowing the guy who attacked Cosima in the stables couldn't have been alone. Which reminds me, I have some cleaning up to do since we have a dead body lying in Eastlynne's stable.

At least the horses are safe. For now. I can't begin to imagine what those fuckers will do to them if they do get their hands on any of our horses. Thank fuck Parker came over as soon as they found out about the herd breaking free.

Parker was right to assume it might be a diversion and he put some of the brothers on stakeout to guard our stables and pastures through the security cameras. Thank fuck we have a huge brotherhood with lots of people, both older and younger generations who can help out.

The experience of the older generation is comforting since they have been through their share of danger. This time, though? I'm the president and the responsibility lands on my shoulders. Not only that, but my old lady's sister was hurt because of the club. Feeling guilty doesn't do shit, however, getting revenge is rather soothing.

The burn of flesh being torn makes me hiss, and the sound of the gunshot catching up causes my body to jump into action. Instead of riding a straight line, I start to move to avoid being a sitting duck while I figure out where the gunshot came from.

Movement near a tree catches my attention and I point my bloody arm in that direction. I can see my brothers spreading out in that direction. Walker fires his gun, and I can see the man who was shooting at us take a hit.

He tries to grab the reins of his horse, but the animal is spooked and throws its head in the air. The roar of our bikes adds to the animal's distress, clearly not used to it like our horses are and it staggers to break free.

We're closing in on the fucker, but we're too slow to prevent what he's doing. Gunshots ring out and Walker manages to kill the fucker but not before the idiot shoots at his horse. I bring the bike to a stop and jump off.

Walker is already kicking the gun from the dead man's hand while I try to calm down the injured and cornered horse. I keep my voice even and calm while muttering soothing words. He lets me take the reins and I get my first look at the flesh wound on his neck.

"There, there, boy. You're going to be just fine," I murmur and turn to Walker. "Text Parker to let him know I need him in Eastlynne's stable. Have Decker bring his daughter up to speed about all this shit. There are going to be too many bodies to hide otherwise. Oh, and I need a few of you to check the property for our cattle, and there might be another horse from the dead fucker in Eastlynne's stable."

"You got it, Prez," Walker rumbles.

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:54 am*

It's a long walk to Eastlynne's place and I'm relieved when I see Parker standing in front of the stables. He's utterly calm as he approaches the horse to inspect the wound.

"Let me take him," he says and I hand him the reins. "Walker called ahead and I have everything set to clean the wound. I'll stitch it up and put a drain into it. I can't believe some people. Thank fuck he's dead, shooting his own damn horse."

"We need to take all of them out. I ordered Decker to bring in Kathleen. This shit is getting too damn twisted and we have two dead bodies which I assume can be linked to Erwin Desmond. She can build a case against him, and I'm not afraid to testify to the fact that one of his handlers shot and injured a horse."

"Good," Parker rumbles. "I don't mind hiding a body, but a whole pile is a bit of a fuss and my back will appreciate the help."

I nod and ask, "How's Cosima doing?"

"Mild concussion. The swelling and bruising around the eyes will become worse over the upcoming few days. She has bruised ribs where the fucker kicked her. It will take a few weeks for her to recover. At least there isn't any permanent damage. They'll know for sure when she's able to open her eyes. For now they're swollen shut. She has a follow-up appointment set at the hospital when the swelling has gone down." Parker sighs and gently pets the horse's nose. "I don't know about the mental trauma. She's holding strong with the jokes and tough shit she throws out, but it might just be her way of coping."

“She lives with my old lady and Cosima has always been there for her sister, so I damn well know she’ll be returning the favor. I’ll keep an eye out as well.”

Parker nods. “Keep me posted. I’m going to take care of this one. You should have yourself checked as well. Flesh wound?”

I glance at my bloody arm and wince before I give Parker a chin lift. I stroll in the direction of the house, needing to handle a few tasks myself before I can spend time with Eastlynne. Hell, I hope she doesn’t blame me for bringing the heat to her place, and getting her sister injured.

She didn’t seem to be, but there’s been enough time in between for her to realize exactly what happened. It’ll add to the pressure of what it all entails to be the president’s old lady. I know damn well she created her own safe haven to balance her anxiety and other issues, and a load of havoc just landed on her doorstep...and it was me who opened the door to all of it.

## CHAPTER NINE

Two days later

– EASTLYNNE –

“I shouldn’t have stayed away,” I grumble as I close Buckey’s stall.

With what happened at my ranch, Cosima getting hurt, I had no choice but to stay there instead of working with Buckey. He needs love and attention regularly, even though I had my hands full with taking care of Cosima. The complications due to the attack are causing extra stress and she needs to be cared for. Then there’s the fact that I’ve also been working on the new, injured horse Rourke left in my stable.



“It’ll be fine,” I hear a voice rumble and I turn to see Colt, one of the older Iron Hot Blood generation. “My horse, Cavier, was injured when he was young. He was in an accident where the trailer he was in crashed. I didn’t have the time to work on him every day because of my own issues. He turned out just fine.”

I give him a tiny smile, knowing he’s right. I’ve been around his son, Walker, more than a few times and he looks just like him.

“I know, but I’d rather have the horses I work with at my ranch. It’s why I bought the place.” I sigh and lean against the stable.

Colt shrugs. “Tell Prez, I’m sure the man would be open to the idea if you’d welcome more brothers into your home. You know, ’cause the horse in question is the centerpiece of the hate raining down on us and all.”

I cross my arms in front of my chest, feeling the frustration and annoyance fill my veins. My life took a drastic turn the past few days. Trying new meds to help dull the triggers and anxiety, opening up to new people. Well, more like Rourke slipping under my skin by working together.

With him comes a circle of people who all have their own demons to fight. Muriel, Kathleen’s mother, for instance, used to be a germaphobe. Kathleen told me how her parents met because of her mother having a stalker. She was placed in Decker’s care because of his ties with the FBI.

Their dog, Hammer, an Australian cattle dog, was one of the first who helped her overcome, and get a handle on it, along with everything else on the ranch. Sadly, Hammer died, but they have some of his offspring. Kathleen has one, Wrench, and he’s trained as a K9. Sadie, Spiro and Tristine’s daughter, has two and they’re trained search and rescue dogs.

Which reminds me. “Kathleen and Rourke are in church to talk about how things are going with the...hate raining.”

