



Trigger's Temptation

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Mc

Description: The stakes are high, and neither of them is ready for what's coming.

Trigger

As the Treasurer of the Royal Bastards MC, Los Angeles Chapter, my unparalleled talent for managing the Club's finances makes me indispensable. I run the Royal Casino with an iron grip, ensuring it remains a cornerstone of our operations. Known for shooting first and asking questions later, I'm working hard to rein in my impulsive tendencies, though my reputation for ruthlessness precedes me.

I find myself drawn into the shadowy world of underground fighting. Introduced by Tiny, the brutal arena offers a way to make quick money but at a steep personal cost. It's here, amid the chaos and bloodshed, that I cross paths with Aerianna once again, the enigmatic woman who ran me over, literally and caught my attention during a fleeting but charged encounter at the Casino.

Aerianna

The moment I met Trigger, I knew my life was about to change. Whether it's for the better or worse remains to be seen. He challenges me at every turn, breaking down the carefully constructed walls I've built. With every look and touch, he forces me to question everything I thought I knew.

I distrust men, convinced they're capable of the same monstrous acts that claimed the life of my best friend, Allison. I'm determined to avenge Allison's death and dismantle the Black Market Railroad. My passion for justice isn't just a duty, it's deeply personal, rooted in the values my upbringing instilled in me and the unbearable loss of my best friend.

Will their connection pull Trigger out of the shadows and into redemption or drag Aerianna further into the darkness?

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Prologue

TRIGGER

6 YEARS EARLIER

I swallow another finger of Crown as I watch the man across from me. He's locked in deep thought, debating whether to fold or call. It's the second-to-last hand in the championship round of the Texas Hold 'em poker game. The winner takes all. It's just me and him now.

Based on my calculations, he's sitting with a three-of-a-kind in Jacks, a solid hand, but it doesn't stand a chance against the straight flush I've got off the river card.

"Sir, your bet?" the dealer, a cute little blonde with a high ponytail, asks him.

His dark eyes scan me, looking for a sign of weakness, but he won't find one. I remain cool, leaning back in my chair, one arm casually draped over the back, my drink dangling from my fingers. The crowd around us is thick with anticipation.

He clears his throat, glances at his hole cards, then places them back down with shaky fingers. "All in." He swallows hard when I don't flinch. If he hadn't done it already, I would have pushed him to go all in myself.

With his chips, every last one of them shoved in the middle, he leans back, grinning like he's already won.

I sit forward slightly, lifting my hole cards just enough to make sure he sees them. Then, I place my drink on the coaster with a deliberate clink. “Hmm...” I drag out the pause, savoring the moment. His nerves are evident. Three hundred grand on the line. I know it’s everything he has, including his life savings, and I’m about to take it all.

“I’ll meet your bet.” I push my chips into the center. The dealer collects the pot, and the tension rises.

“Gentlemen, please show your cards,” the dealer says, his voice calm but firm.

I flip over my hole cards, keeping my eyes locked on my opponent. His gaze drops to my hand, and I see the color drain from his face. “How can that be?” he shouts, his voice cracking. “You cheated. There’s no way you beat me!”

I’ve been called worse, but nothing pisses me off more than someone accusing me of cheating.

I lift my chin and motion for the two security guards standing nearby. They approach, ready to act.

“Sir, please show your cards and stop making a scene,” one of them says.

Grumbling, the man flips his hole cards, revealing the three of a kind. “I’m sorry, Sir, but a straight flush beats a three-of-a-kind,” the dealer says, confirming my victory.

“That can’t be! He has to be cheating!” Reese protests, still fuming.

Instead of getting into it with him, I stand up, adjusting my suit jacket with deliberate calm. “Miss, please have these cashed in and put the money into my account. Also, a twenty percent tip for you.”

The dealer's cheeks flush red with desire as she nods.

Reese is still spitting angry accusations. Fine. Let him.

"Please remove Mr..." I pause, waiting for him to fill in the blank. I already know what his name is, but I wanted to make sure he'd at least be honest about it.

"Reese. Thad Reese," he grumbles.

"Please remove Mr. Reese from the premises. If he doesn't stop, he will be banned from this Casino," I state, my voice sharp.

"Yes, Sir," the first guard responds.

"You can't do this!" Reese shouts, furious.

I step in close, our faces inches apart. "I can, and I will."

With that, I reveal my tattoo, a large Ace of Spades intertwined with the RBMC logo. I make eye contact with the guard, and with a subtle nod, he understands. Reese will be escorted downstairs, where he'll learn exactly why they don't call me Trigger for nothing.

The Royal Bastards MC runs this casino now, thanks to my uncle's partnership with Capone and the LA Chapter. I handle the day-to-day operations, and every clean tournament we run means clean cash for the gun business. When the night's over, I'll collect the winnings and funnel them back into the club.

And as for Mr. Reese, he'll leave this place with a lesson learned. One he won't soon forget.

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Chapter 1

TRIGGER

PRESENT DAY

"Fuck," I groan, rolling my neck as Pearl, a patch bunny, massages my shoulders. We're sitting in front of the TV in the common room. The Clubhouse is scattered with people, each wrapped up in their own world, and no one is paying us any attention.

Capone and Danyella have Nina outside, along with Torch and Daisy's twins, Jaxson and MJ. Derange and Jezebelle have their daughter Naomi over at Jezebelle's house while Red and Nadia have their son in Red's room. Houses are slowly being built on the property for members with families or anyone who wants more privacy, but it's been a slow process. Adapting to this new lifestyle hasn't been easy. What once took place out in the open is now done behind closed doors unless the kids are gone.

I've been tense since that feisty blonde ran me over a few weeks ago. The image of her legs, long, and toned, wrapped in tight running shorts keeps flashing through my mind like a goddamn fever dream. The way she moved, hips swaying with unintentional confidence, was enough to send a man to his knees. Heat coils in my gut, my muscles tightening like I've been wound too tight for too long. Even now, just thinking about her, my body betrays me, stiffening in ways I don't have time to deal with.

I pull Pearl into my lap, and she shifts, feeling me harden under her. Her blonde hair falls in soft waves down her back. Pearl has the looks, but there's something about her

that feels off. She has makeup caked on her face and is trying too hard with the tight white tank top, short leather shorts, and heels. She'd be a knockout if she'd just be herself.

“Do you need a massage somewhere else, Trigger?” she asks, a suggestive tone in her voice.

I don't have to say a word, just raise an eyebrow, and she gets the hint. Pearl kneels between my legs and pulls my aching shaft out. As she goes down on me, my thoughts aren't on Pearl, my mind is on that damn blonde. I close my eyes, imagining her in this exact position, and my body explodes.

It doesn't take long before I'm left with a strange feeling of emptiness. I open my eyes, and Pearl's smiling up at me, but all I feel is disgust for using her to chase an illusion. I quickly zip my jeans, offering a small smile. “Thanks, Doll.”

I rise from the couch, leaving Pearl behind, unsatisfied, and head to the bar. I need a drink. I grab the moonshine, something strong enough to take my mind off of what I just did.

I shut the door to my room behind me and turn on some rock music. The room spins as I take shot after shot, but the blonde, Aerianna, doesn't leave my mind. The vivid images, the fantasies, everything about her haunts me.

What the hell is wrong with me? I've never been hung up on a woman like this before. Usually, I give them what they want and move on. But this? This is different.

The mason jar is empty, and I still can't get her out of my head. I stagger down the hall toward the gym, hoping to workout this tension somehow. I don't care if I end up getting my ass kicked. If I can't drink her out of my mind or fuck her out of my system, maybe I can fight it away.

“Tiny!” I shout as I enter the gym, looking for my best friend. “Tiny! You in here?”

I stagger to the back of the gym and spot Tiny in the ring with Syvannah. Her petite frame is covered in sweat, her light brown hair sticking to her face as she hits Tiny with everything she has. Tiny’s kitten, Peanut, watches from her perch at the corner of the ring.

After Tiny was shot and wrecked his bike, he was lost for a while. He suffered from major road rash and depression. When he could finally ride again, we went on a club run, and he found a tiny kitten abandoned on the side of the road. Tiny brought her home, named her Peanut, and somehow, this little pain in the ass helped heal him in ways none of us could. Wherever Tiny goes, Peanut is right there, perched on his shoulder or in her little yellow bag.

It’s funny to see a man his size carrying around a kitten, but the women love it. Tiny’s softness with Peanut makes them swoon.

I stop watching Tiny and Syvannah and sit down to wait. Syvannah’s been through hell. She and the other women, Exleigh and Nadia, were kidnapped and tortured by the Black Market Railroad. We caught one of the men, Josiah, but Lattimer, the other, went underground and hasn’t been found since.

Tiny’s going easy on Syvannah, letting her get the upper hand so she knows how to defend herself if something like that ever happens again. She acts like everything’s fine, but I can see the pain in her eyes. She’s anything but fine.

I leave the gym without saying a word. Syvannah needs him more than I do right now.

I step outside, the crisp fall air biting at my skin, and sit by the fire pit. A few of the guys are here, Pretty Playboy, Seth, and Bones. I take a long pull from a fresh beer

Bones hands me.

“Moonshine gone already?” Bones asks, looking at me with a knowing grin.

“Yeah, well, I like the hard stuff,” I reply, shrugging.

Bones punches my arm lightly. “Guess you’ll have to make more this weekend.”

“You’ll be helping me, asshole,” I grunt. “Prospect, start this fire.” I kick the ring around the pit and gesture for Seth to get moving.

So much for fighting or fucking my way out of this. Might as well get shit-faced and pray she leaves me alone for one night.

Chapter 2

AERIANNA

“Come on, Faber! Push harder!” Benton yells, his voice cutting through the crisp night air. “My grandmother can do this better than you, and she’s seventy! Move it!”

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Gritting my teeth, I throw myself over the wall, using every ounce of strength to avoid face-planting. By the time I reach the end of the course, my body is screaming, and I drop onto my back, gasping for breath. Benton looms over me, his gaze lingering on my chest a little too long.

Annoyed, I sit up, chug some water, then stand, forcing him to meet my eyes instead of looking down at my cleavage.

“That was better, Faber. I think you just set a new women’s record.” His smirk is the kind that makes every woman in the department swoon. Every woman except me.

“Thanks, Benton,” I mutter before walking off. I need a hot shower and a long massage.

In the women’s locker room, I strip out of my sweaty workout clothes and wrap a towel around myself. Pinning my damp hair up, I step into the shower and let the hot water soothe my aching muscles.

I’m alone in here, and it’s kind of creepy, but women in my line of work are rare, and to find one here at this ungodly hour is even rarer. I have no choice but to be here in the middle of the night, but luckily a few co-workers are here at all times of the day working out, so I know I’m not completely alone.

Except for Benton. The guy sets my danger radar off. I try to avoid working out with him as much as I can, but lately, he’s been here at the same time as I have been. I don’t know if it’s a coincidence or purposeful. Either way, I don’t like it one bit.

I close my eyes and exhale, letting the hot spray soothe my aching muscles, pushing thoughts of Benton away. Instead, my mind drifts to the man I met a few weeks ago. The one with the darkest blue eyes I've ever seen. Rugged. Handsome. Dangerous in the way only a biker can be. Confidence radiated from him, setting my underused libido into overdrive. His deep, rough voice had sent chills down my spine, even when he threatened to put his boot up my ass. No man has ever turned me on the way he did.

I never got a full look at his cut when he slammed into my pickup, but when he called his president, Capone, to the scene, my ovaries practically sang at the way those piercing blue eyes locked onto mine in the glow of Capone's headlight.

Trigger.

I know exactly who the Royal Bastards MC are, and if he's one of them, that means one thing, I can't have him.

I could use my resources to find out who he is, but that would be illegal, and I'm not about to risk my career over a man. No matter how sexy he is. Instead, I'll have to conjure up the memories I have of him leaning against the side of my pickup. His long, muscular legs stretched out in front of him, not hiding the fact that he was well-endowed.

I bite my lip. What would those big hands feel like on my body? Would his full lips worship every inch of me before dragging his tongue down my slit? Would his thick fingers find the spot no man ever has?

My hand moves lower, fingers brushing against my folds as I imagine his touch. A low moan escapes my lips as pleasure builds, my mind conjuring the image of him above me, driving into me with deep, punishing thrusts. My fingers brush along my folds and deeper while I imagine it's the mystery man's tongue and fingers trailing

inside of me.

I come undone, breathless and trembling. I finish my shower, guilt already clawing at me. I can't be lusting after a man like him. My uncle would lose his mind if he knew I had the hots for an outlaw.

I've worked hard to get where I am today. A woman in a man's world has to fight twice as hard to earn half the respect. But this is the path I chose, and I won't let anyone stand in the way of my goals.

In my line of work, trust is a luxury I can't afford. My last partner in Detroit proved that the hard way. He was more interested in getting into my pants than doing his damn job, and it almost got us killed. Worse, it got a teenage boy killed. Someone we were supposed to protect.

Instead of owning up to his failure, he pinned it all on me. Told the Chief that if I "wasn't a woman," he wouldn't have been so distracted trying to "protect me" and could've done his job.

Bullshit.

If the bastard hadn't spent more time trying to corner me against a wall, the kid would still be alive.

I could've fought it. Could've stayed and exposed him for the predator he was. But I was tired. Tired of the politics, the egos, and the way the system bends for men like him. So, I put in for a transfer far, far away from Detroit and the assholes who run it.

That's how I ended up in Los Angeles.

Of course, there were other reasons I left Detroit. Reasons I don't want to think about

right now.

Turning off the water, I grab the towel and dry myself off before heading to my locker. I slip on my bra, and as I reach for my underwear, my stomach drops.

They're gone.

The hairs on my arms stand on end, a slow creep of dread slithering up my spine. I flip open my locker, pat down my jeans, and dig through my hoodie, but I find nothing. My breath tightens in my throat. No way I lost them. No way I forgot. A bead of sweat rolls down the back of my neck as I glance over my shoulder, the empty locker room suddenly feeling too quiet, too still. Someone was in here. Someone took them.

Shaking off the unease, I finish dressing without them, throw my bag over my shoulder, and leave the locker room. The gym is silent as I cross the floor, my footsteps echoing against the wooden panels. Stepping outside into the early morning chill, I slide into my pickup, lock the doors, and start the engine.

I head to my apartment, ready to get some sleep, even though it's rare for me. I need to get home and try before I have to be at the casino I'm set up to work at in the morning. I need to be on my A-game to pull this off.

Morning comes too soon, my alarm buzzing obnoxiously. Groaning, I slap it off and roll over, blinking against the sunlight streaming through my window.

Rolling out of bed with a stretch, I head into the bathroom to start the shower, use the bathroom, and then head into my tiny kitchen to start a pot of coffee. Once the coffee is going, I shuffle my way back into my bathroom and take a quick shower.

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Once I'm dried off, I wrap a towel around me and patter into the kitchen, grab a cup of coffee, and walk back into my bedroom to get ready for the day. Living this life is lonely, but there isn't anything I can do about it right now. My job requires me to do things alone. It might drive some people crazy, like my mother, for instance, but not me. I prefer solitude as I get into the right headspace to complete this job. I can't afford any distractions on my end to blow this chance.

An hour later, I'm in my pickup, heading down the four-oh-five into downtown Los Angeles. I have my windows down, my radio cranked up, and not a care in the world as we creep down the freeway.

Loud pipes come roaring up behind me, and my pulse spikes. Would this be my sexy mystery man, Trigger?

Four Harleys lane split and come up on me fast. I'm half tempted to open my door and send the jackass sailing, but then I think better of it. I don't want to get into trouble with the law, and I'm sure I'd be arrested immediately for doing it, or even worse. The four Harleys speed past me, and I barely make out their cuts.

Royal Bastards MC.

My grip tightens on the wheel. What are they doing out this early? Don't bikers usually party all night and sleep all day? Is Trigger in that group? Would he let me ride him on his bike? I mean, would he let me ride his bike?

A horn blares behind me, snapping me out of my thoughts. Shaking my head, I press the gas and weave through traffic. I move forward until we're finally out of the traffic

jam, and I put the pedal to the metal.

Arriving at the Royal Hotel and Casino, I find the employee parking lot and pull into a space. Checking my watch, I have twenty minutes until I'm needed inside. I pull out my phone and send a text to my uncle and then another to my boss, letting them both know I've got this and they won't be disappointed. Then I send another to my mom and dad, letting them know I'll check in tonight when I get off work.

Finishing my coffee, I leave my mug in the cab along with my phone, shut and lock the doors, and head inside.

It's do or die time.

Either I'll pull this off and get the information I need, or I'll bust and possibly get myself killed.

Chapter 3

TRIGGER

I'm at the Clubhouse on the phone with my sister Elise when Pearl and Sadie saunter by, swinging their hips. They both look at me and give me a wink. Yeah, I could take both of them right now at the same time, but my dick didn't even stir when they went by. What the fuck is wrong with me? Am I broken or something? I look down at the offending appendage and scowl.

"Carter, are you listening to me?" Elise snaps me back to reality. She is two years older than me and she's the one I'm closest to. I wasn't listening, but I'm not telling her that. If I did, then all five of my sisters would be hounding me until the day I die. No thanks, I'll pass.

“Yes, sis. I’m listening.”

“So, will you do it?” Elise presses.

“Sure.” I agree, even though I have no idea what I’m signing up for.

“Great! My plane lands in LAX at six tonight. I’ll see you soon, little brother.” Elise hangs up before I can respond.

“What the fuck did I get myself into?” I mutter.

Torch chuckles. “Sounds like we finally get to meet one of your million sisters.”

“I don’t have a million. I have five sisters.” I correct myself, holding up my fingers on my left hand.

Seth almost trips over his feet when he hears I have five sisters. “Five sisters? Are they hot?”

Derange slaps Seth on the back of the head. It doesn’t disturb his little girl, Naomi, sleeping on his chest. “Doesn’t matter if they are or not, son. They’re a patched member’s sibling, so they’re off limits.”

“Dad, come on. That isn’t fair.” Seth whines.

I remember when he first started calling Derange “Dad.” We all thought it was funny as hell, but now? Seeing Derange’s chest puff up with pride every time Seth says it is something we all respect. That kid didn’t have the best start, and Jezebelle, Derange’s Ol’ lady and Seth’s mom, did everything she could to shield him from her past. But when it came knocking, there was no more hiding. They faced it together, and none of them would change a thing.

“What isn’t fair is you drooling over a woman you haven’t met yet.” Derange fires back. Naomi wakes up and rubs her eyes, blinking a few times before she starts crying. “Here, smartass, you want to act like an asshole to Trigger and disrespect his sister, you’re on toddler duty for a few hours. Maybe having to chase this little terrorizing princess around will teach you to keep your dick in check.”

Seth’s eyes widen when Naomi clings to him and wails louder. And that’s my cue to get the fuck out of here. I don’t do babies, toddlers, or crying. Definitely don’t do any of those together, either.

“I’m out. I have to head to the casino and check on some new employees.” I state.

“We’ll come with you,” Tiny announces, securing Peanut in her custom riding carrier.

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I raise an eyebrow, questioning him. “What?”

“Syvannah is busy, and I don’t trust anyone else with Peanut. Besides, who is going to fuck with me when I’ve got a kitten riding shotgun?” Once he has Peanut secure in her carrier that is specially designed for riding on Tiny’s bike, Red and Aftermath approach us.

“We’ll roll too,” Red says. “I have to check the security, and Aftermath has some business for the Club.” Red grabs his helmet from the hook on the wall.

One of the Ol’ Ladies, I think it was Danyella and Monica, decided to organize everything in the Clubhouse, so now we have spots for our helmets, riding leathers, gloves, sunglasses, and anything you’d leave lying around and end up losing.

“Let’s roll.” I grab my riding gear and head to the garage. Slipping my brain bucket on, I slide onto my seat and fire up my baby. I fixed most of the damage from when that chick hit me. Just need to repaint, which I’m going to do the next time it rains. It’s mid-September in LA, and even though it stays warm, the nights will get chilly, and the best time to do repairs or upgrades is during the colder months. We still ride year-round, no matter what the weather is.

The unusually warm sun beats down on me as the four of us head down the four-oh-five toward the Royal Hotel and Casino. Traffic is moving slowly, but not for us. I signal for single-file formation, and we start lane-splitting, weaving through pissed-off drivers who lay on their horns. Too bad for them.

We arrive at the Royal Hotel and Casino, and I pull into my designated parking spot

in front of the main doors. I want all customers to know whose casino they're walking into and to understand the consequences of fucking with us.

Red, Aftermath, Tiny with Peanut still in her carrying case, and I dismount our bikes and walk into the casino like we own the place, which we do.

Cool air blasts me in the face, replacing the heat of the ride as my boots step onto the marble flooring that is all through the entryways into the casino. Crown molding in intricate designs displays the wealth this casino brings us. One security guard manning the entrance nods his head to me as we pass by.

People playing on slot machines stop what they're doing and stare as we pass by them. Deadly men in leather cuts and a don't fuck with me attitude radiating off them tend to turn heads no matter where we are.

I walk on the soft carpet spread throughout the gambling part of the casino, taking in the stale cigarette smoke, perfume, cologne and sweat that means we're making money and a lot of it. In the center of the casino, guarded by rows and rows of slots, you find the games. There are crap tables, poker, blackjack, and roulette. Heading into the back rooms, I don't pay any attention to the dealers, waiters, or training staff. If I did, what happens next wouldn't take me by surprise.

A security guard opens the doors for us, and we enter in single file. Our riding boots echo down the quiet corridor. I stop at the last door down the pristine hallway and bend down to look through the retinal scan Red installed a few months ago. The light turns green, and the door clicks open, allowing us to enter. Aftermath quietly closes the door behind us. We're swallowed in darkness at first until I start to move, and then the fluorescent lights come on above us, detecting our movements.

Red's face burns a deep shade of red, and he's grinning from ear to ear when he spots the security room to the right fully staffed. He rubs his hands together in glee and

heads in that direction. I shake my head at him. He's like a kid in a candy store when it comes to tech stuff.

Aftermath veers left, down a set of stairs, and into another room that's designed for people who thought they could cheat us out of money. Once they end up down there, they either don't come back up, or they aren't the same if they do.

Tiny, Peanut, and I walk straight ahead until we reach my office. I unlock the door and turn on the light. Tiny closes the door behind us, sets Peanut's carrier on the leather couch, and opens it up. Her tiny black and white head pops out as she looks around, taking in her surroundings.

My office is a hell of a lot nicer than my room at the clubhouse. The plush carpet is soft against my boots, my dark cherry desk sits toward the back with two leather chairs placed in front of it.

Bookshelves line each side wall full of different literature. You wouldn't know looking at me that I'm a romance nerd, but there is no shame in my game in what I like to read. The leather couch is nestled against the side wall where the one bookshelf ends. Pictures of me and my bike, me and my sisters, me and my parents, and the Club are hanging up proudly on display.

My office has twice as much as my room at the Clubhouse. I also spend a lot of time here for various reasons, including getting what I need from women.

"If she pisses anywhere in my office, Tiny, I'll make you clean it up with your tongue." I threaten.

Tiny chuckles. "She only does that when she's marking her territory. And it's only at the club bunnies' expense or if you piss her off."

Peanut lays her ears back and growls at me. I reach into my desk and pull out the treats I keep for her. At the shake of the bag, her attitude changes fast. She hops onto my desk, meowing. Cocking her head to the side, her tail flicking impatiently. She's been my best friend's saving grace, and I'll treat her as such. I shake a few out into the palm of my hand and set them on the edge of the desk. Peanut purrs as she gobbles them down, her tail swishing back and forth. I give her a few more before closing the bag and putting it away.

Tiny smirks. "What do you have going on today?" He picks Peanut up from the corner of my desk once she is done eating. She climbs up his chest to his shoulder and nestles down contently.

"I've got some new employees I need to look over and make sure they're on the up and up before I release them into the chaos of the casino." I pick up the first of around twenty folders and hand it to Tiny. "Want to help?"

He takes the folder from my grasp. "Sure, why not? I don't have anything else to do."

We've spent hours flipping through employment folders, but nothing stands out as a threat to the casino or the Club. Tiny and Peanut are still going through their stack, and every so often, Tiny lets out a wolf whistle. I've learned to tune him out so well that half the time, I don't even register him speaking.

Instead, my mind drifts to her.

I can't get the blonde bombshell out of my head. No woman has ever had me tied up in knots the way she does, and I don't even know her name or where she lives. If I knew where she lived, would I stalk her until she allowed me inside and between her thighs? Would she taste sweet or spicy on my tongue? Would she submit to me or make me submit to her? Just thinking about her on her knees, choking on my length, has my pants growing tighter.

“Trigger.” Tiny’s voice snaps me out of it. I jerk in my seat, scowling.

“What?” I drag my eyes away from the last folder, realizing I don’t even remember reading it before I shut it.

“You do know Red could digitalize these for you so it wouldn’t be a pain in the ass.” He drops his stack on the edge of my desk.

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I raise an eyebrow. “Do you even know what digitalized means?” I joke.

He flips me off and sprawls onto my couch, sinking into the expensive leather with a groan. “This couch is the best thing to ever hug my ass.”

I shake my head. “What the fuck am I gonna do with you?”

Tiny shrugs his shoulders, “Don’t know, don’t give a fuck. All I know is I’m going to take a nap on this couch. Wake me up when you’re ready to go.” Tiny yawns, his hand absently stroking Peanut’s back, slowly petting her until he falls asleep with his mouth wide open, snoring like a freight train.

I push back from my desk, straighten my cut, and leave my office, quietly closing the door behind me. Now that the tedious part of employment is out of the way, the fun begins. My security team should have each new employee in a room alone, waiting for me to screen them.

Cracking my neck, I stride down the hall, ready for the interrogations.

I open the first door and freeze. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

Chapter 4

AERIANNA

This has got to be the weirdest job training I have ever had. When I went in through the employee entrance, a big bald man was waiting for me. Without a word, he led

me through a maze of corridors, twisting and turning until I completely lost my sense of direction. We finally stopped in a stark white room.

He told me to sit at the desk and not move. I complied, my senses working in overdrive. I sat down and a few minutes later, he came back with a change of clothes, told me to put them on and don't fuck around.

His tone left no room for argument, so I quickly stripped out of my leggings and t-shirt and slipped into the provided outfit. A pair of black dress pants, a crisp white long-sleeved shirt, and a purple-and-green vest. After I pulled my hair up in a ponytail, I sat down and slipped on the black shoes. Everything fit like it was tailored just for me, but I don't know how. I haven't given anyone my measurements.

Before I could dwell on it, another man entered. He didn't introduce himself, just dropped a thick booklet and a pen onto the desk with a loud slap. He told me to fill it out and yet again, don't fuck around.

I opened the booklet that was more like a damn novel and began filling it out. It asked everything from where I was born and who my parents are, right down to when I have my menstrual cycle. I skipped half the questions not giving a shit if they want them. They don't need to know half this crap to get a job.

Closing the ridiculous questionnaire, I set the pen on top. I was half-tempted to draw a middle finger on the cover, but I resisted. Patience have never been my strong suit and I'm struggling to not walk out the door and tell them to fuck off.

The door suddenly swings open, and standing in front of me is the man I can't stop thinking about. "You've got to be fucking kidding me."

His piercing blue eyes lock onto mine, and for a moment, I'm speechless. I let my gaze travel from his boots to his head, halting when our eyes meet again, a look of

disgust crossing his features.

My hackles rise, and I narrow my eyes. “What the hell are you doing here?” I ask, sitting back in my chair and crossing my arms over my chest.

“I should be asking you the same thing.” Trigger growls, agitation rolling off him in waves like he’s pissed because I’m here. His eyes roam down to my chest and then back up again. He crosses his arms over his chest, mimicking my posture. The veins along his forearms stand out, a clear reminder of his strength. It’s impossible not to look. Strong arms are my kryptonite. “But I already know the answer and it’s fuck no.”

I drag my gaze back up to this sexy but frustrating man’s eyes. “Wait, you can’t tell me no.” I protest, my voice rising with a mix of disbelief and frustration.

“The fuck? I can tell anyone who I want, no. And that includes you,” he snaps, a scowl forming on his face. The crunch of his nose is either disgust with the idea of me working here or with me personally. Either way, it stings.

“Please, I need this job.” I stand up, practically begging him. “I’ll do anything you want. Just give me a chance. If I fuck up, then fire me. But don’t hold our past against me.” The words hit hard, and I feel a lump in my throat. I straighten my spine, fighting back the tears.

For a moment, his angry demeanor shifts, the scowl softening before it hardens again on his handsome, rugged face. Aeri, stop thinking like this! “Fine. But if you mess up once, your ass is out faster than you ran me over a few weeks ago.”

“Thank you!” I jump and hug Trigger. Pulling away quickly, I wipe the smile off my face and pray he doesn’t can my ass now. I need this job, and not just for the money.

Trigger turns on his heels and walks out the door. “Hurry up. You’re late. Your shift started twenty minutes ago.” Trigger throws over his shoulder.

I scramble to gather my things and follow him down the clean corridor. There isn’t even a scuff mark on the tiles. We walk, well, Trigger’s long legs walk, while my shorter ones hurry to catch up until another man approaches us.

He has on a Royal Bastards MC cut, and his patch reads Tiny. He has a yellow carrying case that looks small in his big, meaty hands. He nods at Trigger before his gaze sweeps over me, sizing me up. I feel his scrutiny like a weight. He appraises me from the tip of my black uniform shoes to the sleek ponytail on top of my head. Trigger growls low in his throat and Tiny chuckles. One of the first security guards that I met approach us with caution. That gets my attention quickly.

“Take her to the training floor. Have her learn Blackjack from Annabeth.” Trigger orders, flipping open a folder I didn’t notice he was holding. He scans it like he has no clue who I am. “Once Miss Faber gets the hang of it, bring her to the gaming floor.”

“Yes, sir.” The security guard practically salutes Trigger, and I try to hold back my eye roll. Tiny chuckles while Trigger growls again from deep in his throat, and it sets my body on fire. Oops. Maybe I didn’t do as good of a job as I thought.

Jesus, that was brutal. I’ve been playing Blackjack for over four hours, and now Annabeth is taking me to the gaming floor. I left my backpack, which has my clothes, keys, and wallet in a locker in the women’s bathroom next to the employee entrance. If I need to leave quickly, I won’t lose my stuff. My eyes search the robust design, looking for Trigger.

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My heart is pounding with anticipation when my gaze lands on Trigger sitting at a Blackjack table alone, with a drink in one hand and an unlit cigar in the other. His sexy forearms are on full display under the RMBC cut he's wearing. He might look like a rugged take no bullshit biker, but underneath the tough exterior, I see a sophisticated man who has had a hard life. That's even scarier than the brute strength some of these MC members show. It means he is smart as well as cunning. He exudes both street smarts and book smarts, and that is a dangerous combination.

Instead of waiting for Annabeth to order me to another table, I swallow my nerves and head in Trigger's direction. Drawing closer, I wipe my sweaty palms on my work pants and approach the dealer. I tap him on the shoulder, and he looks back at me with a stunned expression. I frown before clearing my throat.

"I'm here to give you a break."

The dealer nods his head, and I stand back, watching Trigger play this round with rapt attention. His long, sexy fingers tap on his cards, asking for a hit. The dealer flips over Trigger's nextcard, revealing a two of diamonds. Adding the total up in my head quickly, Trigger has twenty, and the dealer has fifteen. This forces the dealer to flip another card over. When he does, it's the seven of clubs, causing him to bust. He collects the chips and distributes the winnings to Trigger.