I frown and wonder if I should have mentioned the meeting.

Colt chuckles. “I know about the meeting, little one. You knowing about it shows the level of trust Rourke puts in you. Some old ladies don’t thrive well if details are kept from them. Rourke mentioned to everyone how you like routine, not having your personal space breached, and no surprises. I used to be a loner myself. PTSD changed me, but so did my horse, this brotherhood, and my old lady. Life hits you with challenges, but thank fuck there are also things that help balance it out. Well, if you allow them into your life. You being here, opening up? Good shit, darling. It might be hard to keep focus with all the turmoil, but the road of life will clear up when you let the dust settle.”

I let my body relax as I take in his words and dammit, “I don’t regret the tiny steps I’ve taken since I met Rourke, even if some were forced. The meds also help, along with Rourke who seems to have all the patience and understanding in the world when it comes to me.”

“Everything is worth the patience and understanding when it comes to finding the one woman who shines bright and overshadows the downsides in life.” Colt grins. “I happen to speak from experience, and I’ve seen many of my brothers fall for their old lady. There’s no better feeling than knowing you are able to stand side-by-side and share ups and downs. Even if we have a whole brotherhood at our back.”

My head bobs. “These past few days have been—” I try to think of how to describe it and finally go with, “Uncomfortable.”

“Understandable with her handling most of your social contacts. She’s recovering, and it’s forcing you to step up as well.”

He's right. "It scares the crap out of me. Cosima is a highly active person and now she's mostly resting in bed. Like you said, she would handle everything when it comes to communicating with others. I don't want to bother her and she needs the rest with her concussion, and the complication she has along with it." Shaking my head I admit the scariest part, "I hope the loss of sight is temporary and that there's no permanent damage to the optic nerve."

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Colt reaches out and places his large hand over my shoulder to give it a gentle squeeze. “From what I’ve heard? Cosima is strong and will handle whatever hand life deals out. Besides, she has a fierce sister who’s the president’s old lady. You both have a whole brotherhood to fall back on as well.”

I’m still processing his statement when he steps back and strolls out of the stables. My mind jumps to the fact that he breached my personal space and touched my shoulder. Yet, within the moment I didn’t think about it because I know him. Tiny steps forward are a way to overcome issues that block things in my everyday life.

There’s a bounce in my step when I walk in the direction of the clubhouse. The chat with Colt gave me confidence and the ability to see things from another perspective. The situation with Cosima has held my heart in a grip of fear. All while I now feel strong enough to handle anything she needs.

I owe her. She’s been my rock for years and it’s the least I can do. I might fail, but like Colt mentioned; I have a brotherhood at my back. Some of the old ladies of the older generation showed up to drop off food the past few days, along with some of their grown kids who are around my age. It made me feel awkward, but it’s also nice to have friends, and the option to ask for help.

When I enter the main room of the clubhouse, I notice Parker sitting at the bar.

“Hey,” I quip.

He glances over his shoulder at me. “Hey, yourself. How’s your sister?”

Cosima has asked me to keep Parker out of the house. He was sweet and helpful the first day but the day after he came to visit and she refused to so much as talk to him. With the added complications she demanded I didn't share it with anyone. The only ones who know are the doctor, Rourke because he went with us to the hospital, and now Colt.

"Still recovering," I reply and point at church. "Are Rourke and Kathleen still in there?"

Parker glances at his phone. "Yeah. They're expecting company so if you need to talk to your old man I'd do it now."

I smile. "Thanks, Parker."

He clears his throat and hesitantly asks, "Cosima still refusing anyone to visit? Or is it just me?"

Shit. I don't like lying and Parker is genuine and a nice guy.

I wring my hands and tell him, "She's not herself. She needs time and needs to heal. The complications show she has to take as much rest as she can."

Parker jumps to his feet and is barking out his words. "Complications? What fucking complications and why am I only now hearing about fucking complications?"

I wince and take a step back. Parker curses and mutters out an apology.

At the same time, I hear a door opening and Rourke's voice asking, "What's going on?"

Parker glares at Rourke. "Eastlynne just mentioned Cosima has complications.

What's going on?"

Rourke's eyes collide with mine before they land on Rourke. "It's Cosima's private business and she's asked Eastlynne to keep it that way." His arm comes up. "Mind joining me in church for a bit, East? I only have a few more minutes until our new contact will be here."

I rush toward him and let my palm glide over his so he can pull me close. His lips land on mine and I melt into him. The delicious pause button of my brain always hits whenever Rourke has his hands on me.

Every touch, every kiss, every-freaking-thing he does soothes my soul. It's easy to follow him because he makes me feel like he's always there to have my back, to catch me if I stumble, and to give me a shoulder to cry on.

Pulling back, I murmur, "Thank you."

His eyebrows shoot up. "Why's that, sweetheart?"

"For your patience, your help, your persistence." I can feel my cheeks heat. "For being you."

The dimple in his cheek becomes prominent.

"I'm more me because of you." He pulls me tight against him and I place my head against his chest. "Pacing myself, forcing a different approach to get to know you also made me more aware of shit. I can't explain it. I guess it's somewhere along the lines of becoming aware of how life rushed past me. How I've taken things for granted, while in fact, everything can be a struggle either inside your mind or facing tasks. Doing everything myself, throwing out orders, so many fucking dimensions and you never really think about all the details unless you stumble to a stop and put

life itself under a microscope. Hell, I'd freak out too."

He pulls back and his voice turns into a whisper when he says, "Kathleen and her mother don't eat strawberries. Wanna know why?"

My lips slightly part, but I'm almost afraid to ask.

It seems he doesn't need me to ask when he gives me the answer anyway. "Because when you put strawberries in saltwater...worms come crawling out."

"You asshole," Kathleen snaps and smacks Rourke's shoulder. "You shouldn't ruin strawberries for her. Now she'll never eat them again." She pierces me with a look. "Please don't Google it, you don't need those images inside your head. Trust me. I didn't believe my mom when she answered my question of why she never ate strawberries. Details are overrated, sometimes you just need to say fuck it and enjoy."

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I process the weird information and all I can come up with is, “So you do eat strawberries?”

Kathleen looks horrified. “Hell no. But I do sometimes use the two-second rule if I drop something delicious.”

“Two-second rule?” I muse and then it hits me. “Oh, yuck. Everything that lands on the floor needs to be thrown away.”