Then he flips his hands over twice before stepping back, and I step into his place. My fingers tremble slightly as I shuffle the deck, the smooth cards slipping between my fingertips. I inhale sharply, steadying my hands before I deal the first round. The weight of Trigger's piercing blue eyes presses against my skin like a brand. His blue eyes are sharp, unblinking, and unreadable, making my pulse stutter. I swallow hard

and push a breath past my lips. Focus. Just a game, just a man. But damn if my body believes that lie.

“Are you ready?” I ask.

Trigger shakes his head with a growl and smirks. “You have no idea.” His voice, deep and rough, sends a chill down my spine. Trigger places his bet on the table and sits back, watching me.

Even though I’m shaking on the inside, I keep my hands steady and my breathing even. I set out the first round of cards, revealing a five of Spades to Trigger and an Ace of Diamonds to me.

I don’t break eye contact with Trigger as I place his next card down face up on the felt. I see out of my peripheral vision that he has a six of Clubs. That makes eleven. I flip over my card, revealing a nine of Hearts. My total is ten or twenty. Depending on what Trigger does, if I will beat him or not.

Not taking his mesmerizing gaze off me, Trigger slowly taps the table. I wet my lips with the tip of my tongue, and a smirk appears on his handsome face. Somehow, this game has changed. The way he is staring at me with hunger in the blue depths has my panties wet and my nipples tightening under my uniform shirt.

I flip his next card, not taking my eyes off him, and hold back a smirk when it’s the four of Hearts. I still have him beat, depending on what he does next. Trigger takes his stack of chips and pushes them onto the table. He leans forward, crooking his finger at me.

I lean forward until I can smell the whiskey on his breath, and Trigger’s intoxicating scent pulls me under a spell. I want to crawl across this table and let him have his way with me.

“If I beat you on this hand, you have to turn your badge in and let me take you back to my Clubhouse so I can blow your mind.”

“And if I win?” I ask, raising an eyebrow. My voice is husky with need.

“If you win, Little Kitten, I’ll take you to your place and blow your mind.”

I swallow hard and exhale a shaky breath. I shake my head, I remember why I am here. I have a job to do. “Win or lose, I’m not letting you in my panties.”

I lean back at the same time Trigger sits back in his seat, his expression as stunned as mine. No matter how badly I want this man, he is untouchable. I cannot let him into my bed or my heart. He is a criminal, and my loyalty to the badge is to take them down, not them taking me down.

I flip over Trigger’s next card, and it’s the ten of Clubs. “Dealer wins,” I state.

I should be ecstatic, but I’m not. I want to get to know this intoxicating man. I wanted to see if he would go through with his plans and blow my mind or if it was all an act.

He drinks the last of his liquor and frowns when I take his chips and put them in their respective places on the holder. “Good job, Little Kitten.”

Trigger stands up when the other dealer comes back from break, pulling out his wallet. He throws some cash on the table and winks. “That’s for you, Kitten.” Then he saunters off and I watch his tight ass until it’s out of sight.

I collect the tip money Trigger left and scurry out of the gaming floor. My head is spinning a million miles an hour, and I’m exhausted after that intense interaction. I’ve been looking for a way into the Royal Bastards to find out what they know, and when I have them in my grasp, I let it go. All because I’ve caught feelings for a man I

barely know.

Chastising myself for my lack of experience in this undercover shit, I slam open the women's bathroom door. I can't do this. I'm not made for this. A familiar scent lingers in the air, and the hair at the nape of my neck stands on end. I lift my gaze to the wall-to-wall mirrors in front of me and find Trigger standing right behind me. His piercing eyes are locked on mine, staring right into my soul.

"What are you doing in here?" I ask. I'm terrified he can smell my fear and my arousal.

"Have a drink with me." Trigger demands, not taking his eyes off mine in the mirror.

I shake my head. "I can't." Not taking my gaze from his, I lift my chin. "I'm not some Club slut you snap your fingers at and expect me to drop my panties." But God, I would, in a heartbeat, if he keeps pursuing me.

Trigger brushes his hand along my collarbone, making goosebumps break out across my skin. He leans in, pressing the heat of his front against my back. "Just one drink. If you don't like my company, I'll piss off and you'll never hear from me again."

Mesmerized by Trigger's soft touch, his erotic scent, and his intense gaze, I break down and agree. "Ok, let me get changed, and I'll meet you at the bar."

Trigger's expression is ecstatic from my agreement. He's still pressed against me, and I feel the hardness of his arousal against my back. "You won't regret this, Kitten." Trigger's lips brush the side of my head, his heated gaze never leaving mine until he walks out of the bathroom.

Once Trigger is out the door, I exhale deeply, and my knees turn wobbly from nerves. I've got to pull myself together, or Trigger will run all over me. Walking to the sink

on shaky legs, I splash cold water on my face and compose myself. Grabbing the key to the locker, pull out my backpack and head into the stall to change.

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Once I put on my street clothes and fix my hair and make-up, I straighten my spine, ready to see this through without losing myself in the process.

Chapter 5

TRIGGER

I watch Aerianna leave the bathroom with her spine straight and her head held high. She radiates beauty and strength, traits I admire in a woman. With her elegance comes a gnawing fear of rejection, so I stay where I am, hidden in the shadows, unable to move. My eyes track her every step.

She sits at the bar, crosses her long, slender legs, and orders a drink. Once the bartender brings it to her, she swivels around on the stool, watching everyone and everything, looking for me.

Do I go over there and show her who I really am? Can I take a chance that this woman won't destroy me? I'm already fucked up, flawed by my short temper, arrogance, and selfishness. It's all part of my past, my history, something I can't escape. But with her, she doesn't deserve the wreck I am.

I decideto say fuck it. As much as I want to go over there, as much as my instincts scream for me to claim her, I leave her sitting alone. It's one of the most unselfish things I've done in a long time. Normally, I'd go over, make my move, have my way, and leave, no strings attached. But I can't do it. My heart crashesagainst my chest, stunning me with the realization, and for the first time in a long while, I realize I don't want to hurt her.

I catch Tiny outside smoking a cigarette, waiting for me. Peanut is nestled in her carrying case, fast asleep on a soft blanket. “You ready to go?” Tiny questions, flicking the ashes off his cigarette.

“Yeah, let’s get the hell out of here. I’ve got better shit to do than play casino boss today.” I slap Tiny on his meaty shoulder, and we head for our bikes parked out front.

“Isn’t your sister coming in tonight?” Tiny asks while strapping Peanut on the back of his bike. He had his bike custom-made for Peanut and her carrier after his accident.

Red and Aftermath’s bikes are already gone, so we don’t have to wait for them. I straddle my Harley and slap on my brain bucket before answering. “Yeah, she is. I don’t know what is going on or why Elise is coming here, but it’s whatever. Out of my five sisters, she’s the only one who doesn’t judge me on my past or hold it against me. So, if she wants to come out here, then so be it. But she is off limits to everyone.”

Tiny climbs onto his custom bike, and we fire them up, the rumble vibrating beneath our feet. I drop the gear into first, and we take off. I glance in my side mirror and spot Aerianna walking out of the casino with a pissed-off look on her face. When her eyes land on my back, I can almost feel the heat of her gaze. If looks could kill, I’d be a dead man riding.

Instead of dwelling on why I walked away from her, I face forward and ride home. I have no room for complications in my life. With Lattimer still on the loose, anyone associated with our club is in danger.

Tiny and I make it to the clubhouse, and as soon as I park my bike, a laugh echoes through the corridor and hits my ears. Son of a bitch! What is she doing here?

I throw off my helmet and stomp down the hallway toward the common room. There, I see my sister, Elise, sitting on a barstool, holding a drink while Pretty Playboy and

Bones hover around her, making her blush. She's wearing a short black skirt that rides up her thighs, a tight white tank top, and a light black jacket. Her long blonde hair is pulled into a high ponytail, with loose strands framing her face. My sister is a beauty surrounded by a bunch of deadly beasts.

"Oh shit," Tiny mutters, freezing when he sees what I see.

My knuckles pop, each crack sharp like gunfire, as I curl my fists at my sides. A slow burn spreads from my chest to my fingertips, an itch only violence can scratch. Pretty Playboy drags his fingers along Elise's arm, his touch light, almost casual. My vision turns dark. A growl rumbles from my throat, deep and primal, my pulse hammering so hard I swear it echoes in my ears. He's dead. He just doesn't know it yet.

"Get your fucking hands off my sister before I break all of your fingers then shove them down your throat, making you choke on them." I snarl.

Pretty Playboy's eyes shoot up to mine, and his mouth hangs open. I shocked him because normally I act first before threatening him. "Did I fucking stutter?"

"No, Trigger. I didn't know she was your sister." Bones says quickly, backing away with his hands held up in defense. He knows better than to test me. I'm not in the mood. When my menacing gaze lands on him, he scurries out of the room with his tail tucked between his legs.

My gaze lands on Pretty Playboy. He hasn't moved. He may have taken his filthy fingers off my sister, but he's still sitting too fucking close.

"Carter, that is enough!" Elise snaps, cutting through my fury. "I'm not a child, and if I want to hold a conversation with a man, you can't stop me." She snaps her fingers in front of my face, drawing my attention away from Pretty Playboy and on her. What I see has my blood raging through my veins. She has a black eye she tried to cover

with makeup, a split lip, and a bruise on her cheekbone.

I raise her chin gently, forcing her to meet my gaze. “What happened?” I ask again, my voice barely a rasp.

I carefully examine the bruise on her cheek with a delicate touch, and she flinches involuntarily. I can tell by the shame in her expression. I might be an asshole to most but when it comes to my sisters, I’m a different person. Instead of being rough and demanding, I’m gentle and cautious. My five sisters will tear you apart limb from limb before spitting down your neck if someone fucks with one of them.

“That’s why I wanted to come here. I needed to get away.” Elise casts her blue eyes, similar to mine, down onto the floor like she is ashamed of herself.

I gently raise her chin, making her look at me. “What happened?” I ask in a quiet voice. I look over the marks on her tender skin, and my body is vibrating with rage.

Elise looks around the room before speaking, “Can we go somewhere more private?” Her voice is barely audible.

I look around the room, and all my brothers and their Ol’ Ladies turn their heads, looking in different directions like they’re not eavesdropping. “Let’s go into my room.”

Elise slides off the bar stool, the weight of the world on her small shoulders as we walk side by side toward my room in the back of the Clubhouse. Once we reach my door, I pull out the key from my jeans pocket and open it. Placing my hand gently on the small of Elise’s back, I guide her inside. It’s taking everything I have to not fly off the handle and go on a rampage, breaking bones and tearing every man limb from limb or shooting them in strategic places on their body so they don’t bleed out right away, but will die eventually from blood loss.

Elise sits on the corner of the bed and exhales a long, exhausting breath. Her shoulders slump defeatedly. She looks around my clean room, taking in the neatly made bed. My clothes are either in the dresser against the wall or hanging up in the closet. It's so clean in here you could eat off the floor if you wanted. I'm a closet neat freak, but not a lot of people know this about me, except for my sisters. Everything in my room is in its place. I like things to be orderly. There's no place for chaos in my world, but right now, it's everywhere.

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Which is why Aerianna is off-limits to me. There is something about her that doesn't fit, and my brain is telling me to stay far away from her. But my little brain has other ideas, and that is why I cannot pursue her. She will bring havoc to my mind and body, even if my body wants her luscious thighs spreading for me while I lap, kiss, and nip at her tender skin, driving her wild with need as she does with me.

I shake my head and close the door, blocking out all conversations outside. I lean against it, with my foot propped behind me. After those thoughts of Aerianna, I crave a cigarette but don't smoke around my sister.

"Tell me what happened," I demand. Waiting for my sister to answer is like torture.

Elise blinks back tears before speaking, trying to hide her pain and embarrassment. "I was seeing this guy." I growl low in my throat, but Elise ignores me and continues, staring out into space, her voice trembling. "Everything was going great until the firm I worked for gave me a promotion. That's when things turned to shit. I started working late, bringing in a lot of money, and he was stealing it and gambling it away the whole time. I had no idea he had a gambling problem until his bookie showed up at my job."

She gestures to her bruises. "The bookie's men did this to me. It's a warning. If I don't pay his debt, they'll come back and make sure I don't walk away next time." Her voice cracks with fear. "My boss overheard everything, but instead of helping me, he fired me. So, I came straight here without stopping at my apartment and packing. I can't go back, Carter."

"How much does this asshole owe?" I ask through clenched teeth.

Elise hesitates, then she sits up straight, throwing her shoulders back, “A hundred grand due by next Friday.”

I blanch, “Fuck.”

“That’s what I said.” Her blue eyes, like mine, stare at me. The pain, the fear, the hurt, all of it is written on her face. “I don’t have anything left, Carter. My boyfriend destroyed everything. I’m lucky if I have ten dollars to my name.”

“First, you’re going to give me the name of this,” I hold up my scared hands and produce air quotes, “boyfriend,” I lower my hands, “and then the name of this bookie who threatened you. Then, your ass is staying here and not leaving this Clubhouse.” Elise opens her mouth to protest, but I interrupt her. “I know you don’t want your little brother telling you what to do, that you’re a grown woman, but this isn’t for my peace of mind. It’s for your safety. If these guys follow through, you’ll either be dead or worse, and I won’t have my little big sister hurt because she is a stubborn woman.”

Elise looks at me, stubborn and proud. “Okay. I’ll stay here. But I’m not sharing a room with you, Little Big Brother.” She smiles tightly, though I can see the weight of everything on her shoulders. “I really don’t want to bunk with my little big brother.” Elise agrees with a tight smile. She doesn’t tell me her boyfriend’s name, but I’ll get it, even if I have to get Red involved.

“Let’s go find Capone and see what rooms are available.” Elise rises from the bed, but her shoulders are still hunched over. I pull her against my chest and hug her. “I will take care of this mess, Little Big Sis. Don’t worry about a thing.”

Elise hugs me back, and tears drip down her face and onto my cut. “Thank you, Carter. I knew I could count on you no matter what happened, and you wouldn’t judge me for it.”

I know exactly who she means. The townsfolk we grew up with are filled with prayers for someone to atone for their sins but are quick to judge you for your mistakes. I went through it when I was a teenager, which is why I left, and now my sister is going to go through what I did, and I won't let them dull her shine.

"Stick with me, sis. I will protect you from the likes of those judgmental assholes." I make her look into my eyes, "But you have to promise me something in return."

Elise narrows her eyes. "What?"

"Stay away from my brothers. They're out for one thing and one thing only. Especially Pretty Playboy. Promise me you'll remain off limits to those Neanderthals who only think with their dick when it comes to beautiful women." My head spins with murderous intent thinking about one of them putting their grubby hands on my sister.

"Ok, Carter. If it makes things easier for you, I will keep my distance from the single brothers out there. But I cannot guarantee they'll stay away from me. Besides, I have to work on myself first before I even think about getting into another relationship. So, your fears can stay away." Elise pats me on the chest, and we leave my room.

I find Capone, Danyella, and Nina playing pool with Torch, Daisy, and the twins. I kick my head to the bar when Capone spots me, and he kisses Danyella hard before sauntering over to me. Nina rolls her eyes at her parent's display of affection with a wistful smile on her face. That young lady is going to give us all a run for our money when she starts dating.

"What's up, Trigger?" Capone asks as we take a seat at the bar, his expression unreadable. Seth pours the three of us a shot of Crown before scurrying off. I need something to calm the rage pouring through my system.

“Prez, this is my sister, Elise. If it’s ok with you, she is going to be staying here for a while.” I don’t give a damn how he feels about it; I’m not asking for permission. But I still respect Capone.

He looks Elise over, assessing her carefully. If I didn’t know he was madly in love with Danyella, I’d probably knock him on his ass, President or not, that’s my sister. Ok, she can stay. There are spare rooms down the hallway since most of our patched members have built houses on our land now. She can take whatever room that’s empty.” He pauses, his eyes locking with mine. “But you and I need to talk. Now.”

“Let me get Elise settled, then meet you in Church in ten,” I say, giving Capone a short nod.

Capone nods his head, dismissing us. I guide Elise down the hallway opposite from mine. “Take whatever room you want. Keys are hanging up just inside the door to the unoccupied rooms.”

Elise opens and closes each door until she comes to the last one on the right. I’m not sure what she’s looking for in each room, but this one must meet whatever it is. “I’ll take this one.”

I look across the hallway to Pretty Playboy’s room. Oh, fuck no. “Why?” I growl, knowing damn well why she wanted this one. That isn’t going to happen under my watch. I will castrate Pretty Playboy and shove his dick down his throat if he touches or even thinks about my sister.

Elise steps inside and turns toward me, her blue eyes are brimming with tears. I know this is killing her because she hates crying. “This one feels the safest for me, Carter. I was violated, and no matter what I do or who I surround myself with, it freaksme out. This room is far enough away from anyone who can hurt me.”

God, my sister guts me something terrible and now I feel like a huge asshole for thinking she wanted to hook up with Pretty Playboy. “Ok, Sis. If this is where you feel safe, I will let you get settled. You know where I am if you need me.”

“Thank you, Little Big Brother.” Elise smiles weakly at me.

“There is everything you need in the bathroom, and I’ll have Danyella and Monica get some clothes for you to change into.” I kiss the top of her head. “Everything will be Ok, Big Little Sis. I’ll make sure of it.”

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“Thank you, Carter.” Elise closes the door on me, and I spin on my heels.

The anger and rage thump through my veins and boil my blood. I held it together the best I could around Elise, but now I need to shed some blood. I need to fuck someone up no matter who it is or why.

Chapter 6

TRIGGER

After leaving Elise in her new room, I find Danyella, Monica, and Daisy watching a movie with the kids. I walk up to them and bend down so I’m near Danyella’s ear. “Elise needs clothes when you get a chance. Would you be able to get her some?” I whisper so I don’t disturb the ankle-biters.

“Of course. Is she alright?” Danyella asks, concern etched in her voice.

“She will be, but right now, she’s hurt.” I hold back the anger in my voice, but it still comes out raw and raspy.

Danyella gives me a reassuring squeeze on the hand. “We’ll take care of her, don’t worry. Capone and the rest of the brothers are waiting for you in Church.” Danyella responds with a gentle voice. She is the one to help those who need it.

I nod. “Thank you, Dany.”

“We’ve got you and her,” she says softly.

Leaving them to their movie, I head straight for the bar. Grabbing a bottle of Crown, I pour a shot, down it in one go, and slam the glass onto the counter. The burn barely registers. With that, I make my way to Church.

Inside, all eyes are on me as I take my seat. Capone sits at the head of the table, Blayze on his left, Torch on his right. Red has his laptops set up, and the rest of the brothers, Derange, Tiny, Aftermath, Dagger, Pretty Playboy, and Bones, are in their respective seats. The air is thick with expectation. All eyes are on me as I straighten my back and take my seat.

Capone slams his ivory gavel on the table, signaling that Church is in session. “First order of business. Since we have two new patched-in members, they need to have titles. Pretty Playboy, you’ve proven time and again that you have what it takes to keep our meetings in check, and your attention to detail is outstanding. I want you to be in charge of Secretary duties as of further notice and take some weight off Red.” Then he looks at Bones. “Bones, since you know how to take care of and dispose of our enemies when it’s called for, you are our official cleaner. If anyone needs someone to disappear, Bones is the man you want.” Capone tosses two patches at Bones and Pretty Playboy. “Find an Ol’ Lady to sew these on for you once we’re done here.”

Hoots and hollers, with feet stomping and whistling erupt, making Bones blush and Pretty Playboy smirk. Capone holds his right hand up silencing the rowdy bunch of assholes. “Trigger, how are our legit businesses holding up?”

I don’t even need to look at my notes for this. My photographic memory serves me well. “The bar, casino, and repair shop are all in the black. The fighting ring is slowly making us extra cash, and I’m seeing a turn in profits by the end of the year. As for our contracts, those speak for themselves.” I pull a stack of envelopes from my cut and pass them along to all the brothers. There’s a total of fifty-k split between everyone. It’s not much, but it’ll do for now.

“As for Bones’ idea about the gentleman’s club.” I continue. “I think we can swing it by next year as long as our other businesses stay in the black with no setbacks.”

“What about using the money from our Cartel operation to fund the opening?” Bones asks.

Capone shakes his head. “We’re not running as hard for the Cartel as we used to. The cash coming in is just enough to keep them happy. We’re contracting most of the work out to our sister chapter, the Royal Harlots. They need money, and we can provide it. Once they’re on their feet and able to go legit, we’ll cut ties with the Cartel completely.”

A beat of silence. Then, Capone adds, “But I don’t see that going over well, so be ready for a fight.”

“Thanks, Prez, I really want to see this through.” Bones responds.

“I know you do, and you will. Just give us time to get shit organized and prepared. It’s not something we can handle overnight.” Capone acknowledges. “Anything else?”

Murmurs of no ripple through the room. “Ok then. We have a guest staying with us until her safety is taken care of.” Capone nods to me, and I rise from my seat. Time to bring my brothers up to speed.

“My sister, Elise, had some bad luck these last few months. Her boyfriend racked up a bill with a loan shark, and now they want my sister to pay it back. If she cannot come up with a hundred grand in a week, they’re going to take it out of her skin. She isn’t to leave this Clubhouse, no matter what, until I can get a handle on this. They banged her around pretty good the other day and that is why she is here. She knows we can and will protect her at all costs, without laying a hand on her delicate skin. And if I

find out anyone has touched my sister, I will skin their dicks and make them choke on it.” I narrow my eyes at Pretty Playboy and he narrows his back. Fucker is going to give me grey hair.

Capone speaks, cutting the tension between Pretty Playboy and myself. “Red, look into Elise’s personal life and give me the name of this boyfriend of hers. Dig as deep and as far as you can. We will help you, Trigger, but we can’t if you plan on skinning all our single men.”

I sit down in my seat and cross my arms over my chest. “Just don’t touch my sister, and I won’t have to skin anyone,” I grumble like a scolded toddler.

Capone moves on. “Torch, it’s your turn to collect the cash drops from our businesses this week. Take Pretty Playboy, Bones, and Aftermath with you. Trigger, you get the casino drop, and we’ll see what we have by Friday. Church dismissed.” Capone slams his gavel on the table.

I drag my hands down my face and exhale sharply. Fuck, why is this adulting shit have to be so hard? I rise from my seat and exit the Church doors. Usually talking about finances and shit puts me in a good mood but not today. Tiny is waiting for me on the other side of the doors.

“C’mon. I got a place you need to go.” He motions with his big beefy hands to follow him, and I do without question.

Tiny mounts his bike, and I follow. Together, we ride out of the garage and into the setting sun, the L.A. skyline glowing in the distance. After thirty minutes, we reach the industrial side of the city. Tiny turns into a warehouse parking lot, lined with muscle cars and filled with women in barely-there outfits, dancing to the beat of the music. The crowd parts when the rumble of our bikes vibrates through the pavement. All eyes are on us. They know better than to fuck with us or who we’re connected to.

Once we park our bikes near an old warehouse, a familiar woman with long blonde hair steps away from her dark grey Shelby and heads toward us with her hound dog on her heels. She's wearing black skinny jeans, a black tank top, and a black and white flannel. Her long, lean legs eat up the pavement until she reaches us.

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“Tiny, Trigger.” Krimson nods her head at both of us. Nolan doesn’t say a word. He just glares, his usual pissed-off expression firmly in place. I thought we were past this macho bullshit after we helped him rescue his sister, Nadia.

“Krimson, Nolan,” I greet back with the same gesture.

“What are you doing here?” Krimson asks.

“We’re here for the fights,” Tiny responds.

“Hmm...sounds intriguing. Which one of you is fighting tonight?” Krimson’s puckered lips form into a mischievous smile. Her honey-colored eyes bounce between both of us.

Damn, this woman gets me hot and bothered all at once. She oozes sex appeal and danger, a lethal combination. I shift slightly on my bike to adjust the growing problem in my jeans, and Nolan’s eyes narrow in my direction.

I shrug. What can I say? I’m a guy who finds this woman very appealing. I’ll never act on what she does to my body because of the respect I have toward her, but that doesn’t mean my little head will listen to my big head.

“He is.” Tiny points a thick finger at me. I blanch in shock but school my features.

Krimson’s smirk widens as she gives me a slow once-over. “Interesting. I’m curious to see how this plays out.” She steps back into Nolan’s embrace. “We might have to watch.”

“Or maybe join,” Nolan growls, scowling at me like he’d rather be throwing punches than standing here. His face is a mask of unkept rage. Krimson turns around and whispers something in Nolan’s ear. His eyes close with a shudder, and when he opens them, the rage is still there but less calm. Damn, this guy has some major issues.

“It’s up to you. If you think you can handle me in the ring, I’m game.” I shrug my shoulders. No way am I letting Nolan-Fucking-Ryan think he can intimidate me. Even if our Club and Krimson’s gang have a truce, and he is the big brother to Red’s Ol’ Lady, Nadia.

“We have a race to put on. Maybe we’ll see you boys on the inside,” Krimson replies before Nolan can. She grabs his hand, leading him back toward the cars.

Tiny and I stay put on our bikes for a little while, watching Krimson work her magic with the crowd. They listen with rapt attention as she goes over the rules and lines the cars up. She isn’t racing tonight, but the gleam in her honey gaze tells me she wants to. Once Noah collects all the money for the bets, another woman with long dark hair wearing a cheeky skirt barely covering her ass and a tight halter top stands between the two center cars and removes her scarf from her neck. Her tattooed arm raises the scarf high above her head, and when she drops it, the engines roar, tires screeching as the cars take off at breakneck speed.

Watching this unfold has taken my mind off what happened to my sister, but now that it’s over, a flood of emotions overtakes me. Why did something like this happen to my sister, of all people? She’s one of the most caring, sweetest women out there who wouldn’t hurt a fly, let alone a person. Is she an easy target cause she wears her heart on her sleeve? Can I help make her stronger and more cautious with the time I have with her? Is this my fault for leaving after I got out of jail? A storm brews inside me, and for once, I don’t have the answers.

Tiny checks his phone and tucks it back into his cut. “Come on, it’s time.”

We climb off our bikes and head inside the warehouse. Looking around, there is nothing in here except a few desks and a lot of dust. Our footsteps echo in the empty space. I open my mouth to ask what the fuck, but I trust Tiny to know where we're going so I snap it shut and follow him.

We descend a metal staircase until the scent of mold and mildew lingers in the dark, chilly air. Once we reach the bottom of the stairs, a single bulb illuminates our way to a steel door.

Tiny pounds on it with his meaty fist, and the door opens. Inside takes my breath away. Men and women crowd around a massive ring under harsh fluorescent light. Two women fight inside with no gloves, no gear, just fists and fury. Blood splatters across the mat, and the more that spills, the wilder the crowd gets.

As I watch the two women go at it, my hands begin to shake, itching to join them and shed my own blood. This is just what I needed to quench the rage pounding inside my chest.

A tall man with dreadlocks approaches us, clasping Tiny's hand. They exchange words, but I barely hear them because I'm focused on the fight. The woman with short dark hair slams her elbow into the blonde's nose, sending blood gushing down her face. The blonde wobbles, and her opponent seizes the moment, driving her fist into her jaw. She crumples to the mat. Out cold. The ref stands over her, counting to ten, but the blonde doesn't get up, so he calls it. The crowd roars.

"Come on," Tiny shouts in my ear over the roar of the crowd.

I follow him toward the other side of the ring when I spot someone to my left who shouldn't be here. Aerianna's long blonde hair is done up in braids on each side of her head, and she's trying to blend in with the crowd. But her rigid stance and alert eyes are a dead giveaway that she doesn't belong here.

Tiny's voice pulls me back. "Watch these two and the next two. The winner of these two rounds will go against each other, and the winner of that round will go against you." Tiny informs me. "It's like a round Robin. You fight until you lose, but for you, you fight the winner of all of them."

Another set of fighters enters the ring as I peel my gaze away from Aerianna to watch with rapt attention, analyzing their techniques and skills. The one man has a six-inch spread on the other one. He's twice the other guy's size. But what the other guy lacks in weight and height, he makes up for in quickness and power. As the shorter guy fends off the bigger guy, he gets in a few hard jabs to the bigger guy's ribs. I notice he is toying with the big guy, tiring him out and giving the spectators a show.

Then I catch the scent of vanilla and steel, drawing my attention away from the bloodbath inside the ring to Aerianna. She's standing right next to me, watching me. Her striking grey eyes pull me under, and I don't even stop it. My body reacts instantly, drawn to her warmth like a goddamn magnet.

"What are you doing here?" My voice comes out rough.

"Watching the fights. What are you doing here?" Aerianna teases, a grin tugging at her lips.

"Fighting," I respond. Our conversation is short, but it doesn't matter. Words aren't needed. The air between us hums, charged with something thick and dangerous. Good Lord, the way I'm attracted to her, we don't need conversation to know each other. It's the comfortable silence we have together that I love about this.

Our eyes lock onto each other, and for a moment, there is no one else around but her and me. The crowd fades away, Tiny is non-existent, and the fighters are background noise. The palm of my hand lightly traces up Aerianna's arm, causing goosebumps to erupt on her skin. Aerianna's breathing grows rapidly, making her chest heave.

We move closer together like magnets until our bodies are touching. My hard muscles against her soft curves. My palm cups the side of her beautiful face, my thumb tracing her soft, full lips. My body reacts to being close to temptation. Not like the Club Bunnies do, but something more. I want this woman with every fiber of my being. My jeans tighten painfully, begging to be released and have his wicked ways with her. The things I want to do to her flip through my head like a porno. The way I want her strong legs wrapped around my waist, her heavy panting in my ear as I drive into her, bringing her to the edge, just to back away and make her whine in protest. The way her sweet taste would feel on my tongue after I nibble and lick each thigh.

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We stay this way for a few stolen moments before Aerianna rips her gaze away and takes a step back. Her pupils are dilated, and her chest is heaving with every breath.

“Shit,” she breathes, licking her lips. My eyes follow the trail her tongue left, and I wish it was my tongue tracing the succulent flesh of her lips and more. I’ll bet if I stick my hand down her panties, she’ll be soaked for me.

Tiny nudges me on the back, and I turn to him with a pissed-off look. “What the fuck was that?”

“Nothing,” I bark back.

“Uh-huh,” Tiny responds skeptically.

I turn back to where Aerianna was, and she’s not there anymore. I scan the crowd, looking for her, but can’t find her. Shit. Oh, well. She’s a distraction I don’t need right now.

The next fight is over in a matter of minutes. Not even worth paying attention to. Then, the winner from the first round and the second round battle it out. This one I watch carefully, clocking and learning each fighter's moves until only one is left standing. That is the one I will be taking on in an hour.

Tiny leads us to the back of the warehouse, and he opens a door marked private. “You’re going on in an hour. Stay in here, get your head right, and focus on what you need to do. If you win this, you’ll be closer to being able to help your sister. The pot is up to fifty-k, and once the fees are paid, you’ll walk away with thirty-five.”

“Thirty-five K for a few minutes in a ring?” I ask just to be sure. Tiny nods his head with a devilish smirk on his face. Fuckyeah. “Shit, brother. This payday is what I need right now. A few of these this week, and I’ll have enough to help Elise.”