Kathleen snaps her fingers. “Not everything. Besides, we all need some germs every now and then. It’s the whole balance of good and bad.”

I wrinkle my nose and hear Rourke rumble, “That’s enough. Not everyone needs the germs reminder. The balance of good and bad, though? That’s what we’ll be discussing.”

“Oh,” I quip. “That reminds me. Would it be okay if we take Buckey to my place? I’d rather have him there to work with him.”

“I don’t think that’s a smart idea,” Kathleen states.

Rourke sighs but doesn’t get a chance to answer because Parker rumbles, “Incoming. I think reinforcements are here. Well, it’s just one guy.”

We glance at the monitor and watch a large man swing his leg off his bike. He’s wearing a Stetson with a leather chin strap instead of a helmet and the cowboy boots, along with the leather vest, shows he’s like all the others around here. The patches on



his leather vest, though? They're different than the Iron Hot Blood ones.

The guy steps inside the clubhouse and it's Kathleen who states, "You're not Atticus Wolffield."

The guy chuckles. "Nice of you to notice, sweet thing."

He dismisses her and steps closer to Rourke who guides me to the side to put some space between me and the stranger. I don't know if he's doing it out of protection or for my worry brain, but I do appreciate it.

The guy holds out his hand. "Rourke, I presume. I'm Marvin. My father told me you guys unwittingly crossed the fuckers I've been building a case against."

"You're building a case against Erwin Desmond?" Kathleen questions and then snaps, "I call bullshit. Cowboy Bikers MC Lawmen are an official division of the government. Being above the law, but upholding it to bring down criminals in your own way. It doesn't mean you work offline. So, why aren't you guys linked to any of the active cases involving Erwin Desmond? No one has been able to bring him and his men down due to lack of evidence."

Marvin's head slowly turns to Kathleen. He lets his gaze glide over her body from her lips down to her cowboy boots. Her dog is leaning against her leg and bares his teeth. The corner of his mouth twitches.

Kathleen is visibly fuming and I can tell she's a breath away from snapping at him some more when Marvin completely dismisses her and tells Rourke, "Prez? Mind if we have a word?"

"I'm the one who called you here," Kathleen snaps.

Rourke holds up his hand. “Enough. Kathleen, mind keeping my old lady company? And for the love of everything that’s holy...please don’t bring up stuff you did before this fucker stepped into the clubhouse.”

It’s a good thing Rourke and Marvin both turn their backs on us and head for church because the look Kathleen is stabbing in their direction? It’s clear she wants to throttle both of them.

## CHAPTER TEN

– ROURKE –

I shut the door behind us and the first thing Marvin states is, “Quite the mouth on that woman.”

Crossing my arms in front of my chest, I lift one of my eyebrows and keep my voice even when I fire back, “The woman in question is the sheriff. Not to mention, she was born into this MC and while she might not be a member, she’s just as respected.”

Marvin holds his hands palms up. “I meant no disrespect.”

“You’d better not,” I grumble and pull out my chair to take a seat.

The fucker grabs one of the other chairs. “You said she’s not a member, does she have an old man? Boyfriend? Husband?”

“Keep your cock in your pants. You’re here for a case. If not? There’s the fucking door, let it hit you on the back of your head on the way out,” I snarl and get to my feet.

Marvin leans back in his chair. “The reason I ask is because a sheriff that hot? She

shouldn't be alone at night.”

Anger hits me hard. Who does this asshole think he is, coming to my clubhouse acting like a fucking horndog?

“Erwin Desmond and his gang use women as punching bags.” Marvin surges forward and places his forearms on the table in front of him. “They don’t shy away from violence and the abusing and killing horses part? It’s only the tip of the iceberg because their main business is dogfights. The horses that don’t stay on their hooves? They get fed to the dogs. They also use injured horses to get the dogs excited before a fight.”

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I can only stare at the fucker in horror.

Marvin shakes his head in disgust. “Believe me, you don’t want to look at the evidence, and I seriously dislike the thought of that woman.” He jabs his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the door. “Or any other woman for that matter, near those fuckers. I suggest we hunt Erwin and his gang down and take them out.”

“That simple?” I scoff. “I hate to say it, but I did not see any dogs at their ranch when I picked up the stallion.”

“I’m sure they have them stashed somewhere out of sight but still on their property.” Marvin sighs. “I might have been lying a tidbit when I mentioned I was building a case before Kathleen called. I built it after my father told me about it. Last night they had one of their underground dogfights and I was about an hour late at the scene when I finally discovered where it was. The evidence I gathered contained photographs along with the details I witnessed, and it was all we needed. This morning, I emailed the reports to my government contacts, and to my father, resulting in the all clear to take them down with your help.”

I have to blink a few times at the flow of information. “You’re saying the paperwork for taking those fuckers out is handled and you have the legal authority to kill them?”

He puts his hand up to keep it flat and steady before he rocks it mid-air. “Somewhat.” He drops his hand. “Technically, and preferably, we want them in custody to bring them to justice. If they resist or put us or others in danger? Then yes, we have the authority to take them down. The lovely lady outside requested help and was forwarded my father’s number. This allowed me to take lead and have the choice of

how to handle it. Your MC has a history of handling criminals and bringing them to justice. From the details I've read, a woman assaulted, one of your former members killed, and shit? I'd say you guys have plenty of motivation to bring them down."

This sounds too good to be true. "Every single member of my brotherhood is legally covered to take them down? No repercussions whatsoever?"

"Yes. I can have it in black and white on your desk later today if needed, but my word is law." He points at the door. "With the one condition that the women stay on lockdown."

Fuck. Kathleen is not going to like it, which is why I tell him, "We can't leave out the sheriff."

"We can and we will," Marvin states with resolution. "If you need me to inform her then I'd be happy to have a little chat with that woman."

I shake my head. "You'll do no such thing. I'll handle it and you make sure I have those papers on my desk. Now, when and where do you want to take those fuckers down?"

"Preferably as soon as possible. We do need to stake them out and have some information about how many men are on the property. Erwin Desmond has to be confirmed at the scene before we raid the place. He's the main player and the rest of the gang will fall apart once we take him down."

"I have a prospect on stakeout. The last update I received this morning was that Erwin hasn't returned yet." I grab my phone and shoot a message to the prospect in question. "I've put around-the-clock surveillance on that fucker after the attack on my old lady's ranch where her sister was injured. It was a club decision to bring Kathleen in on the incident and she asked for two days to see if she could obtain backup and

take them down the legal way. See the issue I have with you taking her out of the loop?"