“One other thing,” Tiny states. I raise an eyebrow, watching him. “If you beat this guy, he’s agreed to become a valuable asset to the Royal Bastards in finding Lattimer.”

I nod my head in understanding. Take this guy down and gain valuable intel to help find the man who has been wreaking havoc on our Club.

“He won’t stand a chance,” I confirm.

Tiny leaves and I try to focus, but my thoughts drift. Not to the fight. Not to the money. To Aerianna. Her succulent lips and a teasing smile. Heated grey eyes invade my fantasies, and I’m rock hard. Fuck, I don’t need this right now. But I can’t get Aerianna out of my head. I’m drawn to her like I’ve never been drawn to someone before. She’s going to be the death of me before I even get a chance to taste her.

A loud knock on the door signals it’s almost time. I strip out of my cut and t-shirt, kick off my riding boots, and unzip my jeans to relieve the pressure against my aching dick. I rock my neck from side to side and jump around a few times to loosen my muscles.

The door swings open.

Time to handle business for my club and my sister.

And if I win? That’s one step closer to getting everything I need.

Chapter 7

AERIANNA

Pulling away from Trigger's embrace was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. I can't get the stubborn man out of my head as it is, and now that I know what his body feels like pressed against mine, it's going to be impossible.

I shake my head from the thoughts of his rough fingers gripping my face to the softness of his thumb stroking my lips. His scent lingers in my lungs and makes my heart stutter. I've never had this reaction to a man before. I've been taught at a young age what a man can do to a woman if he really wants to. What violent acts a man can commit against a woman just for being a strong female.

But none of that matters when it comes to Trigger. My mind and body want him. Even though we are worlds apart on the opposite sides of the law, where I stand for the good and he stands for the bad, I still want him in my life. He makes my heart race, his strength makes me feel safe. Something I haven't had in a very long time. Not since before I joined the Detroit task force, fresh out of school.

The bell dings, pulling me back to reality. The two women fighters exit the ring, one being carried out while the other walks out on her own. Blood drips from the cuts on the unconscious woman's face. These people are crazy to do this day in and day out. To fight until they either win or are dragged out.

Earlier today, my handler called me with a lead into a man the Royal Bastards MC has been looking for. He's supposed to be here fighting tonight, and my job is to find him, see what he knows, and how I can flip him. He told me he was a dark-skinned man with a Lion tattoo on his back. I haven't seen him fight yet, but that doesn't mean he isn't here.

Unfortunately, or maybe it was fortunately, before I could find him, I spotted Trigger ringside with a man three times his size. The second I saw him, I lost all control.

Even if someone held a gun to my head, I still would've approached him.

When he's near, my thoughts sharpen and blur all at once. My heart races, and my body hums to his proximity. I don't know why, but Trigger has become my kryptonite. I want, no, I need, to get closer to him, not just for my job but because I want to know him better. I want to know how he would handle me at my worst and at my best.

All thoughts of us being on opposite sides of the law fly out the window when he is near me, which is why I need to stay away from him, but I can't. That's like telling a bear to stay away from honey. He's the nectar to my starving body.

What the hell is wrong with me? I am here with a job to do, not to lust after a known biker gang member. Uh! I need to hit the gym later and burn off this energy thrumming through my body that Trigger releases inside of me.

I stand in the back of the crowd as it chants for the last fight of the night. My jaw drops when Trigger enters the ring. His chest is bare, glistening with sweat, making his muscles ripple with every movement. His short dark hair is gleaming with sweat, and his jeans are unbuttoned and unzipped, a dark trail leading to a promise he can deliver what he's putting out.

My mouth waters at the thought of what I want to do to this man. He scans the crowd until his piercing gaze lands on me. All shouts and cheers fade away as we lock eyes. I shift from foot to foot, desperate to relieve the pressure between my thighs, but it's no use. He owns my attention, my body, my thoughts. And the bastard knows it. This man turns me on, and I get to watch him work his magic. Trigger sends a wink my way before he faces his opponent.

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His dark skin glistening under the lights and the deadly look in Trigger's opponent's eyes has me worried for Trigger. I notice the Lion tattoo on his back, and realization dawns on me. Oh shit, this is the guy I was supposed to find. I swear I'm a better undercover agent than this.

Trigger has me all flustered, and I forget why I'm here and what I'm doing. That's why I need to stay away from him, but with the way he looks at me, that is becoming more and more impossible.

The ref signals the start of the fight, and Trigger and this guy go toe to toe. They're playing with each other, seeing what the other can do and how they fight. Trigger's face doesn't give anything away besides boredom as they test each other. Trigger slaps his opponent with an open palm, teasing him. From the sheer size and strength of Trigger, I know he is testing his opponent, seeing how to push his buttons.

As the first few minutes of the round go by without a lot going on, the crowd starts to get restless. Taunting erupts and it pisses Trigger's opponent off. He lunges for Trigger, but Trigger sidesteps him at the last second, sending the guy into the cables. The second he bounces back, Trigger delivers a brutal uppercut to his chin, spinning him in place.

Tiny shouts something to Trigger, and I watch as rage replaces boredom on Trigger's face. His eyes slit as he focuses on his target, like a panther stalking its prey. He moves gracefully on the balls of his feet as he delivers blow after blow on the poor, unsuspecting guy. Trigger's chest is heaving up and down in rapid succession, and I see the faraway look in his eyes that he isn't hearing anyone or seeing anything besides the guy in front of him.

The raw power Trigger emanates has me moving to the front of the ring, shouting for him to finish this. When he delivers the final blow that knocks his opponent out, I want nothing more than to wrap my legs around him and finish what we started earlier. His piercing blue eyes lock onto mine, and I'm done for. The hunger in his gaze sends a pulse of need straight to my core.

Without thinking, I follow Trigger through the back door, my heart pounding as I shut it behind me. Trigger spins to face me, his broad chest rising and falling. Blood smears across his knuckles, sweat dripping down his torso.

"What are you doing in here?" Trigger growls.

I approach him until we are toe to toe, my chest brushing against his. His heat engulfs me, and the pure, raw energy radiating off him sets my nerves on fire. The pure sexual energy radiating off him sets my body into motion.

"I don't know," I murmur. "But I know I want you."

I groan as Trigger's strong hands clasp around my waist and he picks me up by my ass. I wrap my legs around him, feeling the bulge behind his jeans against my heated center. "God, do I want you."

His mouth crashes into mine, our kiss wild, desperate. His tongue demands entry, and I give it to him, tasting sweat, blood, and the fire burning between us. I grind against him, desperate for friction, but it's not enough. He growls, fingers tangling in my braids, yanking my head back to expose my throat. His lips trail down, licking and biting the sensitive skin below my jaw. I'm losing myself in him.

This kiss, this man, is going to ruin me for all others.

He licks and sucks the sensitive area below my jaw, exploring and tasting my heated

skin. He leaves gentle but firm kisses up the column of my neck until our lips meet again. This kiss is ruining me for all other kisses. Trigger is going to destroy me for all other men once I get him inside of me. Our mouths crash together again, lips, tongue, and teeth scraping against each other. It's raw and powerful. Butterflies explode in my belly, and fire burns between my thighs. Trigger is igniting an inferno inside of me, and I'm powerless to stop the blaze from taking over my body, mind, and soul.

The door flings open, and someone walks in. I can't see who it is since Trigger hasn't released his hold on me. Trigger pulls his lips away from mine, and a deep growl rumbles up his chest when his gaze lands on the person who barged in like they own the place.

"Fuck, dude. Put that shit away. We have a meeting to get to." A gruff voice interrupts.

Trigger releases me, and I slide down his body, frustrated but thankful someone can keep their head in the game.

"Now, Tiny? Really?" Trigger releases a harsh breath but doesn't release my hips. His hot fingers sear into my skin.

"Yeah, brother, now," Tiny responds.

I turn around and see a giant of a man standing in the doorway. This is Tiny? This man is a beast. He takes up the whole doorway, leaving no room around him. He is tall with a California tan and a messy faux mohawk, and his body is all hard rippling muscle. His hands are big enough to wrap around my throat and squish me like a bug if he wants to. But there is something in his dark brown eyes that is gentle and kind.

"I should go." I quietly say.

“No, you should stay, and Tiny can go,” Trigger argues, but I pull from his grasp, needing space, needing air. I pull out of his grasp and head for the door. Tiny moves to let me pass, and I walk out of that room, leaving Trigger behind me. I have a job to do, and the last thing I need to do is get tangled with a criminal.

The night air does nothing to cool the heat still pulsing in my veins. I make it to my truck without incident. Trigger doesn't chase after me, not that I expected him to. But what if he had? I don't think I'd have had the strength to leave.

Now that I know what he tastes like and how he feels, keeping my distance is getting harder and harder.

I climb in my pickup and start the engine. Not wanting to go home yet, I head to the gym to relieve some of this pent-up energy.

Pulling into the parking lot, I breathe a sigh of relief. No one is here. The last thing I want to deal with is Benton and his leering, hungry eyes staring at me while I'm trying to expunge this stress. If he were here, I'd probably end up punching him in the face.

I climb from my pickup, grab my workout bag, lock the doors, and head inside. I have so many questions about tonight. Who is the guy with the Lion tattoo and his association with the Royal Bastards MC?

Since I'm undercover, I don't have an office to sit down and run some research. I have to hope my handler gives me what I need after I send off a quick text to him to let him know what I discovered tonight.

As I enter the gym's locker room and slide my bag off my shoulder, my phone chirps back with a message saying they will be in touch and to stay liquid. I roll my eyes. I might be new to UC work, but I'm not a newbie at this job.

Tossing my phone aside, I unlock my locker and change into workout gear. Climbing on the treadmill, I plan on getting sweaty and hopefully exhausted so I can sleep for a couple of hours.

I need to sweat this out.

I need to forget the way Trigger tasted.

Because if I don't, I'll lose myself to a man I have no business wanting.

Chapter 8

AERIANNA

After two hours at the gym, it's two a.m. by the time I drag myself back to my apartment. My legs feel like jelly, and my arms are still trembling from pushing through an extra workout. After a quick shower, I pull on fresh clothes and head out, driving home through the quiet, empty streets.

When I step inside my apartment, I toss my keys into the bowl by the door and unholster my service weapon, securing it in the safe. My mind doesn't slow down, racing a million miles an hour. Memories of my past and the people I've lost haunt me. And then there's him, the sexy, dangerous biker who takes my breath away, tempting me to blur the clean lines of black and white and step into the grey.

Losing my best friend, Allison, broke something in me. Trusting men has been nearly impossible ever since. She and I grew up together in a small town tucked away in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. There wasn't much to do there except party and stir up trouble, and Allison and I were inseparable through it all. If I was there, so was she, and vice versa.

Looking back now, the signs were there. I should have seen them. But we were young, naive, and reckless. I missed them, and it cost Allison her freedom. For eight long years, I've been searching for her. Every year that passes chips away at my hope, but I can't let it go. I owe it to her.

It all started when she began drifting away, hiding things from me. She told me she'd met someone—someone who promised to take her far away from our small town and give her the world. She was smitten, glowing in a way I hadn't seen before. But she wouldn't let me meet him. She said I wouldn't understand. Then, right after graduation, Allison disappeared without a trace.

EIGHT YEARS AGO IN TROUT LAKE, MI

The sharp ringing of my cell phone drags me from sleep. I'd just gotten home from a bonfire celebrating our graduation. Allison had decided to stay longer, saying her new guy was coming to meet her. I left to make it home before curfew.

"Hello?" I mumble, slapping my phone to answer without checking the caller ID. Silence greets me.

"Hello?" I try again, a frown forming. Still nothing. I pull the phone away from my ear and see Allison's name flashing on the screen.

"Allison? What's wrong?" I ask, sitting up abruptly, sleep forgotten.

"Aeri, I'm so sorry," she whispers, her voice trembling.

"Sorry? Sorry for what? Allison, where are you?" Panic seeps into my voice as I sit up straighter.

Before she can answer, I hear muffled voices and shuffling, then a piercing scream.

The line goes dead.

“Allison!” I shout into the silence. My hands shake as I redial her number. It goes straight to voicemail. I try again. Same result. Again and again, nothing.

With my heart racing, I throw on jeans and a hoodie, grabbing my phone to open the Find a Friend app we’d installed on our phones. The icon flashes blue, marking her last location, then blinks to black. I screenshot it and shove my feet into my sneakers.

I sprint down the stairs, grabbing my car keys off the hook by the door. My hands are trembling so badly that I drop them, cursing as I pick them up again. I take a deep breath, forcing myself to focus. I won’t be any help to Allison if I’m falling apart. Once my breathing steadies, I slide the keys into the ignition, fire up my truck, and peel out of the driveway.

On the road, I call Uncle Mark, the Chief of Police in Trout Lake.

“Hello?” His groggy voice answers.

“Uncle Mark, it’s Aeri. I need your help.” My voice cracks, thick with panic.

“Aeri, what’s wrong? Where are you?” His tone sharpens, sleep slipping away.

“I’m driving to the bonfire where Allison and I were earlier tonight. She called me Uncle Mark. Something’s wrong.” Tears spill down my cheeks, and I wipe them away with my sleeve.

“I know where you kids were. I’ll meet you there in twenty minutes. Aeri, listen to me: if you get there before I do, do not get out of your truck. Wait for me. Promise me.”

“Okay,” I whisper, my voice trembling.

“Hey, Aeri?”

“Yeah?”

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“It’s going to be okay.” I hear the sound of him moving around, grabbing his gear.

“I hope so,” I mutter, my voice barely audible. My chest tightens as Allison’s scream echoes in my head. “You didn’t hear her scream,” I whisper before hanging up.

Fifteen minutes later, I pull up to the now deserted bonfire site. What was, hours ago, a lively celebration is now eerily quiet. The fire is nothing but smoldering ashes. There’s no one in sight. My uncle pulls up beside me in his cruiser, stepping out as I open my door. He doesn’t say a word, just pulls me into a firm hug. His steady hand rubs my back before he lets go.

“Tell me everything,” Uncle Mark says gently.

I spill it all, how I left early to make curfew, the guy Allison was supposed to meet, the cryptic phone call, and her scream. I even mentioned the Find a Friend app we’d set up for emergencies and showed him the screenshot of her last known location.

“It says she was here when she called me, but now... there’s nothing,” I whisper, gesturing to the dark, empty clearing. “Just a few hours ago, this place was packed with kids celebrating. Now, it’s like a ghost town. What’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” Uncle Mark replies grimly, “but I’m going to do everything I can to find out.”

He walks to his car and pulls out two spotlights, handing one to me.

“Let’s check it out. Guide us as close as you can to the last ping from Allison’s

phone.”

The townspeople assumed Allison had just run off to the big city. No one but me seemed to care enough to look for her. Even my Uncle Mark, who had promised to do everything he could, gave up after two weeks without a single lead. I’d told anyone who would listen that Allison wouldn’t just leave, it’s not like her to do that.

But they didn’t believe me. Her parents shrugged it off, saying she was a troubled teen who’d come crawling back once she realized life wasn’t as glamorous as she imagined. The rest of the town followed suit, chalking her disappearance up to rebellion.

I knew better. Deep in my gut, I knew something terrible had happened. When no one would listen, I started digging on my own.

Allison had told me about a guy she’d fallen for, a man who lived in Detroit. It wasn’t much to go on, but it was a start. I followed the lead to Motor City, only to find him dead. He was face-down in a puddle of his own vomit, a needle still sticking out of his arm. A literal dead end.

But I couldn’t bring myself to go home. I stayed in Detroit, determined to find answers. Joining the police force felt like my best shot at keeping Allison’s disappearance in the forefront of my mind while making a difference. After graduating from the academy, I searched every dark alley, every homeless camp, and every shadowy corner of the city on my shifts. But day after day, month after month, year after year, I came up empty.

Eventually, the searches became less frequent. Not because I gave up, but because I was running out of places to look. Still, Allison’s face haunted me every day. It was the reason I decided to pursue a degree in Criminal Justice, hoping to use it as a stepping stone to where I really wanted to go: the FBI. If I couldn’t find her as a cop,

maybe I could uncover the truth as a federal agent.

Then came the night that changed everything.

My partner and I were on a stakeout, monitoring a suspect tied to a human trafficking ring. It was late, the kind of hour when the streets get quiet but not empty. That's when I noticed him, a teenager sitting under a flickering streetlamp. His clothes were filthy, his frame so thin he looked like a gust of wind could knock him over. Something about the way he sat, hunched and alone, gnawed at me.

"What's he doing out here this late?" I muttered, keeping my eyes on him.

Before my partner could answer, a woman approached the boy. They spoke in hushed tones for a few minutes before walking off together. I felt a cold weight settle in my stomach.

"Let's follow them," I said.

We tailed them to a house tucked into a forgotten corner of the city. On the outside, it looked like any other rundown building, but inside, it was something far worse.

It wasn't a typical stash house. Instead of drugs or cash, it held women and children. They were crammed into small rooms, their faces hollow with despair.

"This isn't just trafficking," I whispered to my partner, my stomach twisting into knots. "This is... something else."

The house was heavily guarded, so we couldn't go in without backup. As we waited, I watched the boy come back out alone. The woman he'd walked in with wasn't with him anymore.

My blood ran cold. The weight in my stomach turned into a boulder. Whatever was happening inside that house wasn't good, and I was starting to realize it was bigger than I could've imagined.

2 YEARS AGO- DETROIT

"What do you think happened to her?" I asked.

"My guess is this boy is the bait for these sick fucks." My partner, Adrian Ramirez, replies. He opens the cruiser door, "Let's see if we can get him to flip."

Without a word, I follow Ramirez. "Stay close, I'd hate to see anything happen to your fine ass," Ramirez whispers in my ear.

Ever since I joined the department and he has been my partner, Ramirez has always made sexual remarks toward me. I usually let them roll off my shoulders and not even acknowledge him, but there is something in his tone that has been getting more and more aggressive. The way he leers at me when he thinks I am not watching him.

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“Don’t worry about me, Rameriz.” I bite back. “I know how to watch my back.”

Probably the wrong thing to say to him, but I don’t care anymore. I’m done with the sexual innuendos.

We find the teenager sitting on a new corner, under the street lights. He’s looking for another victim. I slowly approach him, with my weapon drawn but held down. “Don’t move,” I command. “Put your hands on your head and your belly on the ground.”

“Fuck,” the teenager grumbles. He does what I ask, and Rameriz cuffs him.

I read him his rights, and we put the boy into the back of our cruiser. Ten minutes later, we’re back at the precinct and have the boy in the interrogation room, questioning him.

Once we convinced him he was working with known traffickers, things started to fall into place, and he told us everything. The teenager, whose name is Rael Dominga, decided to become my criminal informant. He’s a runaway without a family. When he was twelve, his mother was deported back to Mexico, and he doesn’t know who his father is. After he went into a group home and had to endure bullying and abuse, he ran away. He’s been on the streets since he was fourteen.

My heart aches for Rael, and I want to do everything I can to help him. He’s a lost sixteen-year-old trying to make ends meet. He informed me that a man named Josiah offered him a job to lure these women into the stash house. Told him that one day he would bring Rael out to Los Angeles and into Josiah’s world. Giving him money, cars, homes, and everything Rael could wish for. All he had to do was keep bringing

Josiah these women and children. So that's what Rael did. He'd sit on the corner and lure in unsuspecting women and leave them to an unknown fate. He didn't realize he was working for the Black Market Railroad until we showed him proof. He told us about the pipeline running from New York to California. He wasn't supposed to know, but adults ignore children and talk.

After a while, the job became just that, a job. Josiah would give him food and clothing in return for working for him. With no questions asked and a boy who looks the way he does, Rael had no issues finding unsuspecting women and children to bring to Josiah.

Now that I have him working with us, I know I'm one step closer to finding Allison.

Rael and I are sitting in my unmarked police car. Ramirez went to get some snacks from the store down the street for the stakeout.

"Can I ask you something?" I ask Rael.

"Sure."

Hesitating, I pull up a picture of Allison from my phone. "Have you ever seen this woman before?"

I show Rael, and the moment he looks at the photo, his eyes cast down in shame. "Yeah, Officer, I have," Rael confesses.

"When? How long ago?" I ask.

"About six months ago. Damien, one of Josiah's men, brought her in on the same night I was scheduled to work. She was scared and crying, but I couldn't do anything about it. I went out to do my job, and when I came back, she was gone. I asked about

her, and all Damien said was that she went to sunshine and sandy beaches. I figured she went to Los Angeles with Josiah, and I was jealous.” Rael shrugs his shoulders. “Now that I know what Josiah is up to, I wish I didn’t. All those women are now being sold in the Black Market Railroad, and I’m to blame. This is all my fault.”

“It’s not your fault, Rael. If anything, this is Josiah’s fault. He’s the one who tricked you into believing a lie.”

Ramirez comes back before Rael can say anything else. Once Ramirez is situated, his eyes linger on my body for a bit longer than I’d like. I’m wearing a pair of tight jeans and a hoodie with my hair pulled up in a ponytail. I’m about to open my mouth to tell him that if he doesn’t stop, I will cut out his eyeballs with a spoon, and Rael’s phone chirps.

“It’s time,” Rael says, dread in his tone.

“I’ll be right here with you.” I offer Rael reassurance.

Rael climbs out of the backseat of the car and crosses the street. He shoves his hands in his pockets and puts his head down.

“You sure do clean up nicely,” Ramirez states. I don’t look in his direction and ignore his lingering gaze. “What? Are you too good to even acknowledge me?”

“We have a job to do, Ramirez,” I state, watching Rael. A man approaches Rael, and he glances in my direction. The man grabs Rael by the arm and starts dragging him into the alley. “Shit.”

I climb out of the car, and Ramirez does the same. I follow Rael and the man down a dark alleyway. I can’t find them anywhere.

“Where did they go?” I ask.

My focus is on finding Rael, and I don’t notice Ramirez in my personal space. He grabs my arm and slams my body against the brick building, making me drop my gun. He crowds my space, nudging my legs open with his thigh. His hot breath fans across my skin.

“I knew you liked to play hard to get, but damn, this is too far.” Ramirez gropes my breasts and licks his way up my neck.

“What are you doing?” I ask, trying to push him off.

“Taking what you keep teasing me with. You know you want this.” He presses his hardness against my thigh, and I want to vomit.

“I have never teased you, Ramirez. You’re my partner, not my lover.” I spit out. Sick of his hands grabbing areas he has no business touching, I bring my arm down and elbow him in the face, making his nose bleed.

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“You little cock tease,” Ramirez spits out blood and charges at me like a three-hundred-pound linebacker.

He slams my head into the brick wall, making me dizzy. He has me pinned against the wall with my hands above my head before I can shake off the dizziness. He holds my hands with one of his and brings the other one down to the waistband of my jeans and begins to fumble with the zipper and button. Shit, he’s going to rape me right here if I don’t do something.

Focusing on my training from the academy, I bring my knee up and slam it into his balls as hard as I can. I kick and punch his sorry ass until he starts crying and begging me to stop.

A gunshot rings out. My pulse surges, adrenaline roaring in my veins. I leave Ramirez a sniveling, pathetic heap lying against the alley wall and sprint toward the sound.

Rounding the corner, I spot a small body crumpled on the ground. My heart plummets to my toes. “No!” I scream, sliding to my knees beside him.

Rael.

His face is pale, his breath ragged. Blood pools beneath him, soaking into the cracked asphalt.

“Rael!” I cradle his head, my hands trembling as I check for the wound. Blood pours from his abdomen, hot and sticky against my palms.

“I’m so sorry, Rael.” Tears blur my vision. “I should have been here. I should’ve protected you.”

His eyelids flutter, and he coughs, crimson staining his lips. “Not...your...fault,” he rasps, his voice weak but steady.

I shake my head, tears streaking my cheeks. “Stay with me. Please. Don’t give up.”

One hand presses against the wound, desperate to stem the bleeding, while the other fumbles for my phone. The screen is cracked from where Ramirez slammed me against the wall, but it still lights up. I swipe up with shaking fingers and dial.

“This is Officer Faber, badge number one, one, three. seven,” I stammer, my voice quivering. “Officer needing assistance. A teenager with a gunshot wound to the abdomen. Severe bleeding. I need an ambulance to...” I rattle off the address and hang up.

“Help is on the way, Rael. Just hold on,” I whisper.

His eyes meet mine, glistening with tears of his own. He lifts a trembling hand and grips my wrist, his strength fading.

“Don’t...blame...yourself,” he breathes before his head tilts slightly to the side.

“No! Rael, stay with me!” I cry, pressing harder on his wound as his blood soaks through my fingers. “You hear me? Stay awake!”

The faint sound of sirens in the distance brings a sliver of hope, but it feels impossibly far away.

“Please,” I beg, my voice breaking, “Don’t leave me.”

Rael raises his right hand and captures mine, still trying to stop the bleeding. “Can...you...do...” he coughs up more blood.

“Shh, Rael. Don’t talk. Save your energy.” I coax him to stay still.

His hand tightens on mine. “Promise me...” Rael’s lungs are rattling as he struggles for breath. “Get...these...fuckers...” Then his grip on my hand goes limp, and Rael takes his last breath.

“No, no, no,” I beg everyone and anyone to help us. Save him. I begin CPR, but it’s too late. Rael’s lifeless eyes stare into nothing as his soul leaves his body.

The ambulance arrives a few minutes later, lights flashing in the darkened alley. EMTs rush to Rael, their faces grim as they assess the situation. I’m forced to step back, my hands and clothes stained with his blood.

One of them glances up at me, his expression heavy. “He’s gone,” he says quietly. “DOA.”

My knees threaten to buckle, but I refuse to let myself collapse. Not here. Not now. Rael’s lifeless body is carefully lifted onto the stretcher, and the image burns into my mind. I failed him.

Behind me, I hear heavy footsteps. Turning, I see my commanding officer striding toward me, Ramirez trailing behind him like a smug, wounded predator. A bloodstained rag covers his face, but his eyes gleam with triumph.

Shit. I’m toast.

The look on my CO’s face tells me everything. He’s already decided who’s to blame, and it isn’t Ramirez. Whatever bullshit story he spun must’ve been enough to bury

me.

Without waiting for the inevitable lecture, I pull the badge from my chest and hand it over. There's no point arguing, it would fall on deaf ears. My hands are still trembling as I walk away, each step heavy with rage, grief, and shame.

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But this isn't the end.

Rael's face flashes in my mind, a reminder of the countless lives ruined by the Black Market Railroad. They took him, just like they took Allison. And if Ramirez wants to side with them, that makes him fair game, too.

I clench my fists, the sting of my nails digging into my palms, grounding me.

They'll pay for what they've done. Every last one of them.

The shrill ring of my cell phone jolts me out of the dark spiral of my memories, dragging me back to the present. I blink, realizing I'm still seated at my kitchen table, the cold mug of coffee cradled in my hands. Through the blinds, the first rays of the morning sun stream into the room, painting bright streaks across the walls.

Without glancing at the caller ID, I press the phone to my ear. "Yeah," I answer, my voice hoarse and tired. Sleep had eluded me again last night, but that's nothing new. I don't even remember the last time it bothered me.

"Aerianna," my handler's clipped tone greets me, devoid of preamble, "I need you at Jameson Street and West. We found a body."

My stomach tightens, the exhaustion evaporating in an instant. "I'll be there," I reply, already rising from my chair.

The coffee remains untouched on the table, a bitter reminder of the sleepless night I've left behind. Grabbing my jacket, I head for the door, steeling myself for

whatever waits at the scene.

Chapter 9

AERIANNA

We found a body.

My handler's words play on repeat in my head as I throw on a fresh set of clothes and race out to my pickup. The urgency of his tone still echoes a low hum of unease under my skin.

We found a body.

I press the gas hard, speeding through the city and ignoring the angry blare of horns as I run red lights. The streets blur past until I reach the intersection of Jameson Street and West.

The sun is already up, casting the City of Angels in a golden glow. Its light bounces off the glass and concrete as if mocking the darkness of what I'm about to face. The police cruisers come into view first, their lights painting the pavement in an ominous red-and-blue glow. I slam on my brakes, the tires screeching as I pull to a stop just before the barricades.

When I took this undercover job, I told my handler everything—about my search for Allison, about Detroit, and about the personal stake I have in this case. He trusted me because I told him the truth. Now, he stands by the yellow tape, hands on his hips, the weight of his job etched into every line on his face.

Zach is a man who commands attention. In his early fifties, he could have any woman in his orbit with salt-and-pepper hair, a perpetual California tan, and a body kept in

shape by early-morning runs. His black t-shirt stretches over his toned muscles, and the backward baseball cap gives him a casual air that shouldn't work but does.

But not for me.

While half the women at the station openly drool over him, I never have. Zach isn't a man I lust after; he's the one person I trust. A father figure in a world where trust is rare, and I'll cling to that bond before I let myself see him in any other way.

"Aerianna," he calls out as I approach. His voice is steady and calm, but there's an edge of concern.

"Sheriff," I reply, giving him a curt nod.

"How're you holding up?"

"I'm fine." It's automatic, the answer expected of me, though the truth is less certain.

Zach studies me for a moment, his eyes narrowing just slightly. "If this gets to be too much, say the word, and I'll pull the plug. Your mental health matters, Aeri. I mean it."

"I know, but until I take these assholes down, I'm not stopping." He doesn't know the full extent of my plans. To him, this mission is about dismantling the Black Market Railroad, the network responsible for my missing best friend. But I've learned enough to know it doesn't stop there.

The Royal Bastards are involved, I know they are. The signs are all there, the connections buried in files and whispers, leading me straight to their doorstep. I just don't know how deep it goes or why.

“Just do me a favor and be careful,” Zach says, his voice dropping a notch. “Sometimes, the people you think are bad aren’t.”

I stiffen, his words hitting closer to home than he realizes. “I’ll be careful,” I say, my voice steady even as my mind churns. But the truth is, I can’t promise him that. Not when the lines between good and bad are already blurring, and I’m not sure which side I’ll be on when it’s all over. “Show me the body,” I say, steering the conversation back on track. The last thing I want or need is for Zach to start convincing me to back out now.

“Right this way.” Zach lifts the yellow tape, holding it just high enough for me to duck under.

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The air changes as we step into the alley, the scent of decay hitting like a brick wall. The narrow passage is lined with overflowing garbage containers, their contents spilling out onto the cracked asphalt. The sunlight barely penetrates the grimy walls on either side, casting long shadows that make the place feel colder than it should.

The coroner is crouched by the body, their face impassive, latex-gloved hands moving with practiced efficiency. My eyes are drawn to the small figure lying lifeless on the ground, limp and discarded like yesterday's trash.

The closer we get, the worse the stench becomes. A vile mix of rotting food, sewage, and something sharper, more sinister. I swallow hard, fighting the urge to gag as I force my focus on the scene ahead.

My chest tightens, but I can't let it show. Not here. Not now.

Blonde hair similar to my own flutters in the slight breeze. I hold my breath and step closer, leaning over the coroner's shoulder. "Shit." My gut clenches with certainty. It's Allison. I know it without a doubt.

Zach notices the turmoil on my face and steps in, his tone steady and commanding. "What do you have for us?"

The coroner looks up from where he's hovering over the body. His gray eyebrows rise as he takes me in. I shove my trembling hands deep into my pockets. I focus on breathing evenly, doing everything I can to keep from breaking down.

"As you know, I don't like to assume, but from what I'm seeing, this young woman

suffered severe blood loss and trauma from the stab wounds to her abdomen. Based on the blood on her thighs, she was sexually assaulted multiple times.” He adjusts his gloves and picks up her limp hand. “Her fingernails are broken and jagged, her wrists and hands bruised. She fought back. Hopefully, she left enough DNA on her attackers to help identify them. I couldn’t find any ID on her, but I’ll run her through the database.”

The coroner's words blur as I look into her lifeless eyes. Those green eyes I’ve missed so much now stare blankly at nothing. My chest tightens. I close my eyes, centering myself, and then open them again. “Does she have a butterfly tattoo on her right hip?” I manage, already knowing the answer.

The coroner shifts her slightly, revealing a small blue butterfly. “Yes, she does. How do you know?”

“Her name is Allison Greene. Twenty-six. From Trout Lake, Michigan.” My voice is steady, though every word feels like a punch to the gut. “You can confirm it.”

“Aerianna, hold on,” Zach cuts in, his tone skeptical. “You can’t know this is her.”

I glare at him, the truth weighing heavy on my chest. “It’s her, Zach. The question isn’t who she is. It’s who did this. Was it the Black Market Railroad, or...” I stop before I can voice aloud who I think could have killed my best friend.

Zach’s jaw tightens, and he steps closer, his voice low and resolute. “We’ll find out, Aeri, I promise. And when we do, there will be hell to pay.” He places a hand on my shoulder, guiding me away from the scene. “Come on. I want to show you something.”

“Where are we going?” I ask as he opens the passenger door of his SUV. I climb in reluctantly, my mind racing.

“You need to see this before you make any rash decisions. I know what you’re thinking, and you’re wrong. I’ll prove it to you.” He starts the engine, and we drive out of the city.

“What about my truck?” I ask, staring out the window as the cityscape gives way to open roads.

“I’ll have another officer take it to your apartment.”

I sigh, resting my head against the cool glass. Images of Allison flash through my mind. Her laugh, her smile, the way she always had my back. The loss crashes over me in waves, each one heavier than the last. We were each other’s rocks. When one stumbled, the other was there to pick them up. When one of us fought with someone, the other was there for backup with no questions asked. She was my soul sister, my best friend, and now she is gone. I will never hear her laughter, I will never see her smile. I will never have the comfort of her presence next to me as I achieve milestones in my life. I will never get to hold her babies or comfort her when someone breaks her heart.

Zach pulls into a gravel driveway, stopping in front of a small white house nestled in the woods. “What I’m about to show you stays between us. Do you promise?”

I nod. “I promise.”

“This is the reason why I know the Royal Bastards don’t have anything to do with Allison’s death or the missing women and children.” He climbs out of the SUV, and I follow.

We step out, and the dry heat hits me like a wall. The house looks cozy, almost serene, with a porch swing swaying gently in the breeze. Security cameras are mounted at every corner. Whoever lives here values safety. A swing sits in the

corner, moving gently in the breeze. There is a throw blanket on one end and a steaming cup of coffee on an end table. Someone left in a hurry.

Zach knocks on the door. A moment later, a young woman opens it. She's maybe eighteen or nineteen, her blue eyes wary as she takes us in. Her long blonde hair is tied back in a messy ponytail, and she's wearing a long-sleeved shirt and leggings. Her bitten nails, some crusted with dried blood, tell a story of their own. She's nervous as hell about us being here. My gaze goes back to Zach, and I give him a questioning look.

"Aerianna, this is Denise. Denise, meet Aerianna," Zach says gently.

Denise doesn't acknowledge my greeting. Instead, she focuses on Zach. "What do you need?"

"Can we come in for a moment?" Zach asks.

Denise hesitates, then steps aside. "Sure, but don't wake the others. We had a rough night, and they need their sleep." Denise opens the door to allow us in.

We follow her inside, past a warm living room and into a modest kitchen. The smell of cinnamon and coffee fills the air, making my stomach growl. Denise pours us each a mug and places cinnamon buns on the table. She sits, clasping her hands tightly, her posture guarded.

"Take a seat. There is a good reason why you're here." Denise states before sitting down.

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“There is, but only if you feel like today is a good day to talk,” Zach answers. His voice is warm and gentle toward Denise.

“What do you want to know?” she asks, her voice steady but cautious.

Zach speaks first. “Before you start, I need to give Aerianna some context. She’s working undercover to take down the people who did this to you. She just found out her best friend is dead, killed by the Black Market Railroad. She thinks the Royal Bastards might be involved. Can you share your story?”

“Sure.” Denise clasps her hands on the table and begins speaking. “Last year, I was at an end of the school year party. I didn’t have anything to drink, being the responsible one, but that didn’t matter. The man I was seeing showed up, and before I knew it, I blacked out. When I came too, I wasn’t at the party anymore. Instead, I was tied to a bed, naked, beaten and raped several times. This went on for, I think, three weeks. It was hard to tell. Each day, hour by hour, these men would come in and do things to me. Things I don’t want to remember. I thought I was lost, that there was no hope for me. That this would be my life. Violated day in and day out by men who had no right to touch me.” Tears stream down Denise’s face, breaking my heart. “One night, it was late. I was handcuffed to the bed and passed out from the pain of the man who raped me a little bit ago. I wanted to end my life, I was done, checked out, but that was before they rescued me.” Denise stares right into my eyes, deep into my soul. “Then, one night, they came for me. The Royal Bastards. They got me out and brought me here. Like they’ve done for all the women in this house.”

Her words hit me like a freight train. Everything I thought I knew about the Royal Bastards shatters. I stand abruptly, the untouched coffee and food forgotten.

Everything I've found points to them, so why would they save this young girl? Am I going at this all wrong? Can they help me instead of stopping me? My gaze cuts to Zach, and he nods his head. Yes. Yes, you can trust them.

"I need a minute." I step outside, the fresh air doing little to clear the storm raging in my head.

The Royal Bastards aren't the enemy. They're trying to save women like Denise, women like Allison. And I've been fighting the wrong battle.

Not anymore.

I stare into the woods, resolve hardening in my chest. The Black Market Railroad took everything from me, and with the help of the Royal Bastards, I'm going to burn them to the ground.

Chapter 10

TRIGGER

Riding through the quiet streets after the fight, Tiny silent at my side, I can't stop replaying that kiss. Her lips were soft but demanding like she wanted to claim me, and the heat of her body felt like it burned straight through to my soul, making my heart pound against my chest. Time stood still when her lips claimed mine. Her taste still lingers, something sweet and dangerous. I can hear her soft voice speak to me. What is it about this woman I can't get out of my head?

When we pull into the Clubhouse gates, Seth nods us through without a word. The hum of the engines fades as we park in the garage, but the tension between me and Tiny feels loud enough to fill the silence. His eyes are on me, sharp and unrelenting, and I know that look, it's the one he gives when he's about to tear into someone.

Probably me.

I climb off my bike, hang my helmet on the handlebars, and shoot him a glare. “What?” I ask.

“How long has this thing between you and that woman been going on?” His voice is even, but the weight of his accusation hits me like a punch.

I scoff, walking past him. “I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

“Bullshit.” Tiny replies.

I walk past Tiny and head down the corridor into the bar. It’s quiet in here tonight, thank fuck for that. I go behind the bar and grab a bottle of Crown and two shot glasses. Pouring two fingers in each, I slide one to Tiny. I knock mine back in one smooth motion, the burn doing nothing to numb the storm in my chest. I think about what to tell him. I knock back another shot before I say anything. Tiny still hasn’t touched his drink. Instead, he is still staring at me, leaning against the bar, arms crossed, waiting for an answer.

I sigh, “Fuck. Man, you’re relentless.” I come around to the other side of the bar with the Crown in my hand and take a seat. “That was the first time I even touched that woman.” Tiny raises an eyebrow in disbelief. “Yeah, tell me about it. That’s the woman who ran me over a while ago and wrecked my bike.” I confess with a sigh. I watch Tiny out of the corner of my eye, waiting for his reaction.

“No, shit?”

“No shit,” I rub a hand down my face, exhaling hard. “Her name is Aerianna. I don’t even know who she is just that she’s a crazy ass driver and now works at the casino as a dealer.” I scrub my hands down my face. “I don’t know what to make of this.”

Tiny snorts, finally taking a sip of his drink. “I don’t either, but the way she clung to you like a spider monkey tonight makes me think she isn’t all in the head.” Tiny laughs.

“You’re such an asshole.” I shake my head, but his words pull a reluctant smirk from me. I take a swig of the Crown in my hand and set the bottle on the bar top. “I’m going to check on my sister and head to bed.”

“Ok, Brother. I’ll see you in a few hours. Remember we have Church at ten.” Tiny reminds me. “To talk about what we found out tonight.”

I salute him lazily, smirking as I turn and head down the hallway toward Elise’s room. Pausing outside her door, I listen for any sign she’s awake, but the silence reassures me that my sister is asleep. It’s late, and the last thing I want is to wake her. Tomorrow, I’ll check in properly. For now, I need to deal with the storm brewing in my chest.

When I reach my room, I close the door with a soft click and lock it behind me. The weight of the night settles over me as I shrug off my cut, Aerianna’s scent still clinging to the leather. It’s faint, but it’s enough to stir something primal in me. I hang it on the back of the door like I’m trying to preserve it, even though I know it’s just an excuse to keep her close. My boots hit the floor with dull thuds as I toe them off, followed by the rest of my clothes until I’m down to my boxers. I bypass the bed, my body too wired to crash just yet, and head straight into the bathroom.

The hiss of water fills the small space as I crank the shower on, letting the steam build until it fogs the mirror and wraps around me like a second skin. I step in when the water’s hot enough to sting, hoping it’ll wash away more than just the blood and grime of the night. But the heat does nothing to ease the ache twisting inside me. My muscles are sore, but that’s not what’s eating me alive. It’s her, Aerianna. That woman is in my head, under my skin, and no matter what I do, I can’t seem to shake

her.

The way her body brushed against mine earlier. The memory ignites something deep and dangerous. She looked at me like I was the only man in the room, and when she kissed me, it was like she was daring me to lose control. I remember the feel of her lips, soft, demanding, full of fire. If Tiny hadn't barged in when he did, I'd have taken her right there on that filthy floor without any fucks given.

The thought alone is enough to stir me, and before I can stop myself, my hand wraps around the hardness she's left in her wake. Closing my eyes, I see her on her knees, her grey eyes locked on mine, her lips parting to take me in.

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My grip tightens as I pump, the fantasy consuming me. Her taste, her heat, the way her body would feel beneath mine, it's all I can think about. It doesn't take long before I tremble, my release crashing over me like a wave. My head thuds against the cool tiles, my breaths coming in sharp, uneven bursts.

What the hell is this woman doing to me? I don't even know her, not really, but she's already got me so twisted up I don't know which way is up. Does she feel the same pull? Is she as consumed by this as I am? Or am I just another mark, another distraction in her tangled world?

I shut off the water and step out, grabbing a towel to dry off. The air in the bedroom feels cool against my skin as I walk naked to the dresser. I pull on a clean pair of boxers, the exhaustion finally catching up with me. Collapsing onto the bed, I can't stop my mind from circling back to Aerianna. The way she looked at me, kissed me, consumed me. Sleep comes slowly, and when it does, she's still there, haunting my thoughts.

I'm good and fucked when it comes to this woman.

A fist pounding on my door drags me from sleep. I was dreaming about Aerianna. The woman has my head in knots, and I don't know what I'm going to do. The raging hard-on I'm sporting is going to hurt like a son of a bitch today.

The pounding continues, more insistent this time. I yank the door open, coming face to face with Torch.

"Shit, bro." Torch chuckles, eyes dropping to my tented boxers. "Put that beast away.

You're late for Church."

"Yeah, give me ten." I slam the door in Torch's face before he can say anything else. The fucker loves torturing us with his jokes. Since he and Daisy got together and had the twins, he's mellowed out some, but not by much. Especially when his twin, Jax, is around with his Ol' Lady, Rose. Those two are goddamn terrible together, always pulling pranks on everyone, even the Ol' Ladies.

They got Red and Nadia one day, and you would have sworn Red's face was going to burst into flames from embarrassment. Let's just say Red and Nadia have learned not to have sex in his communications room without locking the door first.

Shaking off the thoughts, I head to the bathroom and take a much needed piss before washing my hands and brushing my teeth. I need coffee, too. I throw on a pair of jeans hanging in my closet, then slide a white T-shirt over my head. Once my socks and boots are on, I grab my cut and put it on. The leather fits like a second skin. I pocket my wallet, keys, and phone before heading out.

I walk down the hallway toward Elise's bedroom to check on her when I hear a soft giggle and a male voice coming from across the hall in Pretty Playboy's room. Instead of checking on Elise, my mind jumps to the assumption that she's in his room. Rage consumes me, and I pound on his door hard enough to rattle the walls. I don't give a fuck if he's my brother by the patch that's my sister he's fucking with.

The door flings open to a pissed-off Pretty Playboy, standing there naked, chest heaving. "What the fuck do you want?"

I shove him aside and step into his room. On his bed, naked, are Pearl and Sadie, two of the Club Bunnies making out. Neither of them covers themselves when they see me. If anything, they get more into it, licking and sucking on each other's nipples while playing with their clits. Normally, I'd throw caution to the wind and join them,

but ever since I met Aerianna, they don't do it for me.

"You're late for Church," I grunt, stepping out of his room before he can say anything.

Yeah, I thought it was my sister in there. Was it a dick move to barge in like that? Yeah. Do I give a fuck? Not really. But I am improving. I knocked instead of breaking down his door like I wanted to. Progress, I guess.

I grab a cup of coffee from the kitchen and head into Church. Pretty Playboy slides in behind me, scowling. I don't say a word, just take my seat and blow on my coffee before taking a sip. When I glance at him, he huffs like a spoiled child. I grin. Yeah, I'm an asshole. But at least I'm a consistent one.

Capone slams the gavel on the table, signaling it's time for Church. Normally we meet three times a week, but with the shit going down with my sister, we have it when it's necessary to update everyone.

"What's the update?" Capone asks, diving right into business.

"The guy I fought last night sang like a canary when he came to. Said Lattimer has been hiding out underground, and the only way we can bring him up is with a shipment of girls. He said Lattimer has been peeking his head out of his hiding spot every few months but dives right back in like a weasel when we get too close. He has tabs on us somehow, but the guy didn't know. That tells me we have a snitch."

Fury erupts in the room.

Capone slams his gavel down, "Now wait a fucking minute!" He shouts. "Before we go accusing someone of being a snitch, we need to figure some other shit out. I know each and every one of you sitting here or prospecting for us. None of us would put

this club in jeopardy, and every single one of us would put our life on the line for the patch.” He slams his fist on the table in frustration. “Red.” Capone barks. “What do you have?”

Red pushes his glasses up onto his face and clears his throat. “I’ve checked out what I could find on Elise’s boyfriend.” His sympathetic gaze lands on me. “He’s a piece of work, Trigger. I don’t know how we keep finding these fuckers but we do.”

Red tosses a stack of photos on the table, and we each grab one. He looks familiar, but I can’t place where or how. Standing around six foot one, he has thick, broad shoulders that isn’t muscle. It’s the kind of bulk that comes from too many beers and late-night fast food runs. His once athletic frame had gone soft, but his arms still packed enough power to leave marks when he lost his temper.

His dark brown hair is long and greasy, as if he couldn’t be bothered to run a comb through it. From this photo he is sporting a five o’clock shadow, not the kind that made a man look rugged, but the kind that made him look like he never gave a damn. His hazel eyes are bloodshot from whiskey and too many sleepless nights, carrying the restless energy of a man always looking for his next bet, his next excuse, his next fight, and he reeks of desperation.

A tattoo snakes up his forearm, some ink he probably got in a drunken haze, though it had long since lost its meaning. His stance is of a man who thinks he owns the room, but underneath it is an undercurrent of agitation, like a wolf pacing in a cage. He’s wearing wrinkled jeans and a faded T-shirt. Everything about him screams recklessness, a man who has never learned his lesson and never wants to.

“How the fuck did my sister get mixed up with this asshole?” I question aloud, not expecting an answer.

Red speaks up, “It appears they met at a bar, and he laid on the charm. He was on the

prowl for a woman like Elise, and when he sunk his claws into her, that's when things turned bad."

I look at Red. He won't meet my eyes, so there is something more he isn't saying. "Spit it out, Red. Just rip the fucking band-aid off."

"His name is Jonas Mercer." Torch snorts. I know he has a smart-ass comment but refrains from speaking. "After I got his name, I dug deeper and, Trigger, you're not going to like what I found. He is the brother to Josiah Mercer." Red's face turns a deep shade of red out of anger and controlled rage.

A cold, suffocating silence falls over the room at Red's words. My heart drops into my stomach. Jonas Mercer. The name slams into me like a freight train, and for a moment, I can't breathe. The brother of Josiah Mercer, the monster who did unspeakable things to Syvannah, Exleigh, and Nadia. The same guy who almost killed Kensi. The one who's responsible for the bloodshed and the wreckage left in his wake.

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I should've known something was off. My sister was always so stubborn and independent, never willing to listen. She never saw the signs. Shit. How deep is she in this mess? I stand up abruptly, pacing, my mind whirring with a million thoughts at once. The room feels too small, too suffocating.

“Red, what else do you know? What else have you found?” I ask, trying to keep my voice steady but failing.

Red’s jaw tightens as he digs into the files he’s brought, tossing another photo on the table. This one’s an old mugshot. Jonas Mercer’s eyes stare back at me, filled with malice and indifference. It’s not just some petty criminal shit. He’s been in and out of trouble for years, each time pushing further into darker, more dangerous territory.

“He’s tied to some pretty heavy players,” Red continues, voice tight. “Drugs, extortion, the whole fucking network. But it gets worse. I’ve been following his financials, and it looks like he’s been living off Elise. He’s been using her, feeding off her trust. She was an easy target for him. He knew exactly who she was. How to pull her in.”

A sick feeling twists in my gut. “How long has this been going on?”

“About six months now,” Red says. “But things have escalated recently. He’s gotten more involved with Lattimer’s operation. That’s probably why he’s keeping an eye on her. She’s a pawn in a bigger game.”

I can feel the anger building, rising like a fire in my chest. Elise. My little sister. How the fuck did she get wrapped up in this?

Capone speaks, his voice steady but laced with authority. “We need to find Jonas. Fast. If he’s been working with Lattimer, this shit’s bigger than we thought.”

I nod, my mind racing. “I’m going after him. I’ll make sure he talks. If he’s using Elise, he won’t walk away from this.” The words come out through clenched teeth. Every muscle in my body is wound tight with the urge to go out and find him, but I know this isn’t something I can do alone.

Capone holds up a hand. “Not alone, Trigger. We do this right. We get our ducks in a row before we go charging in.”

I shake my head. “I’m not waiting. I don’t give a shit about the plan. Not when my sister’s in danger.” The tension in the room ratchets up another notch. I can feel everyone watching me, feeling my pain, my need to move, to act. But Capone isn’t one to be ignored.

“Listen to me,” Capone says, his voice sharp. “We’ll find Jonas. We’ll hit him where it hurts. But you’re not going after him until we’re ready. Understand?”

I hold his gaze for a long moment before nodding. I can’t promise to hold back, but I can follow orders. For now.

“We need answers, and we need them now,” Capone adds, his tone still commanding. “Get the rest of the Club in motion. This ends tonight.”

I know Capone’s right, but all I can think about is Elise. Is she already in too deep? Has Jonas already done enough damage that she won’t be able to escape? My mind races, and I know there’s no turning back from this.

If it comes down to it, I’ll burn everything to the ground to protect my sister.

Tiny slams his fist onto the table, causing it to rattle. “Are you fucking kidding me? Elise is tangled with Josiah’s brother? The one who raped and tortured, Syvannah and Exleigh and kidnapped Nadia? The one who tried to kill Kensi? What the fuck is going on?” Tiny turns his attention to me. “Do you think Elise was the leak without her knowing? The two of you talk all the time. Do you think that’s why he targeted her, to keep an eye on the Club without us knowing?”

The blood drains from my face as realization dawns on me. “Where is my sister now?”

“She was in her room the last time I checked on her.” Pretty Playboy answers. I pin him with a menacing glare, and he holds his hands up. “Hey, brother, that was last night. As you saw firsthand this morning, I was too preoccupied to hit on your sister, so I didn’t check on her. I assumed she was with the ladies.”

Capone nods at Pretty Playboy, “Well, now that you aren’t preoccupied, you can go check on her and bring her here. We need to get to the bottom of this as soon as possible.”

Pretty Playboy shoves away from the table grumbling about dickheads need to make up their minds. Stay away from her, keep her close, check on her, don’t check on her as he walks out the Church doors, slamming them behind him.

The room remains tense as the doors slam shut behind Pretty Playboy. Everyone knows things have escalated far beyond just a simple investigation. We’re in deep. Too deep to back out now.

I try to focus and push aside the feeling of dread that’s creeping in. My sister’s caught up in this mess, and now I’ve got to figure out if she’s involved in something more dangerous than I realized. The mention of Jonas Mercer, Josiah’s brother, sends a cold shiver down my spine. Everything makes sense now. Elise was always trying to

shield herself from her past, but this guy, he's connected to everything I thought I had left behind.

Capone's voice cuts through the silence. "We can't afford to waste time. Trigger, you need to figure out where this fucker is hiding. We can't trust anyone right now. If your sister's involved, we have to make sure she's safe. If she's been manipulated, we'll deal with that after."

I nod, swallowing the anger rising in my throat. This isn't just about the Club anymore. This is about my family, my blood. If I find out Jonas has been pulling strings from behind the scenes, I'm going to make him wish he'd never crossed paths with my sister.

Tiny slams his fist on the table again, clearly agitated. "And if Elise is the leak, Trigger? What are you going to do then?"

The thought cuts through me like a knife, but I push it down. Don't think that way. Not yet.

"I'll deal with it," I say through gritted teeth, knowing the weight of those words. It's a promise I never wanted to make, but it's one I might have to keep.

Capone stands, his eyes hard as stone. "We'll take it one step at a time. Right now, we are focusing on Lattimer and Elise's boyfriend. Once Pretty Playboy gets back, we'll start gathering intel on where Lattimer might be hiding."

As Capone gives orders, I can feel the weight of the situation pressing down on me. My sister is in this mess, and she doesn't even realize the depth of the shit she's standing in. I have to protect her, no matter what the cost. Even if it means doing things I'll regret later.

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Capone lights up a cigarette, inhaling deeply before exhaling a slow stream of smoke. He doesn't smoke much these days, only when shit weighs heavy on his mind. Today is one of those days.

"While Pretty Playboy is gone, we have some other business to discuss." His voice is steady, but the room picks up on the shift in energy. "I received a call from Jameson, our National Chapter Prez, this morning. The Bloody Scorpions are causing a fuss in Hawaii, and he wants me to send two of you down there since we are the closest." Muttered curses ripple through the room. Grumbles offfuckandshitas brothers exchange glances. No one likes dealing with the Scorpions, and Hawaii isn't exactly around the corner.

"Red and Aftermath, you two are heading down with Kensi and Nadia. Use this trip as an all-expense paid honeymoon for Aftermath and Kensi." Capone smirks before adding, "While you are there on yourhoneymoon, check up on shit. I expect daily reports so I can keep Jameson in the loop. And don't let the girls know what's going on."

Red leans forward, arms resting on his knees. "What about Matthew?" The concern in his voice is clear. His and Nadia's little boy means everything to him.

Capone takes another drag from his cigarette. "Danyella and Monica are going to keep him for you while you're there."

"As long as Nadia doesn't mind leaving Matthew, I'm in. How long will we be gone?" Red says.

“Two weeks minimum,” Capone replies, stubbing out his cigarette. “Maybe more if shit gets messy. Aftermath, are you good with this too?” Capone asks.

Aftermath leans back, a slow grin spreading across his face. “Oh, I’m definitely down for it. But I can’t guarantee my Ol’Lady will stay out of trouble. We all know how she gets. She doesn’t find trouble, trouble finds her.” Laughter erupts around the room, heads shaking in agreement. Kensi doesn’t go looking for trouble. Trouble damn near has a tracking device on her.

"Try to keep her on a leash," Capone says dryly, but even he knows it’s a lost cause.

"Yeah, good luck with that," Red chuckles.

The laughter fades while the weight of the mission lingers. Hawaii might sound like paradise, but if the Scorpions are making noise, it won’t be a vacation for long.

Before anything else can be discussed, Pretty Playboy comes barging into the room, slamming the doors open. “Prez, we have a problem. Elise is gone.” He’s breathing hard, pissed off and scared.

The words hit me like a freight train. Elise is gone. My mind blanks for a second as everything else falls away. I can’t breathe, can’t think. My little sister... gone. The very person I’ve been trying to protect, the one who I thought was safe... gone.

I stand up so fast that the chair screeches back. My fists are clenched, and my entire body is tense with the need to act, to do something. The room falls dead silent as I glare at Pretty Playboy, waiting for him to explain what the hell happened.

“What the fuck do you mean, gone?” I manage to growl through clenched teeth, my voice low and dangerous. Every muscle in my body is screaming at me to move, to find her, but I’m trying to hold it together.

Pretty Playboy rushes to explain, sweat beading on his forehead. “I went into her room to bring her here, and it’s trashed. Clothes are scattered everywhere, the furniture is smashed. She didn’t go without a fight. At the same time I was heading back here, I got a call, Trigger. An anonymous tip. They said she was taken. It looks like she was snatched, man.”

A low growl escapes from my throat. My blood is boiling, my heart racing. I’ve failed her. I should have checked on her, should’ve made sure she was safe. This is on me.

“Where’s the tip coming from?” I demand, ignoring the stunned silence around me.

Pretty Playboy shakes his head, panic in his eyes. “I don’t know. They hung up before I could get any more details. But I’m telling you, someone knows we’re looking for Lattimer. This has to be connected.”

Capone slams his fist on the table, his expression hard. “Everyone, stay calm. We need to think. Red, Aftermath, you’re still going on the mission to Hawaii. We can’t afford to keep you all here, especially with the situation escalating. But, Pretty Playboy, I need you to help Trigger on this. Get a team together and search for Elise. No stone unturned. I want answers, and I want them now.”

I don’t wait for anyone else to speak. The urgency in my chest is like a fire, burning through me. I’ve never felt this kind of panic, this kind of fear. Not even for myself. Not when I’ve faced down the worst shit imaginable. But for Elise. I can’t lose her.

I turn to Capone, my eyes wild with rage. “I’m going now. You don’t need to tell me twice.” The words spill out, a mixture of frustration and pure, unbridled anger. I can’t sit here any longer. I need to find her. I need to get to the bottom of this. I’ll tear apart the entire goddamn city if that’s what it takes to get her back.

Before anyone can stop me, I'm out of the room, heading straight for the garage. I don't care about the mission to Hawaii. I don't care about anything but finding my big little sister, Elise. The Scorpions, Lattimer, whatever the hell it takes to get my sister back. I'll make them all pay for this.

Chapter 11

AERIANNA

Zach and I ride back to the city in silence. The air conditioner is cranked to full blast, but it does nothing to cool the heat burning beneath my skin. I'm reflecting on everything that young girl told me. Have I been wrong this whole time about the Royal Bastards? Are they really the good guys doing illegal things to get shit done?

I don't know anymore. I don't know what to think or how to act. Do I keep going down this path, or do I turn in a different direction?

"I can hear the wheels spinning, Aerianna. What's on your mind?" Zach asks as he shifts in his seat.

I shake my head. "I don't think I'm good at this job, Zach. If I were, you'd think I would know the good guys from the bad. But I don't. I've been thinking this whole time it was the Royal Bastards who took Allison, but it wasn't."

"What exactly had you going down that path?"

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I take a deep breath, bracing myself. “Back when I was in Detroit after Rael was killed under my watch, I walked away. That much you know. What you don’t know is that I kept digging into the pipeline Rael told me about. And every place I went? It was tied to the Royal Bastards.”

I grip the armrest tight, the memories coming fast and hard. “The pipeline led me from Detroit to Cleveland, where I met Spider, the old Prez of their Chapter. He pointed me to the Montreal Chapter, where I ran into another President named Teller. After squeezing him for answers, I ended up in Northern Ontario, staring down an Enforcer named Skoden.” I shudder involuntarily, the image of the leather-clad giant burned into my brain.

“Then St. Louis changed everything. That’s where I met Demi.” I pause, swallowing back the bitterness of what I had to do to get her to talk. “She knew things, but the price she asked for that knowledge wasn’t easy. But I paid it.”

I don’t elaborate. Zach doesn’t push.

“From there, I hit Helena, Montana. Their Sergeant-at-Arms, Moose, made me prove I wasn’t a rat before sending me to Utah. By then, my name had spread, and I didn’t have to jump through hoops anymore. I met their VP, Outlaw, who directed me to Santa Clarita’s Chapter. Flame, their VP, finally pointed me here to L.A. To you. The FBI recruited me because of how far I had come in my investigation into the Black Market Railroad. I started working undercover with the FBI as a way to find Allison.”

I exhale, shaking off the ghosts of my cross-country hunt. “The only thing that surprises me now is that the Los Angeles Chapter hasn’t already exposed who I am to

Trigger.”

The weight of that statement lingers in the air between us. If they haven’t outed me yet, it’s only a matter of time.

Before Zach can respond, his phone rings. “Yeah,” he answers, his tone sharp.

I can’t make out the words on the other end, but the deep timber of a man’s voice sends a chill down my spine.

“Shit. Are you sure?” Zach pauses. “Ok, I’ll be there as soon as I can. Please, don’t do anything stupid.” Zach disconnects the call and slams his foot on the gas, sending us hurtling forward.

“What’s going on, Zach?” I grip the oh-shit bar above my head when our speed reaches one hundred miles an hour. He presses the gas harder, lurching us forward, weaving in and out of traffic, even riding the shoulder of the road before getting back on the freeway. “Zach, what’s going on?”

Silence.

Zach’s knuckles whiten on the steering wheel, his jaw tight, eyes burning with a mix of murder and concern. I’ve never seen that expression on him before.

“Zach!” I demand, my heart hammering.

After a few moments of silence, Zach speaks. “You’re about to find out what the Royal Bastards know about you.”

My stomach drops to my toes. Shit. Did something happen to one of them? Is Trigger hurt?

My mind races with worst-case scenarios as we make our way to their compound in record time.

Zach slows his SUV down and turns down a dirt road. We head toward a gate surrounding the Royal Bastards Clubhouse. Once we reach the gate, someone manning it slides it open and lets us through. Zach pulls into the closest spot to their Clubhouse, and my breath catches from the sight before me. This Clubhouse is massive. It looks like it used to be a huge warehouse used for storage.

White garage doors are in front of us, rolled up with ten burly bikers standing outside. All are watching us like we're their next problem to solve.

The one I know as Capone is front and center, pacing back and forth. I don't see Trigger, and ice freezes my veins. Was that call about him? Is he hurt?

Once Zach turns off the SUV, he doesn't get out right away. "Listen," he says, finally turning to me, "There is something you need to know. These guys might be protectors, but if they know you're a cop, they won't work with you until you have proven they can trust you. They know I am the Sheriff, and that's cause my daughter is married to one of their own. They're cool with me. But they won't be with you, yet. So, play it cool and don't act like a cop."

"I nod. "What's our story?"