Marvin pulls a stack of papers from the inside pocket of his leather cut and places them on the table in front of me. "Erwin has been married once, to the woman who owned the ranch he's now residing. The woman died two days after they were married and her death was ruled an accident. Trampled by a horse. She was unrecognizable. I have no illusions, this was Erwin's doing. He has a mile-long rap sheet filled with assault and battery. Call me a sexist, an asshole, a mean motherfucker preventing a woman from doing her job: I don't fucking care. What I do care about is keeping women safe and protected. Now, gather your men and make two teams so we can hit the back and the front of the property at the same time. I'm going to do some scoping around at Erwin's ranch and I'll be back in a few hours."

I shove the chair back. "I'll have my brothers ready when you return."

Marvin strides out of church and doesn't give anyone a second glance as he leaves the clubhouse.

"What did he want?" Kathleen questions.

Releasing a deep sigh, I give it to her straight. "He's taking over and will give the club the right to take Erwin Desmond and his men down. All legal and shit. The only condition is that we keep the women out of it. Which includes you too."

"What the fuck?" Kathleen snarls. "He can't do that. It's my case, my fucking town. I'm the one who brought them in. That egocentric motherfucker."

"You done?" I snap.

A gentle hand slides over my forearm and my gaze collides with Eastlynne. She

gently shakes her head at me and turns to Kathleen.

“They must have a solid reason,” Eastlynne states. “And like you said, you’re the one who brought them in, and you wouldn’t have done that if you didn’t think they’d be a good choice to handle it.”

Kathleen is still visibly fuming but nods at my woman’s statement.

Taking a deep breath she pins me with a hard look. “Well? Any truth to your old lady’s words? Do they have a solid reason to take me out of the loop?”

The pride in my voice is evident. “There is. Erwin and his men are considered a gang and are active in dogfighting. The horses are considered food if they’ve served their purpose. They also like to target women ’cause Erwin has a rap sheet filled with assault and battery. Marvin also thinks he married and killed his wife, who happened to own the ranch that’s now in his name.”

“Fuck,” Kathleen murmurs, and her shoulders sag. “How the hell did he get all that info in such a short time? He must have been working the case longer than I have, just like he said.”

“Nah, he was lying about that part,” I find myself saying.

Kathleen places a hand on her dog’s head. “He wasn’t building a case, before I called them, like he said he was?”

“Yeah. Marvin managed to get all the details after you contacted them and he found out where Erwin and his gang were having the dogfight. He gathered all the visual evidence and details they needed and has already filed the report and has the legal side arranged to take them down.”

I take in the way Wrench, her dog, is leaning against her leg and I suddenly understand Marvin's actions.



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Jerking my chin in Wrench's direction, I tell her, "You two are the headliners of what gets Erwin's rocks off. Marvin's condition isn't as sexist or egocentric as it might seem."

"He's still an asshole," Kathleen grumbles.

Eastlynn chuckles and I find myself chuckling right along with her.

Kathleen sighs. "Am I at least allowed to stay with Eastlynne and her sister? I don't think they should be unprotected. Maybe it's smart to have all the women stay at the clubhouse so we don't have to split up all the men."

"I won't ask Cosima to come here," Eastlynne says with a load of worry in her eyes.

I give her a tight nod, understanding the complications Cosima has and the wish for them to stay private. "Kathleen offered to stay with you two. I'll have Parker stay inside as well, and a team of a few other brothers will be stationed around the house, just to be safe."

"Not Parker," Eastlynne grumbles.

"Nonnegotiable," I tell her. "Parker is my VP and has worked with Kathleen countless times. I need those two inside your house so I know you're well protected. I'll order Parker to stay clear of Cosima's bedroom unless things turn to shit."

"Fine," Eastlynne huffs.

I wave Parker over and we head into church where I give him a quick rundown of the information I just learned. We also divide the available men into four teams. One team will be at my old lady's ranch. One will stay here to guard our ranch and women, and two other teams will take down Erwin and his men.

I will lead one team while Marvin will lead the other. For now, we have everything set and we walk out of church to get ready to take Eastlynne home.

She's standing right next to Kathleen and the both of them are wearing the same hard look on their face.

"What's going on?" I question.

"We're taking Buckey with us," Eastlynne states.

Fuck. I rub the back of my neck and wonder how to handle the situation. This morning I denied her because there wasn't a plan to take Erwin down. Buckey is the reason why all of this started, but I guess with us going after Erwin...decision made.

"Fine. We'll put him in the trailer and put him in your stable. But I don't want you out and about working with him until I say it's safe."

A brilliant smile slides across her face right before she launches herself at me. Our bodies collide and my arms are filled with the woman who has rapidly overtaken my heart. From cursing my ass for getting in her personal space to full-on collision by her own choice.

We've come a long way in a short timeframe, and I have all the faith in a wide and open future for both of us. Though, we do need to make sure it's safe first. Hopefully, it will be by the end of this day when we've taken Erwin out and every single fucker linked to him.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

– EASTLYNNE –

“I hope he gets shot in the balls after everything is wrapped up,” Kathleen grumbles as she stares out the window. “Serves him right to ride back on his bike, every single second in pain, to go wherever the hell he came from.”

Parker, who is keeping an eye on the security cameras, snorts. “A bit vicious don’t you think? He’s here because you asked for help. He’s watching out for you, and your dog from what I’ve heard.”

Kathleen turns away from the window to glare at Parker. “I’m trained and qualified to be with every single one of them out there.”

“That’s why you’re here with me watching over precious cargo.” Parker shoots me a wink.

Kathleen winces and mutters, “I’m not complaining about the importance of my task.”

“No, about the asshole showing up and taking over.” Parker chuckles. “Don’t worry about it, Kathleen. You’re still the sheriff and that fucker will be gone come morning. You’ll never have to see him again.”

There’s a loud bang coming from Cosima’s bedroom followed by stumbling. I’m rushing into the hallway and so is Parker.

I barely manage to grab him by his leather cut. “Parker, stop. We had an agreement.”

Parker jabs his hands in the air. “Fine. Just go and check if she’s okay in there.”

Pointing at the living room, I wait until he's left to check on Cosima. I hate pushing Parker away. He's the vice president of the motorcycle club and out of all the people in that brotherhood, I've been around Parker the most. Aside from Rourke, of course.

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Parker is honest, direct, trustworthy, and seems to be interested in my sister. For a moment Cosima was too, even if she met him after being attacked and never actually saw his face. But with the complications and her recovering from what happened, she's not taking any visitors. Especially not a guy she's interested in.

"Hey, are you alright, Cosima?" I ask as I open the door.

Cosima curls into herself and I stay rooted in place.

"Hey, it's just me, okay?" I tell her in a soothing voice.

She releases a frustrated growl. "I hate this shit. All I did was reach for the water bottle and I couldn't even see the damn thing so it fell down. Then I stepped on it and almost broke my fucking neck. I'm disoriented from almost falling and didn't know where the fuck I was standing in my room. Fuck!"

I can't help but wince at the frustration, anger, and despair echoing in her voice. There are no comforting words I can give her. We both heard the doctor; these things take time and can only heal with rest. It's the same with the other symptoms due to the concussion. She has issues with concentrating and with her memory, clearly feeling emotional, but who wouldn't with the complications? The sleeping issues are also a pain because she needs the rest.

From here I notice the water bottle is half under the bed. "I'm stepping into the room."

Cosima swings her arm out and I take her hand to guide her to the side of the bed.

“I hate this,” she murmurs and gets back into bed.

I snatch the bottle from underneath the bed. “Do you still want the water?”

She holds out her hand again. “Maybe we should switch the water with some alcohol ’cause I could really use the whole ‘drink myself into oblivion’ status right about now.”

“I get it.” Placing the water in her hand, I add, “But drinking booze will have to wait till your brain can handle it. Besides, adding painkillers to an alcohol cocktail will double the havoc inside your brain. Definitely not a good idea.”

“I hate it when you’re in charge, and I love it at the same time because you’ve really stepped out of your comfort zone. It’s me. I hate myself and feel so damn useless. I’m normally the one who looks after the both of us,” she grumbles.

Stepping closer, I place my hand on her arm and she jerks away from me.

“Shit. Sorry. I’m so damn jumpy. Another thing I fucking hate,” she growls. “I’m tired. Sorry. Maybe I can finally get some sleep.”

Emotions are clogging my throat. Feeling helpless sucks.

“Okay, let me know if you need anything,” I croak.

She doesn’t say anything and stays huddled in the blanket as I back out of the room. Closing the door behind me, I wander back to the living room where Parker is waiting for me.

“And?” he practically demands.

“She’s a ball of nerves and is angry at the world. So, leave her alone for at least another few weeks,” I snap.

Both Parker and Kathleen’s phones give a notification of an incoming message. Parker glances at his screen and turns it to me. I take in the message and release a deep breath. Hanging around the house waiting is one thing, knowing they have IDed Erwin and are about to enter his ranch, guns blazing is a whole other thing.

“Great, now I’m a ball of nerves,” I grumble and move toward the couch to let myself drop onto it.

The couch dips beside me. “It’s not the first time Rourke has faced danger or helped catch criminals. We’ve all had training and can surely handle a gun and hold our own during a fight.”

“Parker is right,” Kathleen states. “I’ve seen it as a kid growing up, and as an adult how the brotherhood works flawlessly together. Sitting here, waiting until they have it handled is way worse, but you’re helping by staying safe.”

“You’re one to talk,” I grumble.

Kathleen chuckles and points at the empty spot beside me. “Mind if I sit down?”

I smile at her thoughtfulness. “Thanks for asking.” I bump against Parker’s shoulder with my own. “Instead of simply plunking down like this one did.”

Parker shrugs. “You tolerate me now, I don’t need to ask. Besides, it’s not like I’m sitting on your lap.”

“Do you tolerate people once you get to know them?” Kathleen asks as she sits down.

I think about how to answer and all I come up with is, “Maybe. It gets easier when I’ve spent time with a person. Colt touched my shoulder earlier today when he wanted to give me some support and kindness when we’re talking about a heavy subject. Yes, I might tolerate more once I know and trust them.”



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“Good to know.” Parker bumps his shoulder against mine.

I roll my eyes and mutter, “Don’t push it. I might tolerate you guys, but that doesn’t mean it’s an open invite to breach my personal space, touch my stuff, grab food off my plate, or sit on my bed or anything.”

“What the fuck? Why would I want to sit on your bed or steal your food?” Parker asks, eyes wide.

“You know.” I wave my hand. “That stuff some people do when you’re at a restaurant and snatch a fry off your plate.”

Parker falls silent and Kathleen chuckles. “You do know Parker is a fry snatcher, right?”

I give Parker a stern look. “I might have noticed and it’s why I brought it up.”

“Noted,” Parker grumbles.

Movement outside catches my attention.

Kathleen and Parker get to their feet, and it’s Kathleen who asks, “Are you expecting someone? A delivery maybe?”

I stand and glance out the window. “To be honest? I have no freaking clue.”

Parker steps in front of me. “You shouldn’t be standing near the windows.”

“Why? Do you think they’re going to shoot us instead of delivering stuff?” I snort, and feel my shoulders sag the next instant when I realize, “Dammit. I don’t want to bother Cosima, but she’s the only one who knows these things.”

We watch as two men get out of the white delivery van.

Kathleen places her hands on her hips. “Well, we’re not going to open the door unless we know for sure they are supposed to deliver something you guys ordered.”

“Two brothers are out front, a few others around the back. They will handle it,” Parker states.

“I’ll ask,” I mutter, not wanting the guys outside to get hurt, and stomp in the direction of the hallway.

Opening the door, I step inside the bedroom and watch how Cosima jolts upright, snatches the bottle of water from the bedside table and hurls it in my direction.

“What the hell?” I snap and barely manage to dodge the bottle. “You can’t find the thing when you want a sip of water but flawlessly grab it to throw it at my freaking head?”

“Be glad it wasn’t the lamp I grabbed because I can’t fucking see anything and simply snatched the first thing I felt,” Cosima fires back.

“Gee, thanks,” I mumble under my breath and release a sigh. “Hey, do you remember if we have something scheduled to be delivered today? There’s a white delivery van out front.”

“I don’t know, East.” She points at the bathroom. “Check the calendar on the fridge. Food for the horses should come in this week, but I can’t remember the date.”