"I'll figure it out." Not exactly reassuring, but I don't have time to argue. "Just play it cool, and things will be fine," Zach responds.

His answer doesn't sit well with me, but we don't have time to create a back story. I think the truth will be better, but Zach doesn't. He's been around these guys long enough to know what will and won't work, so I have to trust him.

“Ok.” I nod my head in agreement.

We step out of the SUV, and I slip my sunglasses on, masking my eyes. Zach approaches Capone, and they do some weird bro hug, slap on the back thing guys do.

“Thanks for coming, Sheriff,” Capone says, his dark gaze shifting to me with a smirk. “What’s she doing here?”

Does he know who I am? Is my cover blown? Why the hell do I care? I have decided to work with them, not against them. So, if they know I’m a cop, then they know.

Zach gestures between us. “Capone, this is Aerianna. Aerianna, meet Capone, President of the Royal Bastards.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” I say smoothly.

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Capone's smirk deepens. "We've met before when I had to pick up one of my guys off the side of the road."

I swallow hard. Shit. I never told Zach about that.

Zach lifts a brow. "Something you want to share?"

I force a shrug. "I can explain."

"I'm listening." Zach crosses his arms over his chest, waiting.

"I, uh, kind of hit one of them with my pickup a while back." I shrug my shoulders. Way to appear unaffected.

Capone laughs. His dark eyes sparkle with mischief. "Kind of?"

"It wasn't my fault!" I defend myself. "He came out of nowhere and ran into the side of my truck." That's not exactly true. I wasn't paying attention and nailed Trigger, but there's no way in hell I'm admitting that.

"Interesting." Zach rubs his hand on his chin. He knows I'm lying, but I hope he doesn't call me out on it.

Before he can press further, a woman steps out of the garage. "Dad!" She has long, highlighted brown hair and striking, multi-colored eyes, one blue and one green, just like Zach's. She wraps her arms around him, and he smiles, his expression softening in a way I haven't seen before.

“Lil’ K!” Zach embraces her, giving her a fatherly hug. He smiles down at her when they release each other. His eyes crinkle at the corners with happiness. This must be his daughter who is married to one of them.

I scan the crowd to see if I can figure out who she is married to. Standing in the back is a mountain of a man, built like a human battering ram with arms as thick as tree trunks and a neck that could put any man’s thighs to shame. Every inch of him is solid muscle, covered in ink that tells stories only he understands. His brown hair is kept just long enough to run a hand through, and his thick beard frames a face both rugged and striking. But it’s his piercing blue eyes that stand out the most, sharp and intense, like he sees everything and forgets nothing. When his gaze lands on Kensi, I know she belongs to him.

“What are you doing here?” she asks, glancing between Zach and Capone.

Zach glances at Capone, who nods his head in return. An unspoken answer to Zach’s daughter’s question. “Capone called me in for Club business.”

Her frown deepens when she spots me. “Who’s this?”

Before I can introduce myself, Zach beats me to it. “This is a friend of mine. Aerianna, meet my daughter, Kensi. And that big fucker behind her? That’s her husband, Aftermath.”

“It’s nice to meet you.” I hold out my hand, but Kensi ignores it, turning her attention back to her dad. She raises an eyebrow, and Zach shakes his head at her.

“Listen, Dad. I’m going to be out of town for a while. Aftermath is taking me to Hawaii for our honeymoon, and Red and Nadia are going with us.” The excitement in her voice makes Zach smile.

“When are you leaving?”

“This afternoon.”

“Stay out of trouble, Lil’ K. I don’t have reach in Hawaii to bail you out of jail,” Zach responds with a smirk.

Everyone around us chuckles like they know something I don’t, which they probably do.

“I’ll do my best,” Kensi says while rolling her eyes.

Zach turns back to her. “I have to meet with Capone. Will you show Aerianna around and make her feel at home?”

Kensi shrugs. “I guess.”

What the fuck is her problem? I didn’t do anything wrong. I open my mouth to say something when Zach shakes his head. Fuck.

“Thank you, Lil’ K.” He kisses the top of her head before walking off with Capone and the other Royal Bastards.

Kensi crosses her arms, eyes narrowing. “Well, Aerianna.” I hold my breath, waiting for her to unleash her attitude. “Looks like we’ll be getting to know each other.”

I follow her through the garage doors, down a long corridor, and into a room that looks like the club’s main hangout. There’s a bar, a pool table, dart boards, massive TVs, and plenty of seating.

Five women are gathered in what I assume is the living area, their gazes full of

curiosity. One has long blonde hair cascading down her back, and she is seated next to a dark-haired girl, probably a young teenager. Another woman with curly, dark, highlighted hair and matching eyes sits nearby. A slender blonde with a shy smile watches over a boy and a girl coloring at the coffee table. At the bar, two stunning women sit with kids in their laps, one child around two years old, the other barely six months old.

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I blink. Kids. My research didn't say anything about this clubhouse being full of children.

"Kensi?" The blonde with the teenager raises an eyebrow.

Kensi sighs dramatically. "Ladies, this is Aerianna. She showed up with my dad." The disgust in her voice is unmistakable.

Oh my God. I bite back a laugh. That's why she's acting like a brat! She thinks I'm with her dad. Eww.

"I'm not with your dad, Kensi." I chuckle. "He gave me a ride this morning, and we were heading back when he got a call, probably from Capone. Instead of dropping me at my truck, we came straight here."

Relief floods Kensi's multicolored eyes, and just like that, the bitch mode disappears. "Thank God. I didn't want to have to kick your ass. You're my age, for crying out loud."

"Trust me, your dad is like a mentor to me, not a lover. Yeah, he's good-looking, but not my type." No, my type is a tattooed, no-bullshit biker who runs a casino like a mob boss and fights this insane attraction between us.

Kensi laughs, her whole demeanor shifting. "Aerianna, meet Danyella and Nina, Capone's Ol' Lady and daughter." She points to the blonde with the young girl. "She's also the VP's little sister. Next to her is Monica, Blayze, our VP's Ol' Lady, and Capone's sister. Yeah, it's confusing as fuck at first." Both ladies give me a

warm smile and a wave.

“The woman on the other couch is Daisy. She is our Enforcer, Torch’s Ol’ Lady. Those two monsters on the table are their twins, MJ and Jaxon.”

Daisy gives me a shy smile. “Nice to meet you, Aerianna.”

“Nice to meet you, too.”

“Behind us at the bar is Jezebelle and her daughter Naomi, who is Derange’s Ol’ lady. Next to her is Nadia and her son Matthew, who is Red’s Ol’ lady.” Kensi finishes up.

“All of you are Ol’ Ladies?” I ask. “What does that mean exactly?”

Danyella speaks first. “An Ol’ lady is the highest compliment a woman can receive. It means your man will die to protect you. It means you have earned his trust, and in return, you trust him to protect you for life. There is nothing greater than having the honor of being a biker’s Ol’ lady.”

Monica continues where Danyella left off. “Once you become an Ol’ lady, he is telling the world you belong to him, and he belongs to you. Some clubs have their Ol’ lady’s and their side pieces. Not this Club, though. Every man here is faithful to his Ol’ Lady, and she is faithful to him. Once you put on that cut in this Club, you are protected, loved, cherished, and honored.”

Wow. My heart stutters in my chest. What would that be like? To have a man be faithful, no matter what?

Danyella gives me a knowing look. “I can see the questions in your eyes, but it’s something you have to experience to understand.”

The deep rumble of motorcycles vibrates through the walls. A few moments later, heavy boots stomp down the corridor.

Three bikers appear.

The first is the guy I saw at the fights last night, Tiny, I think. Behind him is a tanned, shaggy-haired blonde with a teasing smirk and a chiseled jaw. Then behind that guy is the man I cannot get out of my head, Trigger.

Tiny and the other guy disappear down the hallway, but Trigger stops in his tracks when he spots me standing next to Kensi.

My heart skips a beat as our eyes lock. For a second, the scowl he's wearing eases, his blue eyes softening. Then, Kensi clears her throat next to me, and that look of want and lust vanishes.

His scowl returns, darker this time. "What the fuck are you doing here?" The anger in his voice stuns me.

Shit.

What do I do now?

Chapter 12

TRIGGER

Tiny, Pretty Playboy, and I have been hunting this motherfucker who took Elise for hours with no luck. We've scoured all of Los Angeles, even going underground, pulling every contact we could think of.

Red is on it too, trying to figure out how Elise left, where the bastard broke in, anything that gives us a lead. We were heading to Venice Beach to meet up with F.O.C.U.S. from our New York Chapter, he's in town for a porn shoot with his Ol' Lady, Nixx when Capone called and told us to get back to the clubhouse.

I had no idea what was waiting for me inside.

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The second I round the corner that leads into the Common room, my gaze locks on the woman I can't get out of my head. The hunger and lust rolling off her body has mine reacting instantly. I'm immediately hard behind the zipper of my jeans. Remembering the heat of her core pressed against me last night, the taste of her on my lips, the way she moaned my name.

Aerianna.

I scowl. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

The heat from her gaze shifts to anger and hurt at my words. I want to snatch them back and tell her I'm sorry.

What the hell is wrong with me?

My sister is missing, and the last thing I need to be doing is getting my rocks off with a chick I don't know.

Aerianna stiffens. "That's none of your business." She clips back in agitation.

Fuck. I don't have time for this. "Stay the fuck out of my way," I demand in a low growl.

Aerianna tosses her head back before pinning me with a glare. "Fuck off, Trigger. We're not at work, and you don't tell me what to do."

Instead of engaging in an argument with this infuriating woman, who won't leave my

damn head, I walk down the hallway toward Church. I can feel Aerianna's eyes burn into my back, daring me to say something.

Oh no, Little Kitten. I won't say anything. Instead, I'll keep track of this in my head and take your punishment out on your ass.

I push open the door to low murmurs from the members seated around the table. All conversations stop when I enter and take my seat. That's when I notice Zachary Donovan sitting at the end of the table, and things click into place.

Aerianna is here.

Donovan is here.

Donovan is a cop.

Donovan brought Aerianna here.

Fuck. Me.

I snap my gaze to Capone, and he gives me a slight nod in confirmation. This is the last thing I need.

Well, Little Kitten, if you want to play a game with me, let's play. I guarantee you won't win.

A slow, sinister smirk spreads across my face as I think about all the ways I could make her regret setting foot in my clubhouse.

"Trigger," Capone slams his fist on the table, yanking me from my thoughts.

Shit. Church has already started, and I wasn't paying attention. Instead, I was thinking about the sexy blonde in the next room.

"Sorry, Prez," I say, shaking it off.

"What have you found out?" Capone asks, his jaw ticking in frustration.

I shake my head. "Not a fucking thing. We were on our way to Venice Beach when you called. If anyone can find anything out it's F.O.C.U.S. He's here with Nixx doing a porn shoot. And you know how trafficking and porn run side by side." Not that F.O.C.U.S. or Nixx have anything to do with human trafficking, but they probably have connections who do.

Capone nods. "Pretty Playboy, go call F.O.C.U.S. and see what he can dig up. Since Red and Aftermath are leaving in an hour, Bones, you and Seth are going to take over searching security feeds. Tiny, I want you and Derange to ride out to the Royal Harlots and see if Allura knows anything." Capone lights up a cigarette, exhaling the smoke out in agitation.

"What do you want me to do, Prez?" I ask. I hate sitting here with my dick in my hand.

Capone takes a slow drag before pointing his cigarette at me. "I'm glad you asked. You and Special Agent Benton will be working side by side. She has connections in places we don't."

"Now, wait a minute, Capone." Zach snaps, standing so fast that his chair crashes behind him.

"No, you wait, Zach." Capone fires back, pointing at him. "I let you into my Clubhouse. You earned my trust from these jobs we do. But I will NOT tolerate you

sneaking agents under my nose, pretending it's all friendly." His nostrils flare as he dresses Donovan down. "Am I clear?"

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Zach exhales sharply, jaw tight. “Crystal. Sorry, Capone. I didn’t know how you’d react.” He picks up his chair and sits back down, calmer.

“I’ve known for a while.” Capone shrugs like it’s no big deal.

My eyes bulge, and I choke. “What the fuck?”

Capone shakes his head. “Trigger, you forget I’m the motherfucking President around here. I know shit you don’t think I know.” He stubs out his cigarette.

Fuck.

Oh well. No sense in hiding it now. Even though Aerianna is a FED, she does shit to me no woman ever has before. And if my sister’s taught me anything, it was to respect what I’m feeling and not cower.

“Ok, Prez.” I nod my head. “I’ll work with her. But I swear if she steps out of line once...” I smirk, letting my threat trail off.

Oh, if she steps out of line, I’m going to have fun with her.

Capone exhales, looking between me and Zach. “Fucking, Trigger. I want the two of you to get your fucking heads together and come up with where Jonas Mercer and Lattimer are hiding.”

He slams his gavel on the table, “Church dismissed.”

All my brothers, including Zach, file out, but I hang back, waiting for the room to clear. Capone stays in his seat, watching me with knowing eyes until it's just the two of us.

“What’s on your mind, Trigger?”

I hesitate. Do I tell him the truth? That my head is all fucked up over a FED?

Yeah. I have to. He needs to know so he can help me figure out my next move.

“What do I do, Prez? My sister is missing and my head is all fucked up over a woman, who happens to be an FBI agent? Isn’t that shit illegal or something?”

Capone leans forward in his seat. “Trigger, what is wrong with it? I know she is a FED. I’ve known since she ran your sorry ass over.”

That stops me short.

He continues before I can interrupt. “Yeah, she’s on the other side of the law, but we’re not exactly running a cartel here. We’re mostly legit. Do I think she’d try to take my Club down? That’s questionable.”

My mouth opens, ready to argue, but Capone cuts me off.

“But,” he says, holding up a finger, “and this is a strong but, I’ve seen the way she looks at you. And I see something in her eyes that tells me no, she won’t. That she’s here for her own reasons. Now, suck it up and figure out what they are so we can get your sister back.”

I rap my knuckles on the table. “Thanks, Prez. I owe you one.”

I stand up to leave, but Capone stops me. “All you need to do to owe me is get your shit together and claim that woman if that’s what you want. My Ol’ lady has been driving me nuts with you not finding the one.”

I laugh, “Tell Danyella to not worry. Trigger’s fingers are itching, and it’s not for blood this time.”

I leave Church and look for Aerianna. I spot her sitting on a bar stool next to Nadia and Jezebelle, chatting away. I hang back and watch her interact with my Club sisters.

What is it about her that has me so intrigued?

She’s a beautiful woman I don’t doubt that.

Capone’s words echo in my head, and I focus on her eyes. Every once in a while, pain flashes in them, like she is thinking about something or someone who hurt her. Aerianna keeps looking at the babies, then at the ladies, then around the room. She does this a few times. The sadness when she looks at the babies makes my chest ache. When she looks up, she masks the pain. That’s got to be it.

Instead of standing in the shadows like a creeper, I step forward. It takes her a few moments to spot me, but when she does, a smile graces her lips before it turns into a frown.

Ok, I deserve that one but damn, that fucking stings.

I approach Aerianna. “We need to talk.”

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“Who says I want to talk to you?” Aerianna snaps back.

“Aerianna,” Donovan warns. He’s sitting at a table with Aftermath and Kensi. “I just found out Trigger’s sister is missing. You’ll be working with him to get her back.”

She opens her mouth to protest, but Donovan cuts her off.

“That’s an order.” Aerianna’s eyes grow wide with realization before they narrow at me.

“I’m not the one who outed you, and neither is Donovan.” I lean close so my lips brush Aerianna’s ear. “We aren’t the bad guys, so put away your claws, Little Kitten.”

Aerianna shivers, and the room grows quiet. I can feel everyone’s eyes on us as I take her hand and lead her to my room. I have no intention of fucking her, not yet. I just need privacy so we can focus on Elise.

Unlocking my door, I gesture for Aerianna to step inside before I do. She looks around in shock. “Jesus, this room is clean for a bachelor. Do you have one of your, what are they called, Club Bunnies to come and clean your room for you?”

I know exactly what she is doing, and she isn’t going to get away with it. “Now, Little Kitten, do you actually think I’d have a woman I only fuck clean my room?”

Aerianna’s cheeks turn bright red. I lean in close and breathe in her scent of Vanilla and steel. A heady mix that goes straight to my dick. “This is all me.”

Aerianna's breath hitches in her throat, and she makes a small gasping noise. "What do you want?"

Still only standing a hair's breadth away, I answer, "I want you."

I step back and watch her chest heave up and down making my dick hard as stone. "But right now, I have to find my sister. She's been missing since last night."

I watch with rapt attention as Aerianna goes from a woman driven with lust to a no-bullshit cop in an instant. And cue my little head being very excited about this.

"What do you know?" she asks, all business.

I tell her everything, from the moment Elise disappeared to now.

She takes it all in, her mind working through the details at lightning speed, not missing a beat.

Jesus.

This woman is perfect for me.

Chapter 13

AERIANNA

Good lord, can Trigger smell any more masculine? I shake my head and listen as he tells me what happened to his sister. The wheels are spinning.

"My sister's boyfriend's name is Jonas Mercer. He's the brother to the motherfucker that kidnapped and raped some of the girls that are here." The hate and anger in

Trigger's voice is noticeable. The hat he's wearing sits low, covering his eyes, but I can imagine the rage burning in them.

I pull out my phone and begin a search. I type Jonas Mercer in the search bar and wait for it to load. Once the files finish downloading, I open them up.

I almost collapse. "Holy shit."

"What?" Trigger asks.

I turn my phone so he can see the file. "Jonas Mercer is the brother to Josiah Mercer. Josiah is the man I've been looking for."

Trigger's defenses come up. "Why are you trying to catch Josiah?"

"That doesn't matter." I wave my hand. "Can I see Elise's room?"

"Why?" Trigger's eyes narrow in distrust.

I roll my eyes. "Look, Trigger, I get you don't trust people. But for me to do my job, I need you to trust me and not question every move I make."

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I watch with rapt attention as Trigger's stance shifts from intimidating to relief. "You're right. Follow me."

We walk out of his room, back down to the Common Room, past the bar, and down another hallway. There are several doors down here, each one leading to a separate bedroom, I assume.

"Jesus, how big is this place?" I question.

"Pretty big. Capone's Grandfather had it designed to hold all patch members, their families, Prospects, Patch Bunnies, and any stragglers we might pick up along the way. I'd say there are thirty rooms in total. Some have been converted to family rooms so the parents can have space from the kids when we have to go on lockdown." Trigger explains.

"Lockdown? Like you can't leave no matter what?" I'm appalled they'd lock their own family members inside.

Trigger chuckles, "Not like you're thinking. If the Club is in danger or there is a threat, we bring all the family members here to protect them and keep them safe. If they have to leave for some reason, say a job, a Brother will follow them where they need to go."

"Do you get threats often?"

"There has been more lately, but it's usually quiet." Trigger stops in front of the last door on the right. "This is it."

He inserts a key and opens the door. Swinging it wide, Trigger allows me to step inside before him.

“Thank you.” The sweet gesture does not go unnoticed by me. He’s so confusing. One minute, I think he wants to rip my head off, and the next, I think he wants to rip my panties off. And men say women are confusing.

As I pass by Trigger, our bodies barely a breath away, I inhale his scent. His unique musk is laced with the sharp tang of sweat and adrenaline, the faint metallic hint of blood, something dark and smooth, with notes of leather, cedarwood, and a whisper of spice and leather. It’s burned into my lungs and I can’t get enough of it.

Trigger grips my wrists lightly, sending a chill down my spine. “If you are going to sniff me again, Little Kitten, at least make it worth my while.” He murmurs against the shell of my ear.

My cheeks turn a bright shade of red, but his words do nothing to douse the fire burning underneath my skin. I pull away, and Trigger is hesitant to release me as I am with him.

Scanning the room, I shake my head at the fantasy playing out in my mind and get down to business. Trigger’s sister is missing, and the last thing I need to do is get emotionally involved with the victim’s brother.

I scoff at that train of thought. Trigger isn’t one to get emotionally involved, and I shouldn’t be either, but I can’t help it. Not when I look into his piercing blue eyes. He undoes me in ways I don’t understand, nor do I want to.

Elise’s bedroom is a mess. There are clothes scattered everywhere, her dresser is dumped on its side, and the sheets and blankets on the bed are messy. A lamp from the end table next to the bed is shattered, and the bathroom door is broken off its

hinges.

I squat down to examine the bathroom floor. “Watch where you’re walking. This could be Elise’s, or it could be her assailant’s.” I point to the small drops of blood on the tiles leading to the toilet.

“Shit.” Trigger growls from behind me.

I need to stay transparent with him so he can understand my process. “It’s a small amount, so there isn’t anything to worry too much about. It could be from a bloody nose or a small cut. If these drops were spread around in a pattern, then we would worry. That would mean someone was dragged through it. It’s not so whoever’s blood this is isn’t hurt badly.”

I turn my attention to the splinter of wood on the door and notice more blood and some skin. “Look here.” I point to it. “It looks like someone grabbed the frame and cut their hands.” I mimic what I mean without touching the door frame.

I spin around and look into the bedroom toward the door. I stand up from my crouched position and walk to the door, examining it. “Were there signs of forced entry into the room?”

Trigger shakes his head. “No, the door was locked.”

I stand back and cock my head to the side. “She wouldn’t open the door for just anyone, especially since she wants to feel safe. Has anyone new been hanging around?”

“You’re barking up the wrong tree, Agent Aerianna.” Trigger’s voice is low and deadly.

“What do you mean?”

“No one in this Club did this. We know who did, so why are you trying to point fingers at my family?” Trigger grits out through clenched teeth.

“I’m not. But if there were no signs of forced entry, then someone let Mercer into the Clubhouse and stay undetected long enough to get to Elise and move her. Unconscious or not, someone would have seen something.” I throw up my hands, clearly agitated.

“Where’s your tech guy?” I ask. I need to get the video feed from inside the Clubhouse.

“He’s leaving for Hawaii.”

I raise an eyebrow. “In the middle of your sister missing?”

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“It’s Club business. Learn it.” Trigger’s clipped tone has me snapping my mouth shut in rebuttal.

“Ok, let’s say it’s not someone here. How did they get to Elise, and no one knows it?” I ask aloud. “Will your tech guy let me look at the footage? Maybe he’s missed something I can pick up.”

“If you’re done here, then come on.” Trigger opens the door, and I follow.

“I’m still confused. If you know who took her, why do you need my help?” I question.

“Because for some fucking reason my Prez and your boss want us to work together.” Trigger leads me back out to the Common room and toward another door to the left of the bar.

Trigger knocks before opening the door. He smirks when he looks back at me. “You learn fast around here to not open doors or enter rooms with a door without knocking first. Couples don’t like to lock them when they’re getting their freak on.”

I step inside, and the sight before me takes my breath away. It’s a tech person’s wet dream. An ultra-modern, high-tech sanctuary sits before me. The air hums with the quiet power of cutting-edge hardware, from top-tier custom-built PCs with liquid cooling and the latest GPUs to a multi-monitor setup. The monitors are flicking through several areas throughout the city with stunning 8K resolution on display.

I spot a man with shaggy red hair and black glasses sitting in a rolling chair, typing

code on the screen before him. He's so engrossed in his work that he doesn't even look up from the monitor when we walk in.

“Yo, Red. Tell me you found something?” Trigger announces right next to the man's head.

Red jumps and his face burns bright red. “God almighty and fucking shit, Trigger. What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Aren't you supposed to be leaving?” Trigger asks, ignoring Red's glare.

“Yeah, in fifteen minutes. I wanted to make sure everything is running for Bones when I leave, so there are no unexpected issues.” Red turns back to the monitor, his fingers flying over the keyboard. His brows furrow in concentration. A few more keystrokes, then he swivels in his chair. “There. Done.”

I take him in. For being a tech guy, he does not fit the nerd bill like I would assume. He's lean and muscular with a chiseled jaw and high cheekbones. His red hair stands out against his pale complexion. Don't get me wrong, he is a gorgeous man, but he doesn't do it for me like Trigger does.

“Who's this?” Red asks.

“This is Aerianna. She wants to look over the footage from the time we think Elise went missing.” Trigger introduces us.

“She's not going to find anything. Someone hacked into the system and scrubbed the feed.” Red crosses his arms, irritation clear in his voice.

“Does someone need to be close to hack into the system, like in the building?” I question.

“Yes. I have layers of security. But if someone’s skilled enough and already inside, they could bypass it.” Red responds.

I raise an eyebrow at Trigger, and he shakes his head. “Interesting,” I mumble under my breath.

“Don’t even go there, Aerianna.” Trigger warns.

I hold my hands up in defense. “I’m not saying a word.” I think about everything I’ve learned so far. “Ok, how about this. Red, can you pull up any information on Jonas and Josiah Mercer? Their LKA’s, cars, property, anything you can think of? Then, run a check on Elise’s phone. See if she had any texts, emails, or phone calls last night that would lead to her letting someone in from the outside.”

The tech room door swings open, and a man around six-two strides in. His sharp, chiseled features and strong jawline scream Dutch heritage. Faded scars along his cheekbones and eyebrows hint at a haunted past. Dark brown hair falls onto his face, and a smirk plays on his lips when his hazel eyes land on me. He gives me a slow, deliberate once-over, making me shift uncomfortably.

Trigger growls deep in his throat. “Eyes off, Bones. Unless you don’t want to keep your dick.”

Bones’ eyes snap to Trigger in shock. So, this is Bones. The one who will be taking over for Red when he leaves. “Sorry, Trigger. I didn’t realize.”

“Now you do.” The unspoken threat between them is thick, and I don’t like it one bit.

“Can we focus?” I snap, breaking the tension.

Red checks the time on his computer. “Shit. I’m out. Bones, do what Aerianna asks

while I'm gone. Trigger you coming?" Red stands from his chair and hurries out of the room.

Trigger looks between Red, Bones, and me before giving a brief nod. He steps to me, his body caging me in. I relish in the feel of his hardness against my soft curves. Trigger leans in, so his warm breath caresses the shell of my ear. "I'll be back, Little Kitten. Keep your claws retracted. Those are only meant for me."

Before I can respond, Trigger strides out, leaving me standing here stunned. I blink away the spell he has on me and turn toward Bones. He's watching me with a smirk on his face.

Bones sits in the chair Red just occupied and links his tattoo-covered hands behind his head. "That was intense."

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“That was nothing.” I dismiss his accusation with a wave of my hand.

“If you say so.” Bones shrugs his shoulders. “What do you need?” he turns around in the seat and begins typing as I speak.

“Can you pull up any information on Jonas and Josiah Mercer? Their LKA’s, cars, property, anything you can think of? Then run a check on Elise’s phone. See if she had any texts, emails, or phone calls last night that would lead to her letting someone in from the outside.”

“Got it. Anything else?” Bones nods, working quickly. His efficiency is impressive.

“No, that should be a start. We need to find out what spooked Elise into letting her assailant in last night.” I start pacing the small room, working out everything in my mind.

“She was safe here. This guy couldn’t touch her.” I turn once I reach the end of the room and walk back. “If she was safe, then why would she let him in? Why would she put up a fight only to be taken in the end? If he has something on her, wouldn’t she go willingly?” I pace back in the other direction, rolling my shoulder. “Why bring him inside? It doesn’t make sense.”

“Who said she let him in? Maybe someone else did.” Bones muses.

“I thought about that, but Trigger said I was going down the wrong path. That no brother would allow that to happen.”

“No brother would, but a Club Bunny might if she felt slated by Elise showing up.” Bones responds.

I stop pacing when realization dawns on me. “Holy shit, Bones. You’re right. Maybe we’re looking at this wrong. What Club Bunnies are here that have an issue with Elise?”

“Khandi, Lexi, or Georgia,” Bones says, still typing. “They were Pretty Playboy’s regulars. Since Elise arrived, he’s been keeping his distance, and they aren’t happy about it.” Trigger walks back in just as Bones keeps talking, unaware of his presence. “They were his go-to fucks when he needed to scratch an itch. Now, he wants something real. That’s got to sting.”

Bones finally notices Trigger and stops short. “Fuck.”

I take the papers and grab Trigger’s hand. “Come on, we need to go over these, and I’ll fill you in on what we’re talking about.” I pull him out of the room before he can say anything to Bones.

Leading him down the hallway toward his room, Trigger stops walking and makes me stop short, too. “What’s going on?”

“I’ll explain, but not until we’re secure in your room.” I smooth the scowl off his face. My fingers brush against his skin, and heat flares between us. I swallow hard. I know I won’t be able to resist him for much longer. “Besides, I need your head in the game instead of what Bones said about Pretty Playboy.”

Chapter 14

TRIGGER

I unlock my door and gesture for Aerianna to enter before me. She walks past, swaying her hips, driving me insane with lust, need, and something I don't want to name. This isn't just want anymore, it's a pull, a force that's dragging me into dangerous territory. Fuck, she is driving me crazy.

I shake my head and follow her inside, closing the door behind me. Leaning against it, I close my eyes for a moment, steadying my breath. This shouldn't be happening. I have a club to protect. A mission to finish. Aerianna is a distraction I can't afford, but fuck if I don't want to get lost in her anyway. When I open my eyes, Aerianna is staring back at me, questions swimming in the grey depths I've come to crave. "Now, can you explain what's going on?"

She moves to the bed, sitting on the edge, and pats the spot beside her. A simple gesture, yet it unravels me. I should walk away. I should put the club first, just like I always have. But for the first time in my life, I don't want to. I gather up all my willpower and sit beside her. Aerianna's body heat scorches my skin, causing what little willpower I have left to crumble to dust.

Aerianna turns her head, looking into my eyes. Everything I'm feeling reflects back at me, uncertainty, desire, something deeper that neither of us wants to name. Before she can answer my question, my lips crash onto hers, and I pull her closer.

Aerianna hesitates for a split second, but then she gives in. She's fire, and I should be afraid of getting burned, but I don't care. I want the flames. Her lips and tongue mingle with mine.

Throwing a fuck-it to the wind, I hoist Aerianna onto my lap. She straddles my hips, her hands knocking the hat off my head, fingers tunneling through my hair, nails digging into my scalp. A low moan climbs from her throat as she rocks against me, igniting a new kind of war inside me.

A war between my duty and my need for her.

A low moan climbs its way up Aerianna's throat as she presses her heat down against my groin, begging to be set free. I grip her hair, tilting her head back so I can devour the column of her throat. I should stop. I should put the club first. I should remember that she's an FBI agent, and I'm the Treasurer of the Royal Bastards MC. That she's the one woman who could destroy everything.

But I don't stop.

Releasing Aerianna's head, I skim my hands down her sides until they're resting on the hem of her t-shirt. I stare into her eyes, waiting for a sign. Aerianna nods her head, letting me pull her shirt off her head. I unclasp her bra, letting it fall between us. My mouth descends on the succulent flesh as my fingers work fast to unbutton her jeans and slide the zipper down.

Aerianna yanks off my cut and places it on the bed next to us. Aerianna doesn't hesitate as she strips me of my shirt, baring me completely. We're a mess of lips, tongues, and teeth as we ravish each other's mouths.

I pull away, breathing hard. I cup Aerianna's cheeks in my palms and make her look at me. "Once we cross this line, there is no going back. You. Are. Mine." I growl, and it terrifies me how much I mean it.

Aerianna pulls herself closer so we're skin against skin. The hard peaks of her nipples dust against my chest. "You. Are. Mine." She states.