Better not to mention she's pointing in the wrong direction. "Thanks, sis."

I turn to step out of the room when I hear a gunshot.

"Is that a gunshot?" Cosima squeaks.

"Stay here," I tell her and close the door behind me.

Parker rushes toward me and snaps, "Back into the bedroom, now."

I glance over his shoulder. "What about Kathleen?"

"I'm right here," Kathleen says and I turn to open the bedroom door.

"Cosima, we're all gonna stay in here," I tell her, knowing she's going to hate it but there isn't another way.

Cosima throws her blanket over her head and I only hear a muffled, "Great."

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No. Nothing is great about anything when I hear a few more gunshots. Parker's phone goes off and he's listening for a few heartbeats to whomever is calling him before he hisses out a few words.

"What's going on?" Kathleen asks when Parker ends the call.

"They took Erwin down but one of his men slipped away. They think he alerted the others who weren't at the ranch. The guys are coming here, but it will take—"

"What? Hours? Minutes?" I snap, feeling panic hitting me full force, especially when I hear someone trying to kick down the door. "Oh, shit. Did they hurt our guys who were outside?"

Kathleen palms her gun. "Try not to think of anything bad happening, we don't know anything yet." She squats down and grabs a tiny gun strapped to her ankle. "Here, do you know how to handle a gun?"

I stare at the chunk of steel in Kathleen's palm and keep my lips sealed. How the hell did everything escalate so freaking quickly?

"Why isn't she answering your question?" Cosima asks. "Did she take the gun? Eastlynne knows how to shoot a gun, our mother taught the both of us."

"It's not nice to rat out people," I snap at my sister.

"Fuck you, sis. It's not nice to bring people into my bedroom while I specifically told you not to bring anyone around the damn house. I respected your shit for years and

now that I'm asking—”

“Gunshots and people trying to get inside the house, Cosima,” I snarl, cutting off her ramblings. “As soon as we kill the fuckers who disrupted our home, I will make sure no one else will step foot inside the house again, okay?”

Hushed voices come from the living room and Parker signals with his hands to Kathleen. I have no clue what they're up to but Kathleen seems to understand. Parker aims his gun forward and slips out of the bedroom.

The rumbling of bikes approaching is coming from outside. My gaze goes to the windows but it gives a view of the stables since Cosima's bedroom is located on the back of the ranch house. Fear grips my heart when I notice a man with a jerrycan jogging out of the stables. He drops the jerrycan at his feet and flips his lighter, letting it fall to the ground as well.

Realization hits me full force and it causes the words to slip over my lips in pure horror, “He set fire to the stables while the horses are still inside.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

— ROURKE —

I see Eastlynne's ranch coming into view and hit the throttle a little more. Behind me are some of my brothers. I have no clue who or how many. Panic hit me the second I realized one of Erwin's men slipped away.

There are a handful of skilled people watching over Eastlynne and Cosima, but the notes and details I saw taped to the kitchen wall in Erwin's house were enough to make me hurl my guts out.

The fucker made a hitlist with Winfield at the top of the list, my name second, Parker third, and the list goes on. Even the name of the damn horse is on there, but right beside my name? That's where the fucker listed Eastlynne. The note next to it showed the details of her ranch and Cosima was listed as well.

They had several plans hashed out and a failsafe if something happened. Which is now and the details are branded in my brain of how they would alert others if their ranch was hit so they could retaliate and strike at my woman first, then go to the clubhouse and burn that one down.

Which is why I jumped on my bike the second I saw one of the fuckers run off with a damn phone glued to his hand. Marvin took him down, but I knew...knew it was useless; the train of retaliation was already in motion. I called Parker to alert him, but I clearly heard gunshots in the background.

I didn't even bother with taking the road to get to Eastlynne's place, and picked the shorter version by going straight through pastures. The scent of fire hits my nose and at the same time, I see flames and smoke coming from the stables.

A wave of relief hits me when I notice horses coming out of the stables. It's short-lived when I notice the woman urging them to run. I curse loudly and hit the kickstand as soon as I'm almost to a stop to rush toward her, gun drawn. I want nothing more than to fire my gun at the man who is coming up behind Eastlynne, but my woman is blocking my target.

"Watch out," I bellow and it causes Eastlynne to spin around.

I get the room I need to pull the trigger, but it's not fast enough to save her from the fucker coming up behind her with a shovel raised to hit her. A gunshot blasts through the air and it seems to come from within the stable. The fucker's body jerks before I shoot him as well, and he crumbles to the floor. My aim is directed at the stables

when I finally reach Eastlynne.

“You okay?” I question.

“Thank fuck you’re here,” Eastlynne grunts and slightly limps as she tries to go into the stables. “You need to help Kathleen. Go. Go.”

Cursing, I jog into the stables and have to put my arm in front of my face to use my sleeve as a barrier against the smoke. Kathleen is sprawled out on the ground when I finally reach her. A man’s dead body lies near her and I can tell she’s the one who took him out.

There’s a piece of a wooden shovel in the fucker’s chest and it holds a bloody handprint. Kathleen’s hands are bleeding so it’s not too hard to guess what went down. The gun that’s still lodged in her hand must have been lost during the fight. Thank fuck she found it in time to save Eastlynne from getting hit by a shovel.

“Where’s Parker?” I question as I scoop Kathleen up and carry her out of the stables to where Eastlynne is waiting.

“Bedroom. Cosima. Others were coming into the house when Eastlynne and I went out the back to save the horses,” Kathleen croaks.

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I scan my surroundings and notice Marvin jogging our way with his gun drawn. “How many perps, do you know?”

“Two in the house.” Kathleen coughs. “Parker was going to take them out.”

She coughs again and I watch as Marvin takes a small bottle from his bulletproof vest and hands it to Kathleen.

Taking a sip she coughs once more and grumbles, “What the fuck? Who in their sane mind would carry whiskey instead of water during a mission?”

“A man who’d rather have a good last sip if all hell goes loose.” Marvin pins her with a penetrating stare. “You okay?”

“Better than the two dead bodies in the stables,” she fires back.

He gives her a tight nod and glances at me. “Stay here, I’m gonna check out the house.”

There’s no way I’m going to leave my old lady, and I’ll gladly listen to the man and trust him to clear the house.

“Wait,” Kathleen croaks. “Look.”