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Three little words. A promise or a warning, I don't know which. But they undo me.

I stop fighting what she means to me and go with it. My mouth crashes against hers, capturing her plump bottom lip between my teeth and gently nipping the skin. Aerianna whimpers, and I force her to stand up.

“Jeans off, Little Kitten,” I demand, smacking her ass.

Aerianna lets out a yelp of surprise and quickly removes her jeans, socks, and shoes. Now, she is standing in front of me in a pair of black silk panties that hug her skin.

I trace the hem of her panties with my fingertip. “If I take these off, will you be soaking wet for me?”

Aerianna nods her head, the control she tries to maintain is no longer present. “Yes, Trigger.”

I shake my head, a low growl leaving my throat. “Call me Carter when we're like this.”

I remove the rest of my clothes, leaving them in a heap on the floor. Normally, it would bother me, but not right now. She's unraveling me in ways I never expected. My focus is on Aerianna, her tight nipples, rapidly rising and falling chest, and her soaked panties.

Aerianna's eyes drink me in, and when she whispers my name, “Carter,” I lose it.

I yank off her panties and lift her into my arms, the heat of her center soaking into my skin. My mission, my club, my duty, they're all afterthoughts as I lower us onto the bed.

Aerianna hooks her feet around my boxers, pushing them down. Her eyes widen as I spring free. "Shit, you're huge." The words slip out before she slaps her hand over her mouth.

I chuckle. She's seen criminals, killers, and the worst the world has to offer. But somehow, I've left her speechless.

I chuckle, "Little Kitten, last chance to back out now." I nudge her opening with my shaft, holding back by sheer willpower. "Are you sure about this?"

Aerianna lowers her hand from her mouth, cupping my face with a touch that's both tender and unyielding. "I'm done fighting this, Carter. I want you completely. Just don't make me regret it."

Something inside me snaps.

I surge forward, sinking into her warmth as she tightens around me like she was made to fit me.

Pleasure and torment crash together. Bliss, because she's perfect. This feels inevitable, like fate pulling us under. Damnation, because I already know I won't be able to stop.

The club, my brothers, my mission- they should be my focus. But I just surrendered to my greatest weakness, and now I don't think I can ever let her go.

"Fuck, you feel incredible." I groan, withdrawing only to claim her again, slow and

deep. I make love to Aerianna like she's both my salvation and my undoing.

Her body tightens around me, and she shatters, dragging me with her into ecstasy. She takes us both to a place that's both heaven and hell. Heaven, because she's everything. Hell, because walking away now is no longer an option.

"Carter," she moans breathlessly, her sweat-soaked skin wrapped around mine.

My arms are around her back, pulling her against me as tight as I can. Like, I can't get close enough. I pump a few more times and shudder as her warmth hits my sensitive skin. "Fuck, Kitten." I kiss her gently on the lips as I slow my hips. Once both our orgasms are through, I release her and flop on my side, pulling her with me.

Spent and breathing hard, I kiss Aerianna again. Once I'm done kissing her, she rests her head on my chest with her ear over my heart. I should get up and use the bathroom and get a washcloth to clean Aerianna, but the beat of my heart lulls Aerianna to sleep, and I follow.

I don't know what it is about Aerianna, but I don't plan on ever letting her go.

A loud knock startles me awake. "What the fuck?" I groan, scrubbing my hand down my face. Aerianna shifts slightly on my chest but doesn't wake up.

Another pound on my door has me cursing as I climb out of bed. I pull the blanket over Aerianna's bare body, instinctively shielding her even though she's out cold. The way she's sleeping, deep and unbothered, tells me she hasn't had real rest in a long time.

The pounding starts again, and I swing the door open, naked like the day I was born. "What the fuck do you want?" I growl, coming face-to-face with Capone, Blayze, and Zach.

Capone raises an eyebrow. “What’d you find out?”

Blayze tries not to laugh but fails miserably. “And I don’t want details.”

I run my hands through my hair. “Yeah, about that? We got a little distracted.”

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Zach crosses his arms over his chest, unimpressed. “We can see that. Can you at least put some clothes on so I don’t have to keep looking at your junk?”

“Give me five, and I’ll be out,” I mutter, glancing back at Aerianna, who is still sleeping. “I don’t think she’s slept in a while, and I don’t want to disturb her.”

I shut the door and glance back at Aerianna. The worry lines on her face are gone, replaced by something softer, peaceful, almost innocent. If only life gave us more moments like this.

I’ve found my temptation, and I will do everything I can to keep her.

I dress quickly, throwing on a pair of jeans, a black tee, and my cut before slipping my boots on. Grabbing the printouts Aerianna got from Bones, I step out of the room, closing the door quietly behind me.

When I walk into the Common Room, Capone, Blayze, and Zach are at a table near the bar. Danyella is perched between Capone’s legs, Monica draped across Blayze’s lap. Aftermath’s mom, Silver Grace, sits next to Zach, deep in conversation. The six of them are in a heated conversation when I approach.

I slap the papers onto the table, getting their attention. Silver Grace takes one look at me and leaves without a word. Capone nudges Danyella off his lap, and Blayze does the same to Monica. They saunter away, tossing teasing looks over their shoulders, but the moment is lost on me because I’m thinking about Aerianna asleep, naked in my bed.

I get it now. That connection, that possessiveness, something I used to mock. But after earlier today, after Aerianna, I understand. And it scares the shit out of me.

“Where are the Patch Bunnies?” I ask.

“Which ones?” Capone sits back in his chair with his arms crossed over his chest.

“Khandi, Lexi, or Georgia.”

“Khandi and Lexi are at the store with Seth and Jax. Georgia, I have no idea. I haven’t seen her since yesterday.” Capone narrows his eyes. “What’s going on, Trigger?”

I slide the papers apart and spread them across the table. “What’s going on? One of those three is responsible for my sister going missing.”

Zach picks up the documents and flips through them. “How do you know?”

“Because Aerianna is smart. Too smart for me.” I shake my head. “She figured out how Jonas got in here and got to Elise.” I tap the papers left on the table with my pointer finger. “One of these three let him in. Since we know where the two are and not the third, my money is on Georgia.”

Capone’s jaw clenches tight. “Find Bones and tell him to track this bitch down.”

“On it.” Blayze stands, already dialing his phone as he walks away.

Capone shifts his gaze back to me. “Anything else?”

I hesitate. Do I tell them? Will Aerianna want to be a part of my world? Does she even want to? We’re on two different sides of the law, but the way she makes me

feel, I can't let that go.

Zach smirks knowingly and raps his knuckles on the table. "Love is a fickle bitch, isn't it?"

I clear my throat, and my gaze settles on Capone. "I want to claim her as mine if you'll allow it."

Capone leans back in his chair, lighting up a cigarette. He inhales and then exhales a slow drag of his cigarette, assessing me, driving me crazy with anticipation. He looks around the room before his cold, dark eyes settle on me. "If you're serious, there'll be rules. I can't have a FED snooping around my Clubhouse. She's either all in or nothing."

"Now, wait a minute, Capone." Zach cuts in. "She's a damn good agent. Don't you think that will be beneficial? Like the way you and I work? I'm a cop, but I'd never do anything to harm this Club or my daughter."

Capone considers this, his expression unreadable. "You have more skin in the game than she does." He takes another drag, then flicks the ash into an empty bottle. "I'll tell you what, Trigger. Let's put this on the back burner. Get your sister back first. Then we'll talk."

I nod, swallowing my frustration. It's not a no. That's all I can ask for. But what about Aerianna? I know what I want.

The question is, does she?

Chapter 15

AERIANNA

Stretching my arms above my head, I smile, my entire body humming with satisfaction. Last night comes rushing back. The way Trigger's strong hands claimed me, the way his lips and tongue owned me in ways I never thought possible. He made me feel beautiful, precious, and dirty all at once, something I will remember for the rest of my life. The way he took me to heaven, he's ruined me for any other man.

Good. I don't want another man.

Only him.

I slowly open my eyes, shaking off the last tendrils of sleep. It's been a long time since I have been able to sleep more than an hour or two, but in Trigger's arms, I did. I roll over, and something shifts in the corner of the room and catches my attention.

"Shit." My hand flies to my racing heart. "Carter, you scared the crap out of me. Why are you sitting in a dark corner?"

I sit up, pulling the sheets with me. I'm still naked from earlier. "Where are my clothes?"

Trigger stands without saying a word and walks to the side of the bed. He turns on the lamp, casting the room in a soft glow. "I didn't want to wake you, Little Kitten." He sits on the edge of the bed, his eyes darken as they roam over me. "When was the last time you slept?"

"Does it matter?" I ask, raising the sheet higher. "Why are you sitting in the dark?"

"Don't hide from me." He leans over and tugs the sheet down my chest, revealing my bare breasts. A low rumble of approval comes from the back of his throat, and my pulse quickens.

His lips descend on one tight peak, and I groan, threading my fingers through his hair. His mouth is hot and demanding, sending fire straight to my core.

"Oh, God." The words slip from my lips.

Trigger releases me with a slow, torturous drag of his tongue and rises. His body hovering over mine. The sheet and his clothes are the only barriers between us. I spread my legs, giving him room, desperate for more. He captures my mouth in a deep, consuming kiss, making me squirm beneath him.

“We don’t have time to take you to heaven, Little Kitten,” he murmurs against my lips, “but I will get you close enough.”

Trigger kisses his way down my body, pulling the sheet with him as he goes. When his tongue and fingers find their mark, he sends me over the edge, his name a broken cry on my lips.

By the time we make it to the shower, I should be spent, but one touch, one look, and I’m bending over, my palms braced against the cool tile.

“I thought we didn’t have time for this,” I ask with a moan as Trigger drives into me at a punishing pace.

“Kitten, there is no way I’d be able to concentrate on what we have to do if I didn’t take you now.” His voice is a deep growl against my skin as he drives into me.

A tremor wracks my body as my orgasm takes me, and he follows right behind me.

We climb out of the shower and dry each other off. I want him again, but I know I have to put a lid on my libido. I’ll never get anything done if I don’t.

Once we’re dressed and my hair is braided down my back, Trigger pulls me into his arms. The contentment settling in my chest is foreign but welcome.

Then his voice turns serious. “Listen, we need to talk.”

I stiffen. “Seriously?” I pull away to give us some distance. My good mood is shattered, and I’m pissed. “Let me guess. You don’t want anyone to know about the fact that you fucked me and gave me multiple orgasms through the night? You want this to be our dirty little secret so word doesn’t get out you’re fucking a cop?” I snort. “No, wait, I got it. You’re embarrassed because of what I do so no one can know...”

Trigger silences me with a hand over my mouth. “That’s not it at all. Are you going to listen instead of jumping to conclusions?” I glare at him but nod my head.

He sighs and points toward the door. “Everyone out there knows how I feel about you. They know I’ve been fighting this for a while, and they don’t care. They don’t give a fuck if you are a FED, they don’t care if you’re the fucking Queen of England. They will only care if you hurt me.”

His words land like a punch to the gut. When he pulls me back into his arms, I go willingly, guilt creeping in, and tears spring to my eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I murmur. “I’m shitty when it comes to trust. You’re going to have to give me grace.”

“And I react first and ask questions later,” Trigger says with a small shrug. “We’ll work on it together.”

I nod. “So, what’s the talk for?”

“We think we have a lead.” His tone shifts, all business. “Bones is pulling up one of the Club Bunny, Georgia’s, LKA. We need to be ready to move as soon as he has it.”

Excitement flares through me. “My hunch played out?”

“My hunch played out?” I ask with excitement.

“Oh, it gave us the lead we were missing. Capone is pretty impressed.”

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I grin, and my good mood comes back. “Well, why are we standing around here? Let’s go get this bitch and get your sister home.” I pat Trigger on the chest.

I turn toward the door, but before I can take a step, Trigger lifts me over his shoulder, making me nauseous.

“Put me down, asshole!” I pound on his back as he steps into the hallway. “Motherfucker.” I grumble.

Laughter and conversation spill from the other room, and my stomach drops. So much for staying professional when a fucking caveman throws you over his shoulder and heads toward a room full of bikers. “Oh, you’ve gotta be kidding me,” I mutter. “Trigger, I swear to...” A sharp smack lands on my ass, making me yelp. “What is wrong with you?”

“Like I said before, I react first and then ask questions later.” His voice holds nothing but amusement. “And you, my Little Kitten, happen to be on the receiving end of my trigger.”

“Fucker,” I grumble and give up fighting him on this. If this is the way he wants to introduce me to his Club, I guess I have to go with it. “One question, though.”

“What’s that?” Trigger walks further down the hallway. I can hear talking coming from the other room.

“Do I still have my job?” My tone is teasing, but he doesn’t know that.

Trigger pulls me off his shoulder, letting my body slide down his, his hands firm on my hips. His blue eyes lock onto mine. “Do you really want it?”

I shake my head, “No. It was a means to figure out some shit. But, no, I don’t.”

“Good, 'cause if you did, I’d let you, but I’d sit at your table every shift so no motherfucker could hit on you.”

I roll my eyes. “That doesn’t surprise me.”

Trigger slings his arm around my shoulders and guides me into the common room. The energy shifts instantly. The air is thick with tension. Men checking guns, loading knives, preparing for war. And among the weapons are things cops use, not criminals.

I scan the room. “What’s all this?”

Trigger’s lips curl into a smirk. “You didn’t think we were going in alone, did you?”

Capone slams a clip into a gun, his jaw tight. “When one rides, we all ride. Trigger needs to get his sister back, and we’re making damn sure that happens.”

A chorus of agreement echoes around us.

Adrenaline surges through my veins. This isn’t just a mission.

It’s a war.

Chapter 16

AERIANNA

Holy shit.

I'm going to war with a bunch of bikers.

The tension in the room is thick, a live wire sparking between us as we prepare to leave. Zach steps out to his SUV and returns with my backpack, the one loaded with my weapons. I unzip it and pull out my Glock 17, checking the clip before sliding it back into place. The familiar weight settles into the holster I strapped to my jeans. Then, I reach for my favorite, my Glock 22, and secure it at my hip.

I'm not done. Sliding throwing stars onto my belt, I slip a knife into my boot, my movements practiced and precise. My fingers graze at the cool steel of another blade, but before I can grab it, I feel eyes on me.

Lifting my gaze, I find Trigger watching me, his expression is a mix of something dark and primal. His blue eyes flicker with amusement, curiosity, and desire.

I shrug. "A girl can't be too prepared."

His lips curve into a smirk, and in the next second, he's in my space, crowding me with his body. Sparks ignite under my skin, my breath catching at his proximity.

"I never thought I'd say this," he murmurs, his voice thick, "but watching you arm yourself is fucking hot." Before I can respond, his lips crash against mine in a rough, searing kiss. It's quick but potent, leaving my head spinning as he steps back. He turns to load himself up, checking his weapons and sliding blades into hidden places.

I watch, heat curling low in my belly. I smirk, leaning in close to his ear. "That's hot too, Carter." My voice is barely a whisper. "Once this is over, I'll enjoy unstrapping you."

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His jaw ticks, and when he turns to face me, there's pure, raw hunger in his gaze. "Careful, Little Kitten." He adjusts himself, still not breaking eye contact. "Your purr is causing my dick issues." His voice drops an octave, rough with lust. "And I might not be so nice once this is over."

Heat pools between my legs, causing a shiver to run through my body. Damn, all he has to do is look at me, and I'm all hot and bothered.

Before either of us can act on the tension crackling between us, a bald, tattooed biker approaches, his mischievous light-blue eyes gleaming as he crosses his arms over his chest. His patch reads Torch. "Aww, our little Trigger is growing up. Who thought we'd see the day?" He grins like an asshole.

A blonde woman beside him smacks him hard. Daisy, Torch's Ol' Lady. Torch releases an oof, rubbing his chest.

"Torch, knock it off." She scolds playfully. Daisy turns her attention toward me, concern in her eyes. "Be safe out there, please."

I swallow a lump in my throat. It's been a while since anyone has said kind words to me. "I will, thank you, Daisy."

She doesn't hesitate, she just throws her arms around my neck, hugging me tight. I stand frozen before slowly wrapping my arms around her.

"It's what family is for," she murmurs.

I glance around the room, and the weight of her words sinks in. She's right.

Trigger's brothers, his family, are preparing for war because Trigger needs them. Not one of them hesitates. Not a single one. The women rush around, making sure their men have everything they need. There's a quiet efficiency to it, a rhythm that only comes from deep loyalty.

They don't just ride together.

They live together. They fight together.

They die together.

They're in this together.

A thought hits me. Where are the kids?

"Where are the kids?" I ask.

Danyella, Capone's Ol' Lady, answers. "Syvannah and Exleigh have them at my house."

The names catch me off guard. "Who's that?"

I don't mean to sound defensive, but I do. My mind instantly jumps to other women Trigger might have had in his bed.

Trigger must read my thoughts because he wraps his arm around my shoulders, squeezing gently. "Relax, Little Kitten, put those claws away." His tone is amused. "Syvannah and Exleigh are two young women we rescued from Josiah and Lattimer when they kidnapped Red's Ol' lady, Nadia."

My stomach twists at the mention of those bastards. I push the grief down from losing my best friend to them.

“They were just girls,” Monica adds, her voice carrying a weight of pain. “Nadia protected them the best she could, but Josiah...” She swallows hard. “He still abused them.” My heart clenches. “So, they decided to come here and recover. Learn to start over and deal with what happened to them.”

My heart hurts thinking about what they went through. “How are they coping?”

“One day at a time,” Tiny steps forward. “That’s all we can ask for is one day at a time with them.”

Is the whole Club listening to our conversation? I look around, and sure enough, everyone is gathered around us. Capone stands with his arm draped over Danyella. Blayze holds Monica close. Torch keeps Daisy tucked under his arm. Derange has Jezebel in his grasp. Bones, Pretty Playboy, Tiny, Dagger, Knight, and a couple I haven’t met yet. Even Zach, who’s standing beside an older woman, their hands brushing every few moments.

Everyone is here. Armed. Ready. United.

The only ones missing are Aftermath, Red, Kensi, and Nadia.

Then, Capone steps forward. His presence demands attention. The room falls silent.

“Here’s what’s going down.” Capone’s voice is sharp, no-nonsense.

“Everyone but Bones and Dagger are rolling out.” His gaze sweeps the room. “You two stay behind with the women and kids. Once we’re gone, bring them back here. Keep them safe.”

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He turns to three Prospects. “Prospects, this is an important job tonight. Seth, Knight, and Jax, you three will follow us in the van. Keep all eyes off us the best you can. You complete this without issues, and you are closer to earning your rockers.”

Trigger straightens beside me. “Zach, Tiny, Aerianna, and I will take the lead at Georgia’s house.”

Capone nods. “Blayze, Torch, and Derange, secure the back. Pretty Playboy and Jax, you’re on one side. Seth and Knight, you’re on the other. Keep the van ready. The second we have Elise, we’re out.”

The air in the room tightens.

Capone’s voice lowers. “No fuck-ups tonight.” His tone is lethal. “We end these motherfuckers quietly and efficiently. We get Elise home.”

He takes a step forward, his eyes deadly serious. “Are you ready?” A chorus of “Aye” rings out. My pulse pounds in my ears. This isn’t just a mission. This is a rescue. This is a war.

Capone lifts two fingers. “Let’s roll.”

We arrive in Georgia’s neighborhood and park the bikes along with Zach’s SUV two streets over. Instead of me riding with Trigger, I opted to ride with Zach. Trigger doesn’t need my distraction when we’re heading into a bloodbath.

The dead of night blankets the neighborhood, not a soul in sight. Capone leads the

way across the empty street, avoiding the street lamps. The way these guys move is efficient and methodical, like they've done this a thousand times.

The area we're in isn't known for being the best neighborhood. This isn't the best part of town. Cars sit on cinder blocks in driveways, weeds choke out wilted grass, and garbage litters the sidewalks. Boarded-up houses display gang symbols in bold, defiant colors. We're definitely not in Kansas anymore.

Trigger's hand encloses around mine, offering me support and comfort. I squeeze his hand in return, welcoming the warm embrace.

And then it hits me. An epiphany that shakes me to my core. If things work out between Trigger and me, I want this. I want to be by his side, hunting down the monsters who sell women and children into the Black Market Railroad.

Fuck the badge in my pocket. If it means keeping Trigger with me, I'd give it up in a heartbeat.

Zach steps up beside me, an unanswered question hanging between us. He knows what I will do and how far I'd go to keep Trigger in my life. Sadness etches in his blue-green eyes, but he understands. There was a time when he left it all behind, too, to try and save his daughter, Kensi. Only he was too late. Kensi was already taken and exposed to the trauma of the Black Market Railroad. Luckily for her, The Royal Bastards saved her from being sold, and Zach will forever be in their debt for it.

Zach squeezes my shoulder in silent support and understanding. He steps back and allows us to get into our spots.

Bass booms from inside the house, drowning out our words. The lights are on, but no movement flickers behind the curtains. Doesn't mean no one's inside.

My nerves are on edge.

Bones approaches Capone with a tablet in hand. “Prez, Elise is in there, and you’re not going to believe who else.”

He turns the tablet around so we can watch a video of Jonas and another man I don’t recognize dragging Elise into the house in the middle of the night. A woman with long brown hair piled on top of her head is in front of them and opens the door, that must be Georgia. She’s very attractive in a slutty way. I can see why the single guys kept her around the Clubhouse.

Capone clenches his fists. “Motherfucker. I want that rapist alive.”

“Who is it?” I ask.

Trigger’s voice is as hard as steel. “Lattimer. The bastard who beat the shit out of Aftermath’s mom, Silver Grace, stabbed Kensi and left her for dead, and kidnapped Nadia to sell to the Black Market Railroad.”

My stomach drops. “Wait, I thought Josiah Mercer was in charge of the Black Market Railroad.”

Trigger shakes his head. “Josiah was Lattimer’s henchman.”

Everything I thought I knew shifts. Have I been looking at this all wrong? Chasing the wrong man all this time? Was it Lattimer who killed Allison?

Zach sees the storm in my eyes. “We’ll get answers, Aerianna. I promise.”

I turn to Capone. “Can I speak to you privately?” He nods his head, and we step away from the others. “I want a crack at this Lattimer guy before you guys do what you do

with him.”

Capone lights up a cigarette and inhales the smoke. “Why?”

“I have my reasons. Ones that I will tell you once this is over.” I promise. I need answers about Allison’s death, and this is the best way to get them.

He exhales smoke, considering my request. “Fine.” Capone agrees, taking another drag, and points two fingers at me. “But you will tell me the entire truth, Aerianna, and not hold anything back.”

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“Fine.” I agree but hesitate. “But Trigger needs to know too.”

Capone smirks like he expected that. “I figured as much.” He puts his cigarette out and pockets the butt. He’s not happy, but I’m glad he agrees.

We walk back over, and Trigger gives me a questioning look.

“I’ll explain later,” I promise.

That is enough to satisfy him for now. Once everyone is in place, Trigger steps up to the front door. I draw my weapon, and everyone else follows. “On the count of three. One. Two. Three.”

Trigger picks the lock, and we enter, sweeping the room. Derange, Torch, and Tiny follow, coming in the back door. Shots ring out as two figures approach us from the hallway. Their bodies fall like dominos. Round after round, we fire and take fire until no one else comes from the back.

Once the gunfire settles, I take in the smells around me and gag.

The living room smells of rotten food, stale weed, and dirty sex. I gag when I spot Georgia sitting on the dirty couch, her skirt pulled up around her waist, no panties on, and dried blood between her exposed thighs. Her lace shirt is torn, and tears stain her face, making her makeup run. She’s been abused and raped by these animals.

But that’s not what makes me gag. That vacant, glassy stare coming from her brown eyes, and the needle jabbed into her arm. She overdosed, and from the way her body

is positioned, it wasn't that long ago.

My fingers feel for a pulse, just to be sure. Her skin is still warm, but her heartbeat is gone. I shake my head. "She's dead but not too long ago."

"Fuck." Tiny shakes his head, saddened by the news. He rubs a hand down his face.

I stand up and gently run my hand down Georgia's face, closing her eyes. I send a silent prayer for her to be forgiven in the eyes of the Lord.

"Keep moving," Blayze demands. As the VP, he has authority when Capone isn't present. He stayed outside, looking for trouble.

Blayze, Torch, and Derange head up the stairs after sweeping the rest of the rooms downstairs. Once they're out of sight, Trigger points to a door with a padlock on it.

Trigger, Zach, and I head toward the door leading to the basement. Trigger picks the padlock, and I steady my gun, aiming it at the door. Once the lock is off, he opens the door and then heads down the dark stairs. I follow, with Zach right behind me. The quietness engulfs us, and I'm on edge.

The smell hits me first. The stench of sweat, piss, and mold assaults my nose, making my eyes water. I try not to take deep breaths the further we walk down the stairs. I pray Elise isn't down here, but I don't think it will be answered.

Trigger flicks on a single bulb over our heads, and a deep guttural cry escapes his throat, making me jump.

Chained to the wall, wrists bound above her head, is a woman who has similar features to Trigger. Her blonde hair is dirty, fresh bruises litter her face and arms. Her clothes are still intact, which is a small mercy in this horrific situation. Her head is

slumped to the side, being held up by her arms. She's unconscious, but her chest is rising and falling at a steady pace.

Trigger rushes forward and gently unhooks her restraints. "Oh, Elise. I'm so sorry, big little sister." His voice is clogged with emotion as he keeps repeating how sorry he is over and over as he drags her limp body into his arms.

Tears burn my eyes, but I push them back. He doesn't need a sniveling, crying woman right now. He needs someone strong to hold him up when he is falling.

I kneel beside them and place my hand on Trigger's shoulder, offering comfort. He looks up at me, his sharp blue eyes are full of grief and rage, not at me but at the men who did this to his sister.

"Come on, Trigger, let's get her home where we can have a doctor look her over, and she can start to heal." I offer.

Trigger stands, the raw power behind his muscles flexing while he holds Elise against his chest. We carefully walk to the steps, and I lead the way, with my gun drawn and ready to shoot an fuckers who get in our way.

The music is cut off, then a loud thump and a cry of pain from upstairs draw my attention. But instead of going to investigate, I keep leading Trigger out of the house and toward the van.

Sadness echoes in the night, and I feel helpless as Capone, Seth, Pretty Playboy, and Jax help Trigger load Elise into the van. The doors shut, and three of them speed off, leaving me standing here alone. Jax stays back to bring Trigger's bike home for him.

While I watch the brake lights of the van disappear, I vow I will end these motherfuckers. I will right what happened tonight, even if it means losing my job. No

one should ever have to go through what these women have. What these families are going through.

Blayze and Tiny drag a man out of the house, covered in blood. His face isn't very recognizable anymore.

"Who's that?" I ask.

"I don't know, but it's not Lattimer," Blayze responds, holding his gun tight against the man's temple. His hands shake with fury.

Derange and Zach come out behind them, dragging another body. "And this one here is Jonas Mercer."

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My blood boils when I take in the man who took Elise. He's still conscious and fighting Derange and Zach against his binds. Derange cold cocks Jonas in the face, knocking him out.

Zach leaves and comes back with the van a few minutes later. Once Jonas and the stranger are secure and the guys get their bikes, we take off back to the Clubhouse.

Tension thickens like a storm, ready to break. Blood, sweat, and tears muffle the cries of our captives, but I don't give a shit. Not anymore. These motherfuckers will pay for what they did.

Chapter 17

TRIGGER

Seth grips the wheel as we speed through the night. Elise's limp body rests in my lap, her head against my chest. She's stirred a couple of times since we pulled her from that basement, but each time, she drifts back under. A blessing in disguise. If she's as bad as I think, the pain will be unbearable when she wakes up. I try to keep her still, but in the back of a van with no seats, it's damn near impossible.

Guilt eats away at me for leaving Aerianna there without my protection, but I didn't think about it at the time. I had to get my sister out of that house and get the medical help she needs. I pray Aerianna will forgive me for pulling a dickhead stunt like that.

Pretty Playboy sits beside me, his knee bouncing, jaw tight. With each passing mile, the deeper the worry etches into his face about Elise's condition. I see it, but I can't

afford to focus on his feelings. Elise comes first.

“Call Bones, I bark. “Have him get Jezebel and have her ready to see Elise.”

Pretty Playboy fumbles for his phone, and his hands are shaking as he dials Bones’s number. “Hey, I need you to get Jezebel into the infirmary. We’re bringing Elise in, and she’s in bad shape.” He nods his head while his gaze sweeps over her bruised form. “I don’t know, man, but it’s bad.”

Pretty Playboy hangs up his phone and shoves it back into his pocket. “He’ll have her there and ready for whatever Elise needs.”

“Thanks.” Silence stretches between us before I finally ask, “Can I ask you something?”

Pretty Playboy exhales. “Yeah.”

“This thing between the two of you. Is it serious, or are you just passing the time?” I keep my voice low so I don’t disturb Elise.

Pretty Playboy pulls his knees up so his hands are resting between them. “Honestly?”

I nod.

His breath comes out heavy. “I don’t know.” He leans his head back against the van. “She’s off-limits, but that doesn’t stop me from wondering what it would be like to be with her. I see all of you pairing off and finding your other person, and I wonder if she’s mine. But she’s forbidden. And even if she weren’t, what if I’m not good enough for her?”

I sigh, running a hand down my face. “Or what if you hurt her? Don’t you think she’s

been through enough?”

“I know she has.” His voice is quiet. “And I don’t know if I wouldn’t hurt her. But it doesn’t matter, I don’t need to know if we have a chance. She’s off-limits. End of story.” He pushes to his feet, stalking toward the front. Slumping into the passenger seat, he props his feet on the dash, closing the conversation.

Did I just fuck something up for Elise? Is Pretty Playboy good enough for my sister? These questions swirl in my mind when Seth drives through the Clubhouse gates. Before I can think too much about it, the side door slides open. Bones, Dagger, and Jezebelle stand on the other side, ready.

Jezebelle climbs into the van, eyes sharp as she assesses Elise. I growl and pull Elise against my chest tighter. “I know my husband is the one with the medical degree, but Trigger, you’ve got to let me check her over before we move her again.”

With a huff, I relax my grip on Elise and let Jezebelle do her thing. “Don’t hurt her,” I growl through clenched teeth.

“I’m not, I swear.” Jezebelle opens Elise’s eyelids and shines a penlight in each of them. Then she runs her hands softly down Elise’s arms, chest, and legs. “Nothing appears to be broken, but I want you to carefully lift her and move her to Dagger and Bones.”

“No. I can carry her. I can climb out without them taking her.” I’m not letting my sister out of my sight.

“You could,” Jezebelle agrees, her voice calm. “But if you jar her stepping out, it’ll hurt like hell. You don’t want her hurting any more than she already is, do you?”

“Fine.” I begrudgingly agree.

She nods. “On three, pass her to Bones, then he will pass her to Dagger. We’ll take it from there.” Jezebelle counts down to three.

I carefully lift Elise and hand her over to Bones, whose muscles are straining with her weight. He then shifts her to Dagger, who holds Elise with no issues. Swiftly and carefully, he takes her inside, and I follow.

Bones glances at me. “What the hell happened?”

“We’ll talk when everyone’s back.”

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Jezebelle ushers Dagger inside the infirmary, and he gently lays her on a hospital bed. I shut the door once Dagger leaves, only keeping myself, Jezebelle, and Elise in here. I turn around and watch what Jezebelle is doing to my sister.