We all watch Parker carrying Cosima out of the backdoor. Marvin rushes toward them and fires off some words. Parker nods and says something in return. Marvin enters the house while Parker carries Cosima over to us.



He carefully places Cosima next to her sister and says, “I think we’re all clear. Marvin is gonna double check. I have no idea what the status is on the brothers who were covering the front, but we’ll know soon enough.”

“What a fucking clusterfuck,” I growl. “That Erwin fucker had orders written on his kitchen wall. A fucking hitlist, a plan to take all of us out, and the women along with all the animals too.”

Roper shakes his head. “Why the hell go on a rampage, suicide mission?”

“According to Marvin they were going to leave tonight and settle down in another state,” I grimly tell him.

Kathleen lets herself drop into the dirt and as she stares up into the sky she mutters, “Thank fuck we managed to kill them all to prevent them from ruining other peoples, and animals’ lives.”

“All clear,” Marvin bellows as he jogs in our direction. “EMTs are at the scene.”

“How are the brothers doing who were covering the front?” Parker questions.

Marvin comes to a stop next to me. “Three are severely injured, the others have minor injuries.”

He steps forward and tries to scoop up Kathleen who is fighting him tooth and nail.

“Get the fuck away from me,” she snarls.

He has a solid grip on her and starts walking. “Stop fighting. You need to be checked out. You were pulled from a fire and you have blood on you.”

“I can fucking walk,” I can hear her say, but it’s useless because Marvin is still carrying her when he enters the house.

I wrap my arm around Eastlynne and pull her close. “Come on, you need to be checked out as well.”

“I’m fine,” she mutters and turns to Cosima. “What about you, Cosima?”

“In pain and can’t see shit. Nothing new because that’s how I fucking was before people came in to shoot up the damn place. And why do I smell smoke? Are the horses okay?”

“Kathleen and I managed to set them free,” Eastlynne tells her.

Cosima turns her head and I know she just mentioned she can’t see, but it’s as if she’s trying hard to glance around. “We need to get them back.”

“I’ll handle it,” Parker rumbles and grabs his phone.

A few heartbeats later he ends the call and says, “Alfie and Joaquin took out two fuckers who tried to shoot their way onto the property. They think they’re in the clear now too. A few of them are coming over with trailers to take the horses to our ranch.”

“Thank fuck,” Cosima grumbles. “That’ll give me a few days to be completely by myself.”

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“I’m not going to leave you,” Eastlynne snaps.

Cosima shoves her middle finger into the air to flip her sister off, but she clearly has eye issues because it’s directed at Parker. Hell, maybe it’s meant for him too, who knows?

“I need space, East,” Cosima states with a sigh. “I don’t want to be looked after and want to lick my damn wounds. You heard the doc, I need rest. Me stressing over you doesn’t give my brain the breather between healing and worrying about my damn self.”

I give Eastlynne’s hip a gentle squeeze. “We’ll give you a few days but we will need updates every day, either through a text ’cause you can use voice to text, or by giving your sister a call.”

Eastlynne looks ready to argue and I slowly shake my head. Cosima sounds like she’s gonna flip her shit if she doesn’t get the space she needs.

Leaning in close, I whisper beside Eastlynne’s ear, “Give her what she wants, sweetheart. It’s her body and mind. I know you mean well and want to be there for her the way she’s always been there for you, but this is what she needs right now.”

I feel her sag against me when she huffs, “Fine. But like Rourke said...I want texts and phone calls, and if I think you’re in pain or doing worse I’m going to kill you.”

Cosima snorts while Parker and I chuckle.

“Let me carry you back to your bedroom,” Parker offers. “Then we’ll leave you alone.”

Cosima’s mouth turns into a flat line, showing how much she hates it. No words tumble out, though. She keeps her body stiff when Parker gently scoops her up and carries her to the house.

Eastlynne is staring at the stables, smoke is still billowing from the building.

“We’ll rebuild,” I tell her. “Come on, let’s check on the horses to make sure they’re okay.”

I lace her fingers with mine and start to walk as I glance back to see if she’s still limping. Thank fuck she isn’t and from a distance, I can also see the horses grazing in the back of the pasture.

“I was so scared,” Eastlynne croaks.

Coming to an abrupt stop, I pull her into my arms and murmur against her hair, “Everything is okay now. It’s over. I won’t let anyone harm you again.”

She’s clutching my leather vest and tips her head back to show me her tearstained eyes. “I knew you were coming. When I saw that man lighting the stables on fire I couldn’t wait until you got here...I had to save them.”

“You did good,” I rumble and the thought of losing her is squeezing the life out of my heart.

I hear voices behind us and slightly turn to see my parents, along with a few others, coming toward us with neck ropes in their hands. I give them a thankful smile, appreciating the gesture of bringing neck ropes because that’s what Eastlynne uses

for her horses.

A little over an hour later we have them all safely settled in their own stalls at the club's ranch and Eastlynne is sitting on the couch surrounded by the old ladies of the older generation. She's talking and smiling, though I can see a slight hint of worry in her eyes.

I'm sure it'll all work out with her sister, even if her future is a bit unclear with her health right now. Cosima is strong and needs to lick her wounds to come out stronger. Parker is jabbing the screen of his phone right next to me and I notice the stream of messages back and forth.

A smile tugs my lips when I catch a glimpse of the messages he's getting. There are some weird sentences and words used and it's then I realize he's texting with Cosima. She must be using voice to text. Yeah, I'm sure it'll all work out especially since my VP has an unhealthy obsession with the woman. I turn my gaze back to the center of my obsession.

My old lady has knocked down walls and opened herself up to expand her family. She might not be completely settled when it comes to her anxiety, but at least she feels at ease. I stride toward her and hold out my hand, which she takes without thinking twice.

"Sorry, ladies. I'm going to steal my woman away from y'all," I rumble and guide her through the long hallway and out the back.

"Where are you taking me?" she questions and I come to a stop.

"On the ride of your life now that our future is wide open," I vow. "But I'll settle on heading for our cabin first so I can eat your pussy."

She blushes and tugs on our joined hands. “Well, what are you waiting for? Lead the way.”

No other words are needed. I grab her to throw her over my shoulder and make a run for the cabin to speed things up, allowing her giggles to fill the air.

## EPILOGUE

Two years later

– EASTLYNNE –

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:54 am*

Glancing over the storyboard allows me to visualize the scene they want one of my horses to do. It gives me a chance to decide which horse to use. A year ago, there wouldn't have been a choice and I'd instantly go with Fletch.

Sadly, we had to euthanize him about a year ago due to the debilitating effects of old age. I knew it was coming but it didn't make the choice any easier. I miss him and sadly see the resemblance of his character in both Breeze and Buckey. I'm thankful to have those two with the same bloodline.

Over the past two years, we've added more horses. The first one was a blue Blagdon Gypsy Cob my sister bought from the Clyden's Ranch. We had to wait to pick her up until the stables were rebuilt after the fire. It did give us a chance to build a bigger stable and I finally have my dream complete with the amount of horses I'm surrounded with. Not only when I'm at my own ranch, but also when we stay at the cabin at the Iron Hot Blood Ranch.

"Did you make a decision yet?" Rourke rumbles from behind me.

Turning, I surprise myself by stating, "Buckey."

Rourke smiles and it allows for his dimple to make an appearance. "Good choice. Now, I think it's time for you to come to bed."

He takes my hand and drags me to my feet. I barely manage to hit the lights and plunge my small office into darkness. We have the house to ourselves today and Rourke did mention we were going to take full advantage.

The past two years have flown by and yet every day spent in his presence is one that's scorched in my memories. Opening up and getting to know him might have been one of my best decisions ever. My life took a spin and changed so much.

I still have moments where social gatherings are avoided by choice, and I gladly leave meetings and chats with potential clients for my sister to handle, but the found family I surrounded myself with by stepping into Rourke's life is amazing. Trust, understanding, support, loyalty, warmth, and love are keywords that fit every single person.

I squeal when Rourke suddenly scoops me off my feet and throws me over his shoulder.

"You're not moving fast enough, woman," he rumbles and jogs in the direction of our bedroom.

My gasp turns into a moan when he grips my hips and pulls me down his body. His skillful fingers make fast work of removing my clothes. There isn't a thought in my mind about the horridness of having my clean clothes hit the floor. This man has managed to dull most of my struggles, along with the meds I take. You might say he's my kind of therapy, one I should have started sooner and clearly can't live without.

I let my hands wander underneath his leather cut and pull his shirt out of his jeans. A frustrated growl rumbles through me when I fumble a bit too long with his belt. Rourke chuckles and takes a step back. How come I'm already naked while he's still fully dressed?

I lick my lips when I realize he's giving me a stripper act by slowly removing his clothes. Okay, it might not be as sexy the way he's kicking off his boots and pulling off his socks, but the end result is when he's finally palming his hard length. The



heated stare he gives me is enough to send a shiver of desire through me.

“Get on your knees and spread them for me, love.” His voice is filled with the lust that’s radiating from him.

There’s no hesitation as I sink down in front of him, parting my legs so he can see my bare pussy.

“Good girl,” he praises. “Now, open that hot little mouth and don’t forget to give me your eyes.”

I loosen my jaw and follow his order, feeling my belly flop when his powerful body steps closer. He pumps his cock in his hand and lets his thumb flick the piercing I’ve grown very fond of. The thick, hot head bumps against my lips and I greedily slip my tongue out to taste him. His fingers sink into my hair and he fists it to keep my head in place.

“Open wider,” he practically growls.

I oblige and he instantly feeds me his hard cock. A moan rumbles through me and I start to suck and swirl my tongue the way I know he likes it. Curses rip from him and he keeps my head in place while he throws his hips back and forth to roughly fuck my mouth.

I might not have had a lot of experience when I met him, but over the years we’ve learned every inch of our bodies, and especially what we like and how we gain maximum pleasure. Never a dull moment, that’s surely a quote that fits our relationship well.

Especially, when he suddenly pulls his dick free and growls, “Get on the bed and spread ’em.”

Following his orders in the bedroom definitely makes me all hot and wet. When I let that little tidbit slip to my sister, she told me I shouldn't be a pillow princess and needed to brighten my horizons. Screw her. I love every second I spend with my man and there's not a single complaint about anything from either one of us. He groans while I gasp when his tongue spears my pussy.

My hands grip his head and I grind my pussy against his face to get myself off. Screw being a pillow princess, I'm full-on action when it comes to giving and taking pleasure. Rourke slightly shakes his head, making the scruff of his jaw add to the friction.

I'm so close to coming, I can practically smell the scent of the orgasm in the air. Maybe it's because Rourke surges up and rams his dick deep inside me while he takes my mouth in a scorching kiss. Being completely filled to the brim, the piercing hitting the right spot inside me, while tasting myself on his tongue causes sensory overload and makes my body shatter underneath him in utter bliss.

"Fuuuuuuuck," Rourke grunts as he rips his mouth from mine.

He takes my hips in his hands and fiercely starts to fuck me to chase his own bliss, slamming deep four more times before grinding against me, roaring out his release. Hot jets fill me as I feel him pulse inside.

I'm completely out of breath and sag down into the mattress. Happiness is a word, but feeling utterly spent while the warmth of my man's body is plastered against me comes close to a vivid description.

"I love you," I murmur with my eyes closed.

I feel how he lifts my hand and places a kiss on my finger before I feel him fumble. "I love you enough to bind you to me forever and always."

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:54 am*

My eyes fly open. Okay, we have exchanged the words ‘I love you’ in various ways over the years, but his words sound different. There’s a satisfied grin on his face and I glance down at my hand, which he’s placed on his chest and is still holding my wrist to keep it there.

“Oh,” I gasp when I notice the ring he’s put around my finger.

He leans forward and brushes his nose against mine. “Is that a yes?”

“To forever and always?” I murmur.

“We already agreed to that, it’s the binding me to you that’s on the table, wifey,” he fires back.

I bite my bottom lip and mumble, “That depends.”

The corner of his mouth twitches. “We’ll swing by the courthouse and bring Parker and Cosima, no one else needs to know. It’ll be just us.”

A huge smile slides across my face and I tell him with my whole heart, “Yes.”

Some things might always make me pause, but if there’s anything I learned in life is that there’s always a way to get from start to finish. Sometimes we need to take hurdles or the long way around, but ultimately, we’ll reach that finish line no matter what.

Mine is met every day I get to spend with Rourke. The man brightens my horizons

and allows me to see past said hurdles to get to our own personal finish line. Each one of those becomes a milestone in our past and a new goal to set for our future.