She begins hooking up wires and an IV, and the steady beep of the heart monitor releases the edgy feeling I've been having.

"Daisy is on her way, and you need to step out," Jezebelle demands next to my sister's bed.

My head snaps toward her. "What? Why?" I growl. "That's not going to happen."

Jezebelle crosses her arms over her chest. "Trigger, I know you're concerned, but I have to get her cleaned up and changed. Give your sister some dignity and step out of the room once Daisy comes in." She steps forward, making me step back. "Don't you think she's been through enough already? She's already had her freedom stripped from her. Do you really want to take more away?" Jezebelle throws her hands up in the air in frustration.

A knock on the door interrupts my answer. Daisy peeks her head in, then steps inside. "It's OK, Trigger. I promise once we're done, you can come back in here. But please do this for her." Daisy places a comforting hand on my arm. "Please."

I huff out a breath, knowing I'm defeated before I even argue some more. "Fine. But..."

Jezebelle cuts me off, rolling her eyes. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. If anything happens to her,

you'll kick our man's ass." Daisy opens the door, and Jezebel shoves me out. "I'll let you know as soon as you can come back."

The door slams in my face, and I brace my head against the wood, my chest aching. My heart feels like it's breaking in two. Half my heart shatters for Elise and what she's endured. The other half breaks for Aerianna and the fact that I left her at the scene to clean up my mess. I hope she forgives me for that fucked up situation.

I sit at the bar, nursing a Crown and Coke, waiting for the rest of my brothers to arrive with our two captives. The whiskey burns as it goes down, but it does nothing to numb the restless energy crawling beneath my skin.

Aerianna texted me earlier, asking about Elise. I read the message a dozen times but never responded. What the hell was I supposed to say? That my sister is breathing but barely functioning? That every time she closes her eyes, she'll see her worst nightmare replaying on a loop? That I don't know how to fix her?

Instead of answering, I left the message unread.

My back is to the room when a warm hand slides along my thigh. My muscles tense instantly. The touch is foreign, wrong. It isn't Aerianna. I'd know if it was. I'd feel her before I even saw her. Fingertips drift higher, lingering too close to my junk. A pair of tits press against my arm, and the heavy scent of perfume floods my nose, making me gag. My stomach twists with disgust. I don't shove women away, not unless they give me a reason, but this feels all kinds of wrong.

I turn my head and come face-to-face with Pearl. Her lips part in a slow, practiced sigh, her pale eyes gleaming with hunger.

"I've missed you, Trigger." Her voice drips with desire as she presses against me. "Wanna get out of here?" One slender arm wraps around my neck, her nails dragging

over the back of my neck. She's trying to seduce me. But my body? It doesn't respond. My dick doesn't even twitch. There's no pull, no heat, no interest.

I lean into her so my lips are a breath away from hers. The lust and hunger in her pale eyes enrages me. Who does she think she is touching me?

Before I can say a damn word, Pearl is ripped away from me so violently that her body flies across the room. A solid crunch echoes through the clubhouse before Pearl's shriek pierces the quiet air.

Aerianna stands over her, breathing hard, her fists clenched at her sides.

Pearl scrambles back, clutching her cheek. "What the fuck, bitch?"

Aerianna lands another punch before she can dodge, knocking Pearl flat on her ass.

I barely have time to react before Aerianna's glare locks onto me, fury and betrayal burning in those grey eyes I crave.

She points an accusing finger at me before her sharp gaze lands on Pearl. "If that is what you want," she gestures to Pearl, her tone dripping with disgust. "Then have at it. I'm not some easy piece of white trash you can use when it's convenient for you."

"Wait. It's not what you think." I shove off the barstool, but Tiny's thick arm slams into my chest, holding me back. He shakes his head, disappointment in his eyes.

"The fuck it isn't," Aerianna snaps. Her chest heaves, her anger radiating through the room, setting my veins on fire. Jesus Christ, she's pissed. And fuck, it turns me on. "I thought you were helping your sister. You know, the one who was beaten within an inch of her life, and instead you're out here fucking this whore."

Before I respond, Aerianna holds up her hand. “I’m out. When you want to man up, you know where to find me.”

She spins on her heel and storms toward the door, taking all the air in the room with her. I hang my head in defeat. My heart, my other half, my soul, is leaving, and these fuckers won’t let me go after her.

“Release me, Tiny, before your dick matches your name,” I growl.

“Don’t do anything stupid, man,” Tiny shoves me back into my seat. “Sit the fuck down and explain what happened.”

I rake a hand through my hair, my head pounding. “The only stupid thing I’ve done is let her walk away.”

“Who?” Tiny asks, sitting next to me. “Aerianna or Pearl?”

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I shoot him an incredulous look. “Who the fuck do you think? I don’t give a shit about Pearl. She can go suck a dick for all I care.”

“That’s real nice, Trigger.” Pearl whimpers behind me.

I turn so I’m facing her. “You’ve done enough damage tonight. Go clean yourself up.” I give her my back. “Get the fuck out of my sight before I do something we’ll both regret.”

Tiny snorts. “She’s good for you.”

“Who?”

He rolls his eyes, “Aerianna, dumbass.”

I frown. “Why do you say that?”

“Because before her, you would have chopped off my dick for holding you back, and you would have done more than tell Pearl to leave.” He pats me on the back. “That’s why she’s good for you. Your trigger finger is under control when she’s around. I even saw it during your last fight.”

He’s right. I don’t lose my temper as easily when Aerianna’s around. I don’t let my anger control me the way I used to. She makes me better. “So, what do I do?”

Before Tiny can answer, Torch and Blayze step into the room, followed by Capone.

“You go and get her ass,” Torch says, clapping a hand on my shoulder.

“What about my sister?” I hesitate, finishing the rest of my drink before rising from the stool.

“Derange is in there with Jezebel and Daisy,” Capone assures me. “We’ve got her.”

I don’t waste another second. I stride out to my bike, throwing one leg over the seat. My hands grip the handlebars tight enough to turn my knuckles white. I don’t bother with a helmet as I peel out of the garage, the roar of my engine shattering the silence of the night.

Misunderstandings can be fixed. Mistakes can be forgiven.

And that’s exactly what I’m going to do. Fix this, even if I have to get on my knees and beg.

Chapter 18

AERIANNA

When we got back, we unloaded the two men from the back of Zach’s SUV, and Capone had them strung up in a secret room toward the back of the property. I wanted first crack at them, but my priorities shifted when we found Elise in the basement and saw the pain in Trigger’s eyes. Their well-being was at the forefront of my mind. That’s what I get for taking my eyes off the finish line. Instead of following my head, I followed my heart and went to check on Trigger. That’s when I saw it.

“Son of a bitch!” I shake my hand. I punched that skank with. It’s starting to swell. When I saw her draped all over Trigger and him almost kissing her, I lost it. I’ve never lost my cool with anyone before, but seeing that sent me into an uncontrolled

rage.

After everything Trigger and I have been through, and he wants that bitch, well, he can have her. I finally opened my heart and started trusting, and he had to shatter it.

I passed Zach on the way out, and instead of walking back to my apartment, which I was going to do, he tossed me his keys. No words were spoken between us. A part of me didn't want to go, but the logical part of my brain made me get the fuck out of there before I did anything more I'd regret.

Now, I'm nursing a possible fractured hand from it connecting with that bitch's face while driving myself back to my apartment.

I park the SUV in one of the visitor's parking spots and turn it off. I sit back in the seat and take a deep breath. Did I do the right thing by leaving like I did? Should I have stayed and talked to Trigger? What does this mean for us now?

All these questions swirl inside my head as I climb out of the SUV and head to my apartment. I unlock my apartment door in a daze and drop the keys in the bowl by the door. I unstrap my service weapon and place it on the stand next to the bowl.

I shake out my aching hand and head toward the kitchen for ice, but a sudden chill prickles across my skin. The hair on the back of my neck stands on end.

The apartment is silent, too silent.

I stop mid-step, holding my breath. The air feels off. Heavy. As if something unseen is pressing against my chest.

Slowly, I turn toward the living room. My pulse thrums in my ears. Nothing looks out of place, but the wrongness lingers, coiling in my gut like a warning.

“What the fuck?” I whisper.

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I reach for my service weapon, gripping it in my left hand. It's going to suck if I have to shoot someone, but I did teach myself how to be ambidextrous just in case something like this happens.

The cool metal grounds me, but my nerves remain on high alert.

Nothing appears to be out of place, but the creepy feeling that someone is watching me still makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

A soft creak causes me to whip around, gun raised.

I cautiously walk to my bedroom and notice the door is closed. That's weird because I always leave my bedroom door open, even when I'm sleeping.

A cold sweat beads at my temple. Every instinct screams at me that something isn't right.

I step forward cautiously, my heartbeat thundering in my chest. The doorknob is cool beneath my fingertips, but as I grip it, pain shoots up my arm from my fractured knuckles. I grit my teeth and push through, twisting the knob.

The hinges groan as the door swings open slowly. I flip on the light and look around. Nothing is out of place, but my gut is telling me something is off.

I scan the room, and nothing is out of place. My bed is untouched, the bathroom is empty, and the closet doors are shut. I crouch, peering under the bed. No movement. No shadow lurking in the dark.

The uneasy feeling remains. Maybe it's stress. Maybe I'm overthinking. Or maybe I'm not.

I head back to the refrigerator and grab some ice out of the freezer. I wrap it in a towel and sit on my couch. I set my service weapon on the coffee table and turn on the T.V. Once I find something brain-numbing to watch, I sit back and relax, placing the ice on my hand. It stings at first but eventually stops throbbing.

I close my eyes trying to get some sleep, but images of Trigger, Allison, Elise, Rael, and even the Ol' Ladies from the Royal Bastards come at me.

Allison's voice echoes in my head, a whisper at first, then a scream. Why haven't you helped me?

I see her. Not the laughing, carefree girl I once knew. Her body, Zach and I found crumpled in the alleyway, limbs twisted at unnatural angles, blood soaking through torn clothes. Her eyes are empty, accusing, locked onto mine.

Rael is standing over Allison's abused and broken body, his dark eyes are accusing me of not keeping my promise. You failed, he mouths into the darkness.

My mouth opens, but no sound comes out. My lungs burn. I need to scream. I need to speak. But my voice is gone, swallowed by the darkness pressing in around me.

Allison and Rael are screaming at me for help, and I can't help them. I can't stop what's happening.

Then, when I can't take it anymore, Trigger appears. His intense gaze, hot and demanding, lingers on my body, making me crave him.

When I reach out to touch him, his face twists. His eyes burn with rage. Rage from

leaving him, rage from not getting there on time to prevent his sister from being hurt.

I try to speak, try to tell him I did the best I could, but nothing comes out. My voice is a whisper across a loud ocean.

I take a step forward, but the ground beneath me crumbles. The Ol' Ladies are behind him now, their expressions unreadable. Allison and Rael join them, their mouths moving, telling me I'm not doing a good enough job.

The distance between us stretches. I try to run, but my feet won't move.

No. No. No.

A shrill, inhuman wail fills the space around me. It's mine. But I never opened my mouth.

The world fractures.

A loud thump jolts me awake.

My body jerks upright, my heart slamming against my ribs like it's trying to break free. My lungs burn as I drag in a ragged breath, but there's not enough air in the room. My skin is damp with sweat, the thin fabric of my shirt clinging to me like a second skin.

My fingers tremble as I reach for my gun, but my grip is weak. My right hand throbs from the earlier punch, but the pain barely registers over the lingering terror clawing at my chest.

A shiver rips through me. My muscles ache, locked so tight I can feel the strain in my shoulders, my back, and my jaw.

I press my palm against my sternum, trying to slow my breathing, but my heart is still hammering, the echo of the dream refusing to fade.

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The apartment is dark and silent, but my pulse roars in my ears, drowning out everything else. I squeeze my eyes shut. It wasn't real. It wasn't real.

But my body doesn't believe me.

My stomach twists violently, nausea rolling through me in waves. The scent of sweat and stale air clings to me, suffocating. I push off the couch, my knees nearly buckling as I stand. My head pounds, a dull, insistent throb behind my eyes.

My fingers curl into fists, my nails digging into my palms. I just need a second, a breath. I need some control. But as I stare at the darkened room around me, the lingering weight of unseen eyes settles against my skin.

And for the first time in a long time, I feel truly alone.

I reach for my phone with shaky fingers when another thump, followed by a pounding, echoes through my apartment.

A deep, gut-churning dread lingers in my chest, the nightmare still clinging to my skin like sweat. My body feels wrung out, the phantom echoes of screams still ringing in my ears.

Another thump. I freeze, my breath catching. The sound isn't coming from inside but just beyond my door.

Thump. Thump. Boom. A full-on pounding shakes the wood. My stomach knots. Is someone out there? Watching? Waiting?

My fingers tighten around my service weapon, still damp from my sweaty grip. The nightmare felt so raw, so real. Another sharp knock makes my pulse slam against my ribs, but I force myself to move.

Slow, deliberate steps take me toward the peephole. My bare feet are silent against the hardwood. My body still hums with adrenaline, instincts screaming at me to be ready.

“Aerianna, open up.” Trigger pounds on my door again, causing me to jump.

I check the peephole. When I see it is Trigger, the relief is so overwhelming my knees nearly give out. His broad shoulders fill the narrow hallway, his jaw clenched, his fist raised to pound again. I set my service weapon on the table and throw open my door before he wakes my neighbors.

“Trigger, what the...” My words are cut off when Trigger’s lips crash onto mine.

It isn’t gentle. It isn’t careful.

It’s desperate. Demanding. Consuming.

The nightmare still clings to me, poisoning my thoughts, but Trigger shatters it in an instant. His lips are fire, searing away the icy fear that wrapped around my heart. His hands are rough, unrelenting, sure, holding me in place as though he’s afraid I’ll disappear.

A whimper escapes me, unbidden, and Trigger groans into my mouth, deep and primal. He presses closer, his body a solid wall of heat and strength, the scent of leather, gunpowder, and something uniquely him drowning out everything else.

My fingers curl into his shirt, pulling him harder, closer, as if I can crawl inside his

skin and forget the darkness that still lingers in the corners of my mind. Trigger answers with a growl, his grip tightening, his tongue sweeping into my mouth, claiming me in a way that's more than physical.

It's a promise. A warning. A brand.

His body pins me to the wall, every muscle coiled with restraint, but barely. He's holding back, but only just. I feel the hard press of him against my stomach, the proof of how much he wants this, and a deep ache coils low in my belly.

My nails dig into his shoulders, and that's all it takes for his grip to tighten. A warning. A dare.

"Little Kitten," he murmurs against my mouth, voice thick with lust and something darker. "If you ever walk away from me again, I will hunt you down and make you wish you never did." His words should terrify me, but instead, they make me shiver.

"Trigger," My voice is breathless, needy.

"Shh." He kisses me again, this time slower, deeper, a promise laced with punishment. His hands skim under my shirt, sliding over bare skin, fingers branding their way up my sides. I arch into his touch, and he grins against my lips.

"You're shaking," he whispers, his breath teasing my swollen mouth. "Tell me, are you still scared, or is this something else?"

I should answer. I should say something, anything. But I don't.

Instead, I pull him closer until there's no space left between us. I crush my mouth against his, kissing him harder, deeper like I can drown out everything I don't want to feel. The nightmare. The fear. The ache.

Trigger growls low in his throat, his hands sliding up my sides, fingers rough and possessive against my skin. I feel the tension in his body, the way he's barely holding back.

When I break away, I'm gasping, my lips tingle, and my heart pounds against my ribs.

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“I don’t know what came over me,” I whisper, my voice raw. “I’ve never lost my temper like that.”

Trigger’s hand slides into my hair, his grip firm but careful, tilting my head so I can’t look away.

“While it was a huge fucking turn-on watching you put that skank in her place,” he murmurs against my jaw, his lips ghosting over my skin, “I want you to talk to me instead of reacting and running, Little Kitten.” His mouth trails lower, slow, teasing, his breath hot against my throat.

“Then you would’ve learned she came on to me.” His teeth graze my pulse point, making me shiver. “And you handled it before I could.”

My fingers dig into his shoulders, needing something solid to hold onto. Something real.

“Looks like you’re rubbing off on me,” I groan, my breath hitching as his fingertips trace a line of my spine.

“I’d rather be rubbing something else off.” Trigger’s voice is thick with hunger.

He kicks my door shut with the heel of his boot. The moment his lips crash back onto mine, we’re lost, all heat, all need, all recklessness. He carries me to the couch, his body pressing me down into the cushions, his weight deliciously heavy against me.

I widen my legs, welcoming him in. Trigger nips at my bottom lip, his mouth

claiming, demanding, intoxicating. Then he kisses lower, down my throat, along my collarbone, between my breasts. Each press of his lips brands me, staking his claim.

“This,” Trigger murmurs against my skin, his teeth scraping as he yanks my shirt over my head, “is mine and only mine, Little Kitten.”

His shirt follows mine, ripped away in one fluid motion.

“Jesus, you need to warn me when you do that,” I rasp as heat pools low in my belly, a desperate ache I can’t ignore.

He smirks, his eyes dark with amusement and something far more primal. I barely have time to think before he shifts his hips, grinding into me, a low, wicked groan spilling from my lips at the friction.

“That’s what I love to hear, Little Kitten,” he growls. “Keep making those noises, and I won’t take my time with you.”

I arch into him, my nails biting into his back. “I don’t want slow and gentle, Carter.” My voice is a breathless plea. “I want you to fuck me.” The way his body tightens, the way his pupils blow wide, I know I’ve snapped whatever restraint he had left.

Trigger moves fast. My jeans and panties are gone before I can process it, and the rest of his clothes are discarded just as quickly.

I lean back against the couch, exposed, open, ready. Trigger’s gaze devours me, dark and heated, like he’s about to consume me whole.

“Come take what you want, Carter.”

He does. One thrust, and we’re joined together as one. It’s not just sex. It’s

desperation. Possession. A silent promise wrapped in fire and friction.

He moves with purpose, with force, with need, and I match him, my body arching into his, taking everything he gives.

I don't know where I end and where Trigger begins. All I know is that I don't want this to stop. Because for the first time tonight, since waking up in that suffocating darkness, I finally feel something other than fear.

I feel alive.

The heat between us lingers in the air, thick and charged, but as the last waves of pleasure ebb, something colder creeps in.

Reality.

I lie against Trigger, my body still humming, my heartbeat trying to settle. His skin is warm beneath my fingers, his breath still ragged against my temple. For a moment, neither of us moves.

Then, just when I think he's asleep, his arms tighten around me.

"You were shaking when I got here," Trigger murmurs, voice rough but laced with something gentler now. "Not from me. From before."

I don't answer. I don't want to talk about the nightmare, the feeling of failure, the accusations that I didn't help, the scream that never make it past my lips. I don't want to admit that I woke up feeling like I was drowning, my mind a cage I can't escape.

But Trigger sees through me. He always has.

His fingers trace slow circles on my bare back, grounding me with silent reassurance.

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"You don't have to say anything," he finally whispers. "Just don't shut me out, Aerianna. I can't." He stops himself, but I feel the tension in his jaw where it rests against my forehead. He doesn't finish the thought. He doesn't have to.

Because I feel it, too.

I exhale shakily, my fingers curling into his side. "I wasn't going to walk away for good. I just needed space." The confession comes out softer than I expect.

Trigger pulls back just enough to look at me, his piercing blue eyes searching mine, like he's looking for the cracks, the places where I might still be breaking.

"Good," he murmurs, brushing his lips against my forehead. "Because I wouldn't let you." His grip on me tightens, creating a silent vow.

I close my eyes, willing sleep to take me before the ghosts do.

This time, when darkness comes, it's warmer. Safer.

This time, I'm not alone.

Chapter 19

AERIANNA

Sunlight filters through the curtains, warming my skin. I stretch, feeling the solid heat of Trigger's body pressed against mine. We're still on my couch, facing each other,

my leg draped over his hip, his arms locked around me. It's been so long since I've felt this safe.

"Good morning." Trigger's voice is husky with sleep.

"Good morning." I cover my mouth with a yawn and snuggle closer. The feeling of being watched is creeping up again.

Trigger brushes my hair back, his fingers trailing along my temple. "How'd you sleep?"

"I haven't slept that well in a very long time."

Trigger lifts my right hand, turning it over to inspect the bruising across my knuckles. He presses a kiss to each one. "How's your hand?"

"It's better than last night. I don't think it's broken." I flex my hand, taking note of the tightness. "I've done worse to it before. I'll be good in a few days."

His gaze sharpens, reading beyond my words. "We need to talk about last night."

I groan. "Do we have to?" This is not something I want to deal with right now. I sit up and rise from the couch. Standing, I grab his t-shirt off the floor and tug it over my head before heading to the kitchen. I need coffee before I can handle this. The machine gurgles to life, filling the space with the rich scent of caffeine.

Trigger follows, wrapping his arms around my waist from behind. His body is solid, warm, and unmistakably hard. "Yeah, we do. You keep shutting me out, but I can't help if I don't know what's going on."

Releasing a deep sigh, I turn in Trigger's arms. "Let me have some coffee, and then I

can tell you what has been going on.”

He cups my jaw, kissing me slowly and deeply. My breath shudders, and my heart stumbles. When he pulls back, he rests his forehead against mine. “Thank you.”

For a moment, we just stand there, wrapped in the quiet safety of each other. But the coffee pot clicks off, shattering the moment. I don’t want to pull away, but I have to. Trigger deserves to know everything about me, and then he can decide if I’m someone he really wants.

I pour two cups and take a seat at the table, motioning for Trigger to join me. “You’re going to want to sit down for this.” He hesitates, then sits beside me, his hand resting on my thigh. The warmth of his touch steadies me.

I add sugar to my coffee and take a sip before setting the cup down. I’m trying to hold off for as long as I can, but looking into Trigger’s piercing gaze and his hand on my thigh gives me the strength I need to continue. “Ok, here it goes.”

I take a deep breath. “I grew up in a small town in the U.P. of Michigan. One of those places where everyone knows your business before you do.” I wrap my hands around the mug, gathering my courage. “When I was a teenager, my best friend, Allison, and I were inseparable. We did everything together. Then, after we graduated high school, she started to pull away from me. I thought it was our friendship changing, but that wasn’t the case. She met a guy who promised her the world.”

Trigger stays silent, his thumb rubbing slow circles against my leg, grounding me.

“One night, we were at a bonfire where a bunch of our high school friends were partying. I left because I was tired and had to get up early the next day to go to work. Allison didn’t want to leave. She told me her friend was meeting her there, and they were going to hang out. I didn’t want to leave her, but she told me to go.” I swallow

hard, the words tasting like ash. “She told me that everything was fine.”

“So, I left and went home. I got a phone call in the middle of the night, and it was Allison, begging me to forgive her and saying she was so sorry she didn’t listen to me. Then there was an ear-piercing scream before the call was cut off.” I blink back the sting in my eyes. “I called my uncle, who is the sheriff in our town, and together we went back to where my phone said Allison was. Well, when we got there, no one was around. We found a blood trail and Allison’s phone. That was the last time I spoke to her.” The silence stretches between us as I stare at my hands, wishing I could wipe them clean of the past.

“I started my own investigation after the town gave up on Allison.” My voice turns hard. “Once I hacked into Allison’s phone, I found the man she was supposed to meet up with living in Detroit. When I found him, he was dead. An OD. I became a beat cop in the Motor City for four years. That’s when I met Rael. A teenager who knew about Allison, about the Black Market Railroad.” My breath hitches. “I thought I was close. I thought I had a lead. When things started falling into place and I thought I would find her, shit hit the fan.”

Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:53 am

Trigger doesn't push me, just lets me speak. I take a deep breath, shaking my head at the awful memories of that night. This is the worst part of my story, and I'm trying not to let it affect me. "My partner and I were on a stakeout, using Rael as bait so we could lure out Jonas Mercer." My stomach churns, and I swallow. "But my partner, he had other plans." I swallow the bile climbing up the back of my throat, looking away. "He tried to rape me."

Trigger stiffens.

"I fought him off, broke his nose, maybe his dick, but while I was dealing with him, Rael was dying. The damage was already done. Someone shot Rael, and by the time I got there, I couldn't help him." My voice cracks. "He bled out in my arms." "

Trigger pulls me against him, and I cry for Allison, for Rael, and for the hundreds of women and children who are victims of the Black Market Railroad. My voice is raw and scratchy. "Rael made me promise I'd end them. That I'd burn the Black Market Railroad to the ground."

Trigger rubs my back in soothing motions. "What happened after that?"

"I left Detroit and followed the Black Market Railroad through the Royal Bastards MC's spread out between the east coast, Canada, the Mid West, and then to here. That's why I thought your Club was involved. This was the first solid lead I've had in three years." My voice drops. "But it's over. Two days ago, Zach and I found Allison's body. She was beaten, broken, and bloody."

Trigger exhales, his lips brushing my temple. "The day the two of you came to the

Clubhouse was the day you found Allison.”

I nod my head. “But before we went there, Zach took me to a house in the middle of nowhere. I met a few of the women your Club saved, and instead of blaming all of you for this, I realized we’re on the same side. That’s why I helped you get Elise back. I knew you didn’t have anything to do with Allison’s death.” I lean my head back and stare into Trigger’s gorgeous eyes. “I’m sorry.”

Trigger frowns, and his arms tighten around me. “Sorry for what?”

“For blaming you and thinking you’re the bad guys when you’re not.”

His grip tightens. “We’re not saints, Aerianna. We do bad shit to bad people.”

I cup his face, my thumb tracing the edge of his jaw. “You saved those women. You saved Elise.” My voice drops. “You saved me.”

Trigger’s mouth crashes against mine, stealing my breath. He pulls back, staring into my eyes. “One more thing, then I’ll stop asking questions.” I nod my head for him to continue. “What had you so scared last night that you were shaking?”

I hesitate. “I thought someone was in my apartment.” My skin prickles at the memory. “I didn’t find anything or see anyone. It was a creepy feeling of being watched. Then I had a reoccurring nightmare about Allison, Rael, and you were in it this time too. Telling me I failed.” I confess. “It really shook me up.”

Trigger’s expression darkens. “You’re coming with me. Pack a bag. You’re staying at the Clubhouse, where I can keep you safe. Until we can figure out what’s going on and if you have a stalker.”

A thrill of fear runs through me. “You think I have a stalker?”

“I think we’re gonna find out.”

Trigger pulls me into his lap, so I’m straddling him in the chair. “Besides, Capone hasn’t touched the two men we brought in last night. He was waiting for you.” Trigger shrugs like it’s no big deal, but to me, it is.

My eyes grow wide. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah, apparently you’re rubbing off on a lot of us at the Clubhouse. So, pack a bag, you’re coming home with me.” Trigger swats my ass making me squirm. “Don’t even think about it Little Kitten. As much as I want to be buried inside of you again while you’re teasing me with my t-shirt and no panties, I want to keep you safe, and to do that, we need to head back to the Clubhouse.”

“Give me twenty, and I’ll be ready to go.” I hop off Trigger’s lap, and he groans in disapproval. He adjusts himself before standing up.

I roll my eyes but hurry to my bedroom. Pulling out a bag, I start packing until I open my top drawer and freeze. The missing panties I had on the night I was working out at the gym are sitting on top, crusty. My stomach drops.

“Trigger!” I shout.

He comes barreling into my bedroom, half dressed, with his gun raised. “What?”

I point to my drawer. “He was here.”

Trigger’s expression turns murderous when he looks in the drawer. “Son of a bitch.” He slams the drawer shut. “You’re not touching those. I’ll buy you every goddamn pair of panties you want.”

My hands shake as I shove the rest of my things into my bag. I'm not coming back here. Ever. My privacy was violated by some psycho stalker.

Once I'm done, I slide on a pair of sweatpants and a hoodie over Trigger's t-shirt. He raises a brow but doesn't say a word as he puts his cut on without a shirt. It looks very sexy as hell.

I grab my keys, Trigger grabs my bags, and we leave my apartment. Once we're outside, I move toward my pickup, but Trigger grabs my wrist. "You're riding with me."

I shake my head. "I'm not leaving my truck here for this psycho to mess with. I'll follow you." His jaw ticks. I press my hand over his mouth before he can argue. "The longer we stand here, the more exposed we are. I'm not budging."

Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:53 am

Trigger clenches his teeth and then exhales sharply. "Fine. Stay close."

He swings a leg over his bike, the powerful machine roaring to life beneath him. My fingers tremble as I grip my truck keys, my mind replaying the scene at my apartment. Someone had been inside. Touched my things. Left a message in the vilest way possible. I shove the thought aside, shoving the key into the ignition. The engine rumbles, grounding me, but it doesn't stop the unease slithering under my skin.

I follow Trigger through the streets of L.A., my knuckles white around the steering wheel. The past is never far behind, and now it's bleeding into my present. Allison, Rael, the BMRR, and now a stalker. Whoever they are, they know me. They've been watching.

A sickening thought coils in my gut. How long?

The Royal Bastards MC clubhouse comes into view, standing like a fortress against the monsters. When we pull up, Trigger doesn't waste time. He stalks toward my truck, opens the door, and pulls me out.

"You're safe now," he murmurs, pressing a kiss to my temple. But I can feel his rage simmering beneath the surface.

Capone stands at the clubhouse entrance, arms crossed, expression unreadable. His gaze flicks between us before he finally speaks. "Good. You're just in time." A slow, predatory smirk pulls at his lips. "Our guests are still tied up out back."

Trigger doesn't hesitate, gripping my hand as he leads me out behind the Clubhouse.

Whoever sent that message thought they could scare me.

They made a big mistake.

They should've made damn sure I stayed down. They should've finished the job when they had the chance. But they didn't, and now I hope they're ready for me.

Chapter 20

TRIGGER

My mind races on the ride to the Clubhouse. Who's stalking Aerianna? Someone the club knows? Someone she knows? Is the Black Market Railroad trying to scare her off? Is our separation even safe for her? Is someone tailing us now?

The possibilities are endless, and without Red here to help, I'm at a loss on what to do. Bones is good, but he isn't as good as Red. I want no stone unturned when it comes to Aerianna's safety.

I'm on high alert, checking everything and everyone we pass, looking for danger. My nerves are shot, and my trigger finger is itching to seek revenge on the person terrorizing Aerianna.

We pull into the Clubhouse, and I'm immediately at Aerianna's truck door, yanking it open. She's in my arms in a heartbeat, her steady breathing lingering on my neck, creating a shiver down my spine.

"You're safe now." I press a kiss to her temple, exhaling a relieved breath. I'm trying to contain the rage simmering under the surface.

Capone stands at the clubhouse entrance, arms crossed, expression unreadable. His

gaze flicks between us before he finally speaks. "Good. You're just in time." A slow, predatory smirk pulls at his lips. "Our guests are still tied up out back."

I don't hesitate, gripping Aerianna's hand as I lead her behind the Clubhouse. Torch, Tiny, and Dagger are waiting for us in front of the doors.

Tiny eyes me. "Everything good?"

I shake my head. "Not yet." I tug Aerianna closer and kiss her temple.

Capone steps forward. His voice drops, edged with something lethal. "Listen close, Aerianna. Once you step into this, there's no stepping back. No do-overs. No, pretending you didn't cross that line." His dark eyes bore into hers. "You get your hands bloody tonight, you're in. With the Club, with Trigger, for life."

I watch as the conflict passes across Aerianna's face. I get it. Will she want to throw away everything she's worked hard for in search for answers about Allison's death? Can she go through with this?

The silence stretches, thick with the weight of the choice before her. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

Aerianna swallows hard, then lifts her chin. "I didn't become a cop for justice. I became a cop for revenge." She inhales a sharp breath. "And tonight, I get it."

"Trigger, are you sure this is what you want? Are you claiming Aerianna?" When Capone looks at me, his gaze sharp and expectant, I know exactly what he's asking. This isn't just about whether I'm standing by her side tonight. It's about everything. It's about her future, her safety, her soul.

I don't hesitate. "Yes." My voice is firm and unwavering. "She's mine."

Something inside me settles, an unspoken vow sealing itself into my bones. She's no longer just the woman I can't stop thinking about. She's my responsibility, my fight, my home. And if anyone thinks they can take her from me, they'll have to put me in the ground first.

"Good." Capone cracks his neck. "Let's get this party started so we can celebrate."

Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:53 am

Tiny unlocks the door and opens it. Aerianna and I walk in first, followed by Capone, then Torch and Dagger, then Tiny, who closes it behind us.

The scent hits me first. The smell of copper, piss, and shit assaults my nose before the moans. The further we walk into the room, the worse the smell gets.

Once we reach the back where the two men are chained up, Aerianna sucks in a deep breath. “Shit.” She covers her mouth and nose with her palm.

“You get used to it,” Tiny says from the back of the room.

Lattimer hangs from chains, feet barely touching the floor, stripped to his boxers. His once-pristine face is a mess of blood and bruises. The man who used to wear suits worth more than my Harley is degraded to nothing but blood and piss.

I give Capone a questioning look. He shrugs his shoulders. “Grace, Exleigh, and Syvannah might have had a little too much fun with this one while we waited for you.” He kicks Lattimer in the kneecap, making him groan in protest.

Jonas stirs, rattling his chains. He’s strung up the same way, less beaten, but still a mess. He snarls, swinging as he kicks at Capone and misses.

“This one, though,” Capone grabs Jonas’s body and halts his momentum. “This one we saved for you, Aerianna. Do with him as you wish.”

Dagger hands Aerianna a pair of leather gloves. She’s hesitant to take them but does it anyway. Once she has the gloves on, a deadly smirk crosses her beautiful face.

She walks to Jonas and slaps him hard. “Do you know who I am?”

Jonas spits blood out at her feet. “Fuck you, bitch.”

Aerianna tsks like a disappointed mother. “Don’t you know it’s not nice to spit on people? Didn’t your mother teach you better?”

“Fuck off.”

“Where’s your brother?” Aerianna asks.

Jonas glares “Fuck. Off.”

Shit. I should have seen this coming. If Aerianna finds out we killed Josiah a while ago, I don’t know what she will do. I give Capone a look, and he shakes his head. Fuck. I have to tell her.

I open my mouth, but Capone's dark gaze dares me to step out of line. Shit. I run my hands through my hair. I don’t know what to do.

“Trigger, outside.” His tone leaves no room for argument.

Tiny grips my shoulder. “I’ll keep an eye on her.”

I nod. “Thanks, Tiny.”

I follow Capone outside. Once we reach the fresh air, Capone has me pinned against the concrete building with his arm against my throat.

“If you ever disobey a direct command again, I will end you.” Capone’s tone is low and deadly. “We cannot tell her right now about Josiah.”

“But...” I struggle to breathe.

Capone loosens his grip on my throat. “No but’s Trigger. You cannot tell her right now.”

“Why?” I question.

Capone releases me from the concrete wall. “You don’t get it, do you?”

I glare. “Get what?”

The silence between us is interrupted by a sharp cry coming from inside.

Capone pinches the bridge of his nose. “If you tell her now, we don’t know what she will do. Let her get the answers she needs, and then we can tell her. Josiah didn’t kill her friend. It was either Lattimer or Jonas.”

Another wet smack followed by another scream. “And by the sound of it,” Capone smirks, “she’s getting her answers.” He claps my back. “Go get your girl.”

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Capone lights up a cigarette, and I rush inside. I find Aerianna hitting Jonas Mercer with a metal pipe. She has blood splatter on her face, neck, and arms. Jonas is swinging back and forth with his head down and blood dripping from his face.

I carefully grip the metal pipe in her hands, and she lets go. “Easy, Little Kitten.” I pull her close. “I got you.”

Aerianna looks at me with tears in her eyes. “He killed her.” Aerianna straightens her shoulders and clears her throat. “He told me that after his brother, Josiah went missing, Jonas played with Allison for months before he got tired of her and killed her. He knew I was looking for her. Trigger, he knows all about me. How? Is he my stalker?”

I tighten my hold, shielding her from the horror around us. “No, baby. He’s not.”

Her body trembles against mine. I shift my gaze to the new guy. He’s awake, fear replacing hatred in his eyes. He shakes his head violently. I exhale. “But I think I know who is.”

Aerianna shivers, her fingers gripping my cut. She’s close to losing it, and I don’t want her to feel vulnerable in front of people she doesn’t know. I glance at Tiny and Dagger. “I’m going to take her in to get cleaned up. Get the information we need from him, and then you have free rein.”

For the first time in my adult life, I didn’t get my hands bloody on this one. It’s a strange feeling not to be the one in charge during a torture session, but my priorities are shifting. They are now focusing on the beauty in my arms. She is my top priority

now and forever.

Once Aerianna has my cut on her back and my ink on her skin, the only way out for either of us is death.

Aerianna presses a trembling hand to her face as I lead her inside the clubhouse, away from the sounds of the interrogation. She's still covered in Jonas's blood. I watch the emotions on Aerianna's face as her thoughts drift to what just happened. She stares at herself in the mirror, breathing heavily, and finally, it hits her. She's never been this person before, the one who draws blood in cold, calculated vengeance. But I know for Allison, she would do it again.

"You okay?" I ask, standing behind her and resting my hands on her heated shoulders.

Aerianna flinches, wiping away the blood splatter from her skin, but the tremor in her hands is too much to hide. "I'm fine," she's lying.

I always know when she's not being honest with herself. Aerianna turns to face me, her back against the sink, still trying to regain control.

"You're not fine. Talk to me, Aerianna."

"I killed him, Trigger. I hit him so many times, and he..." Her voice cracks as the reality of what she's done sets in. "I wasn't the person I was when I walked in there. He made me that way." Her voice drops to a whisper, "I'm broken."

Aerianna's body presses closer against mine as she fights to steady her breath. Her heart races against my chest, and I can feel the struggle within her, the guilt and the darkness of what she's just done. But I also feel her resolve, the unshakable drive that's been with her since I first met her. She's fighting a battle inside herself, and I

know she's trying to reconcile the woman she was with the woman she had to become tonight.

"You're not broken, Aerianna," I murmur, my voice soft but firm. "You're still you. But now, you're stronger than before. You'll never be the same, but that doesn't mean you're not still the woman I trust with everything."

Her arms tighten around me, clinging to the comfort I offer, and for a moment, we just stand there in silence, the only sound is her labored breathing. The blood on her hands, her clothes, it doesn't change how I see her. It doesn't erase the woman I've come to care for deeply, even if she's not sure how she feels about it yet.

"I don't want to lose myself," she whispers against my chest, her voice fragile but steadying as the minutes pass.

"You won't. I won't let you," I promise her, holding her even tighter, as if my arms can protect her from the demons she's facing inside. "Whatever happens, we face it together. I'm right here, Aerianna."

She pulls away slightly, just enough to look me in the eye. Her gaze is vulnerable and raw, but I can still see the fierce determination in her that pulled her through tonight. "I don't know if I can live with what I did."

I gently tilt her chin up, guiding her to meet my eyes. "You don't have to decide that right now. Tonight was about getting answers. You've got them. Now, let's just breathe, okay?"

She nods, a tear slipping down her cheek before she wipes it away quickly. "Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me, Aerianna. You're mine, and I'm not going anywhere."

The tension that's been coiling in her shoulders slowly starts to dissipate as she leans into me once again. I know it's going to take time for her to process all of this, but I'm not going to let her go through it alone. Not when I'm the one she needs, and she's the one I need.

"I'm right here, Little Kitten," I murmur, brushing my lips over her forehead. "Always."

As I hold her, the weight of her decision looms, but the connection between us solidifies further. She might have crossed a line tonight, but the safety and loyalty I offer make it all feel like it was worth it.

Chapter 21

AERIANNA

As Trigger comforts me, my mind starts to spiral again, the image of Jonas bleeding and gasping for breath still fresh. The questions gnaw at me. My head is pounding, trying to figure out who is stalking me.

I pull away from Trigger's embrace, my eyes searching his face for answers. "You said it wasn't Jonas, so who the hell is it, Trigger? Who the hell knows everything about me?" The pain in my voice is laced with fear. Fear of someone watching me, waiting for the right moment to strike.

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Trigger's gaze flickers for a moment, and I see the hesitation. It's brief, but it's there. The moment he opened his mouth earlier, he didn't tell me about Josiah. Could that be connected?

"I don't know yet, Aerianna. But we will find them." Trigger's grip tightens on me. "I'm not letting anyone hurt you."

"I don't think you would intentionally, but..." I pull away from his warm embrace. "You're hiding something big."

Trigger opens and then closes his mouth. He releases a deep sigh. "Are you sure you want to know?"

"Yes." I stand firm, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Then you need to get cleaned up, and we will talk to Capone."

"I don't want to wait, Trigger. I have every right to know what's going on." I raise my hands and drop them to my sides.

"You do have a right, and I will tell you. But I'm not letting you go out into the Clubhouse covered in blood. Not with the other Ol' Ladies and kids around." Trigger points to the shower. "Now, get cleaned up, and then we will discuss this with the rest of my Club."

I look at myself in the mirror and hang my head in defeat. He's right. I'd scare the kids if I went out there like this.

Trigger lifts my chin, so I have to look at him. “Don’t ever be ashamed of what you have done in your past. It only makes you stronger.” He leans in and kisses the top of my head. “Take your shower.”

I remove my bloody clothes and step into the shower. The hot steam soothes my aching muscles and pounding head. I scrub myself several times until the water turns clear and cold.

Turning off the shower, I step out, and Trigger is waiting for me with a towel. He wraps it around my body and dries me off. It’s sensual the way he is doing this for me, and it turns me on.

Once he’s done, Trigger turns me in his arms, and his lips crash onto mine. I close my eyes and enjoy his taste on my tongue. Everything from the last few hours comes pouring out into this kiss. The passion, lust, desire, and possibly even love. Does Trigger love me the way I’m starting to fall for him?

I open my eyes and peer into his. What I see makes me think he is falling for me as I am for him. Only time will tell, though.

I walk into the bedroom and find a change of clothes. Once I’m dressed and my hair is pulled into a sleek ponytail, we leave the sanctuary of his room.

Trigger holds my hand as he guides us down the hallway and into the common room. Ol’ Ladies and Club members are sitting around either playing cards or dancing. The Patch Bunnies are hanging off some of the single members, and they’re eating up the attention.

I spot Pearl sitting with Tiny while a blonde sits on his other side. He’s ignoring Pearl and giving this girl his undivided attention. Pearl huffs and then moves from the table. She stops walking when she spots me and Trigger, our fingers laced together. I

see the moment she decided to approach us. I hold back a groan the closer she gets.

There's a bandage across Pearl's nose, and her eyes are black and blue. "Aerianna, I just wanted to apologize for the other night. I shouldn't have done what I did, and for that, I'm sorry."

I'm shook from her apology. That is something I wasn't expecting. I look up at Trigger, and he's looking down at me, waiting for me to respond. I glance back at Pearl. "Uh... I'm sorry about breaking your nose."

Yeah, that's all I got. This shit is awkward as it is. Pearl smiles and nods her head. She spins on her heels and walks away.

"Ok, that was weird," I mumble. Trigger releases a deep chuckle and kisses the top of my head.

A prospect is behind the bar making drinks as fast as he can. He spots Trigger and I and pours a glass of whiskey before sliding it down the bar to Trigger. He picks it up and swallows it in one gulp.

"Trigger, Aerianna," Capone calls out to us, catching our attention.

We walk over to the table Capone and Danyella are at. Blayze, Monica, Tiny, Torch, Daisy, Derange, Jezebel, Dagger, Pretty Playboy, Bones, and two girls I haven't met before comes over, too.

"We need to discuss what happened today."

"Out here?" I ask. This is weird.

"Yeah, out here," Capone answers. "You need answers, and these ladies can provide

them.”

Trigger sits down and pulls me onto his lap. His arms are wrapped around my waist. The rest of the brothers do the same with their Ol’ Ladies.

I glance between the two unfamiliar women, my instincts on high alert. Their eyes are hollow, their bodies tense, as if they’re barely holding themselves together. My gut twists. Whatever happened to them is serious, and from the way the room has shifted, I’m about to find out exactly how deep this nightmare goes.

Capone leans forward, resting his forearms on the table, his expression grim. “What happened today with Jonas wasn’t just about getting answers for Allison, Aerianna.” His dark eyes cut to me, then to the women behind us. “This goes deeper than we thought.”

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I stiffen in Trigger's lap, feeling the tension rolling off of him. He already knows what's coming, but he wanted me to hear it from someone else. My fingers curl against his forearm, bracing myself. "Deeper how?"

Danyella shifts in her seat, giving one of the women a reassuring nod. "This is Kayla and Serena. They were taken by the same people who took Allison."

A sharp, icy chill shoots down my spine. My breath catches in my throat. The same people?

Trigger's grip on me tightens. "They escaped a few days ago and found their way to us."

I finally force myself to look at them, at the bruises marring their skin, the hollow pain in their eyes. They were held captive just like Allison. They were stalked just like me.

I push off of Trigger's lap, standing to face them, my heart hammering in my chest. "How long?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

Kayla swallows hard, shifting uncomfortably. "Almost three months."

Serena doesn't speak. She keeps her arms crossed, staring at the floor, like she's afraid to make eye contact with anyone. My stomach twists into knots.

Blayze leans forward, his jaw clenched. "They told us things, Aerianna. Things about a man who ran the place where they were kept. Someone who knew everything about

them before they were even taken.” His gaze meets mine, steady and unflinching. “Someone who knew everything about you.”

The breath leaves my lungs all at once.

I shake my head. “No. No, Josiah was the one, he...”

“He wasn’t,” Capone interrupts, his voice firm. “He was just a pawn. The real threat has been watching you for a long time.”

My hands clench into fists. “Then who the hell is it?”

Silence.

The only sound is the distant bass of music and laughter from the other side of the Clubhouse, so out of place with the dread thickening the air around us.

Then, Kayla finally speaks, her voice barely above a whisper. “Dennis Benton.” The room goes deadly still.

“Agent Dennis Benton. The second in command with the FBI Los Angeles field office. That Dennis Benton?” I question.

Kayla nods her head, “He would flash his badge and threaten us, telling us he would track us down because of who he is.”

A shiver runs down my spine. My ears ring. Rage ignites in my chest, burning hot and blinding.

Capone watches me closely. “He’s the one who’s been watching you, Aerianna. The one who knows everything.”

I can't breathe. My mind spirals, replaying every moment, every time I felt eyes on me, every time I second-guessed my instincts. It was him.

Trigger stands behind me, his body radiating tension, his presence grounding me. "That's why I didn't tell you before," he says quietly. "I wanted to be sure."

I turn to face him, my pulse thundering in my ears. "And now? Are you sure now?"

His jaw tightens. "Yeah."

I exhale sharply, my fingers flexing at my sides. "Then we hunt him down."

Serena flinches, and Kayla's breath hitches, but I don't care. I refuse to let fear control me. I refuse to let this monster keep his grip on my life.

Capone nods, his expression grim. "That's the plan."

Trigger steps closer, tilting my chin up so I'm forced to look at him. His piercing blue eyes burn into mine, filled with a promise. "We end this, Kitten. No matter what it takes."

I swallow hard, my breath unsteady. This isn't just about revenge anymore. This is a reckoning.

Chapter 22

TRIGGER

The weight of everything that's happened still lingers in the air as Aerianna stands near the bar, with my arms wrapped tightly around her waist. The rest of the Club is still buzzing from the revelation about Benton, but I have something else on my mind.

Capone, Tiny, Blayze, and the rest of the high-ranking members are discussing strategy, but I'm not listening. Instead, my focus is entirely on Aerianna. On the way she's standing so tall despite everything, on the fire in her eyes that hasn't dimmed despite the horrors she's uncovered.

"You good, Kitten?" My voice is low, meant just for her.

She exhales sharply, looking up at me. "I don't know if I'll ever be 'good' again, Trigger. But I'm here." I nod, my grip tightening. That's enough for me.

I raise my voice, addressing the room. "Listen up."

The chatter dies instantly. All eyes turn to me. I'm not a man who speaks unless I have something to say. Aerianna tenses slightly under the weight of all the attention, but I don't let her pull away.

"I'm claiming Aerianna as my Ol' Lady." My voice is absolute.

A beat of silence, then a low murmur spreads through the room. Some nod in approval, and others, like the Club Bunnies, not so much.

Pearl, who just apologized to Aerianna, gives me a long look before shaking her head with a small smirk. “Well, shit.”

Tiny whistles low, a knowing smirk playing on his lips. “Damn, brother, finally locking it down, huh?”

Blayze crosses his arms, his expression unreadable. “You sure about this, Trigger?”

“I’ve never been surer of anything in my life.” I don’t even hesitate. My grip on Aerianna’s waist is possessive, protective.

Aerianna is still processing what just happened. The Club is watching, waiting for her response. Her throat goes dry, and she suddenly feels very exposed.

“This is,” she swallows, steadying herself. “This is serious for you?”

I turn her in my arms, cupping her face in my hands. “Dead serious, Kitten.” My blue eyes burn with certainty. “I don’t just want you in my bed. I want you as mine. Officially.”

She searches my face for any doubt, any hesitation, but there is none.

“I’ve spent my whole life keeping people at arm's length, but I realize something.” Aerianna rests her forehead against mine and whispers. “I don’t want to run anymore.”

A roar of approval erupts around them as I smash my lips to hers, sealing the deal in front of the entire Club. Cheers and whistles echo through the room, but Aerianna tunes them out, melting into my embrace.

“What happens now?” Aerianna asks.

I lean in, my voice low. "Now, you're mine. And I'll make sure no one takes you from me. You're not just a partner in this war, Aerianna. You're my everything."

Capone comes up to us with a cut in his hands. "One more thing, Aerianna." He holds it up, and pride fills my soul. It reads Property of Trigger with our Club logo on the back and Ol' Lady on the left breast pocket.

Aerianna grabs it with trembling hands. "This is mine?"

"Yeah, Little Kitten." I take it from her hands and put it on her. It fits like a second skin. "This is yours, and I would be honored if you wear it everywhere you go."

Aerianna runs her fingers over the soft leather. "I will." She looks up at me with longing and love shining in her eyes. "But it might look weird wearing an MC cut while I'm on the job."

I expected that. Hell, I've been thinking about it since the moment I decided to claim her. Aerianna has spent years dedicated to her badge, to justice, to a system that barely deserves her. But the FBI? It's never been her real home.

"About that," I say, watching her closely. "You ever think about leaving the Bureau? Maybe working with Zach in his department instead?"

Aerianna tenses slightly, her fingers tightening on the leather. "I have," she admits. "But leaving the FBI isn't something I can just do overnight." She exhales, her throat working as she swallows. "I joined because I wanted to stop men like Benton. If I leave before this is over, it will feel like," she hesitates, searching for the words. "Like I failed."

I step closer, cupping her face, forcing her to look at me. "Kitten, you didn't fail. You found the truth. You dug deeper than anyone else, risked your life when no one else

would.” My voice drops lower. “You’ve done more than enough.”

Aerianna releases a shaky breath, but I can see it, the war inside her. The duty she’s always carried. The burden of unfinished business.

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“I need to see this through,” she finally says. “Once Benton is handled, I’ll resign.” Her voice firms with resolve. “And then I’ll figure out what’s next.”

I nod, pressing my forehead against hers. “We’ll figure it out together. You don’t need a badge to deliver justice. Not when you have me and the Club.

My jeans grow tight and I want nothing more than to whisk Aerianna away and fuck her with nothing but her Ol’ Lady cut on.

Aerianna raises an eyebrow. “I’m starting to learn this.” She looks around the room. “Where’s Elise?”

The question pulls me out of the lust-filled haze I’m in when Aerianna is around.

Fuck.

I scan the room, my gut tightening when I don’t see her. She hasn’t been the same since we got her back, but I figured she’d at least stick around for the party. Now? I’m not so sure.

“She’s been off,” I admit, rubbing the back of my neck. “Didn’t think she’d slip away tonight, though.”

Aerianna squeezes my hand. “Go check on her.”

I don’t want to leave. Not tonight, not after everything. But I look down at Aerianna, and she gives me a knowing nudge.

“I’ll be here when you get back.” That’s all I need to hear. I press a quick kiss to her temple and head down the hallway.

Elise’s door is cracked open, the soft glow of a lamp barely lighting the space beyond. I knock once.

“Elise?” No answer. I push the door open the rest of the way.

I spot my sister on the floor, curled up against the bed, knees drawn to her chest. Her fingers are tangled in her hair, her shoulders shaking.

Fuck.

“Shit,” I mutter under my breath, stepping inside and closing the door behind me.

Elise doesn’t look up. I crouch in front of her, keeping my movements slow, careful. She’s wound too tight, like if I move too fast, she might snap.

“Elise,” I say, voice low, steady. “Talk to me.”

She shakes her head violently, her breath coming too fast, too ragged. I know that look.

Panic.

Pure, unfiltered fear.

I clench my jaw, trying to push down the frustration clawing at my ribs. I’m not mad at her. I’m mad at the fuckers who did this to her, that I wasn’t there sooner. Mad that no matter how many bodies I drop, I can’t fix this.

“Elise, you’re safe,” I tell her, my voice softer now. “You hear me? You’re safe.”

Her head snaps up, wild eyes locking onto mine. “Safe?” She laughs, but there’s no humor in it, only something broken. “Do you have any idea what it’s like to be trapped like that? To know no one’s coming for you? To feel like no matter what you do, you’re never getting out?”

My stomach fucking twists.

I wasn’t there. I didn’t see what they did to her. And now? Even though she’s back, even though I’d burn the whole goddamn world down to keep her safe, it wasn’t enough.

She presses her hands to her temples, her voice cracking. “I can still smell that place, Carter. I can smell him. Every time I close my eyes, I’m right back there.” She sucks in a breath like she’s trying to hold herself together. “I wake up screaming.”

Goddamn it.

I exhale sharply and reach for her, slow and deliberate. She doesn’t pull away, so I rest my hand on her shoulder, gripping her gently.

“You’re not there anymore,” I tell her, my voice steady, certain. “You’re here with me and with the Club.”

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She lets out a shaky breath, nodding, but her whole body is still trembling.

I hesitate for half a second, then pull her into a hug. She stiffens at first, like she doesn't know how to react, but then she collapses against me. Her fingers fist in my shirt, her whole body shaking.

"I don't know how to fix this," she whispers.

My jaw locks. "Neither do I, but I know one thing. You don't have to fix it alone," I tell her, my voice rough. "I got you, Elise, always."

She grips me tighter, silent tears soaking into my shirt. And for now, that's enough.

Elise finally fell asleep. It took a while with her body shaking, her breaths coming in those sharp little gasps that cut straight into my fucking soul. But after sitting with her, keeping my voice low and steady, she finally drifted off. I don't know how long it'll last. Probably not long. But for now, it's something.

I step out of her room, shutting the door quietly behind me, and find Pretty Playboy leaning against the hallway wall, arms crossed over his chest.

He straightens when he sees me. "How's she doing?" The worry in his voice is evident.

I drag my hand down my face. "Not good."

He nods like he expected that answer. "Can I stay with her?"

I think about our conversation in the van and know this is the right person to help Elise when I can't be there. "Yeah," I say, glancing back at the door. "She shouldn't wake up alone."

Pretty Playboy doesn't ask questions, just pushes off the wall and moves past me, slipping inside the room without a sound. I hope I'm not making a big mistake.

I head for the bar, my boots heavy on the hardwood, my mind already shifting gears. Elise isn't the only one still in danger.

Benton is still breathing, and that's a problem I plan on fixing.

The common room is still buzzing with energy, but when I step inside, the mood shifts. The laughter dulls. Eyes flick toward me, reading the tension in my shoulders, the sharp set of my jaw.

"Church, now," Capone demands. He kisses Danyella before stalking down the hallway to our Chapel.

I do the same with Aerianna. Before I can step away, she grips my cut. "How's Elise?"

I shake my head. "Not good. She finally fell asleep, and Pretty Playboy is staying with her for now."

"If you need me to be with her, I will. No hesitation."

"Thank you, Little Kitten." I kiss Aerianna's forehead. "I'll be back out in a little while. Hang out here with the other Ol' Ladies, and don't hit anyone, please."

Aerianna smirks. "I'll do my best."

“Smart ass,” I grumble against her lips.

“But you love me anyway.” The moment the words leave her lips, her eyes grow wide, and she slaps a hand over her mouth.

“I do, Little Kitten. I love you more than I thought possible.” I confess.

“I love you, too, Carter.” I pull Aerianna against me, feeling the soft curves of her body against my hard ones. Leaning down, I kiss Aerianna and pour everything I have felt, still feel, and will forever feel into this kiss.

Catcalls erupt around us, and I pull away, kissing her one more time.

Stepping into the hallway, I make my way to the back of the clubhouse, where the doors to the Chapel stand like sentinels. With a deep breath, I push them open.

All eyes turn to me.

Time to handle business.

Once I take my seat, Bones leans his forearms against the table. “That look on your face means we’re about to get real fuckin’ busy, don’t it?”

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Capone slams the gavel onto the table, starting Church. “We’re finding Benton.” The room goes silent.

Tiny lets out a low whistle. “Been a while since we went hunting.”

“This isn’t a hunt,” I correct, my voice cold. “It’s an extermination.” No one argues.

“Benton has been stalking my Ol’ Lady. He has been using his badge to kidnap and rape innocent women. After what Serena and Kayla told us, he has to be a big part of the Black Market Railroad. He’s still out there, breathing, existing like he doesn’t have a goddamn target on his back. That ends now.” I take a breath, then move onto the next problem.

“The girls,” I say, shifting my focus to Capone. “They need to go to the safe house.”

Capone frowns. “Aerianna’s gonna love that.”

“She can be pissed all she wants,” I snap. “This isn’t up for debate. Elise is in no shape to be left alone, and Aerianna is a target. If Benton gets wind that I just claimed her as my Ol’ Lady, he’ll come after her.” My knuckles turn white. “That’s not happening.”

“Who’s taking them?” Bones asks.

“Knight and Jax,” Capone says. “I want them out of the city by sunrise.”

Tiny nods. “I’ll let them know.”

I exhale my pulse a steady, slow thud in my ears. “Once they’re out, we focus on finding Benton. I want eyes everywhere. Street-level. Online. Every contact we got.”

Bones pulls out his laptop and starts typing away. “Guess we’re gonna have some fun, then.”

I don’t smile. This isn’t a game. This is justice.

Chapter 23

AERIANNA

I’m sitting at a table with Danyella, Monica, and two women I haven’t met before, Exleigh and Syvannah. Both were victims of the Black Market Railroad and have been coming out of their shells more with each passing day.

The Chapel doors swing open, and the club members stride out with grim expressions. That can’t be good.

Trigger stalks toward me with determination burning in his blue eyes. He doesn’t stop until he reaches me, lifting me effortlessly and sits down, placing me on his lap. His lips brush against the side of my neck, sending a shiver racing down my spine.

Across the table, Syvannah’s eyes light up when she spots Tiny, but she doesn’t move. He catches her gaze and winks, but instead of coming over, he heads down the hall toward his room with Pearl trailing behind him.

Seriously? Doesn’t that bitch ever get the hint?

Syvannah’s shoulders slump, her expression crumbling. Danyella places a comforting hand over hers, but I can already see the tears forming in Syvannah’s eyes. I want to

punch Pearl for making Syvannah cry.

“It’s stupid,” Syvannah mutters, pounding her fist on the table. “We’re not together, but fuck, that hurts.”

Trigger raises a brow, following her gaze toward Tiny and Pearl. His jaw ticks before he turns back to Syvannah, sympathy flashing in his eyes. “You know it means nothing, right?”

“Trigger,” I warn, shaking my head.

Syvannah exhales sharply, wiping at her tears. “I know. I’m trying to get past what happened, but it’s hard.”

Danyella squeezes her hand. “If he can’t be there for you when you’re at your lowest, he doesn’t deserve you at your best.”

Before anyone can respond, a shriek echoes from down the hall. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me!” Pearl storms out, fury twisting her face as she glares daggers at Syvannah.

Syvannah straightens in her chair, meeting Pearl’s glare head-on.

A few steps behind Pearl, Tiny emerges, carrying Peanut. Instead of following Pearl, he strides over to us and flips a chair around, sitting directly behind Syvannah. He drapes his massive arms over her shoulders, Peanut curling against his chest.

“I swear she hates being told no,” Tiny mutters, shaking his head. “All I did was go back and get my cat. I didn’t want a quickie, and she threw a tantrum.”

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Syvannah giggles and leans into his embrace. She tilts her head back to look at him. “You know I’m trying, right?”

Tiny’s expression softens. “Yeah, Doll. I know. And I’m patiently waiting.” He presses a kiss to the top of her head, and damn if my heart doesn’t flutter a little.

“That’s the most romantic thing I’ve heard besides what Trigger says to me,” I tease, smirking.

“Get a fucking room,” Exleigh snaps, pushing up from the table and storming off. Seth, the prospect, watches her go, his eyes clouded with something between frustration and sadness.

I glance at Trigger, silently asking for context. He just shakes his head. “She’s battling her own demons.”

“She’ll come around soon,” Syvannah murmurs. “I hope.”

“We just need to be patient,” Danyella adds.

Capone approaches, gently moving Danyella onto his lap. Blayze does the same with Monica, their presence shifting the atmosphere into something heavier.

Trigger brushes my hair off my neck, his lips grazing my skin. “We’ve come to a decision,” he murmurs. “And I know you’re not going to like it, Kitten, but I need you to listen before you fly off the handle.”

I smirk. He knows me so damn well.

Capone's voice cuts in, firm and direct. "With the shit going down with Benton, it's not safe for you ladies and the kids to stay here. We're sending you to a safe house."

Danyella rests her head on Capone's shoulder. "Whatever you need us to do, we'll do it."

Like hell I will. I push off Trigger's lap, standing with my fists clenched at my sides. "You can't sideline me, Trigger. This is my problem, and I need to be there to deal with it."

Trigger stands, his presence towering over me. "Aerianna, listen to me."

"No. You listen to me." I point to my chest. "Benton is mine. I'm the one he's been stalking. I'm the one who can draw him out."

Trigger glances at Capone. Capone nods his head.

"Fine." Trigger exhales heavily, pinching the bridge of his nose. "You can come. But the second it gets dangerous, you're out. No arguments."

"Fine." I cross my arms. "Thank you."

A loud slap sounds beside me. Bones shoves money into Tiny's palm. "Fuck."

Tiny grins, smug as hell. "Don't ever bet against a woman. You'll lose every time."

I blink, realization dawning. "You assholes were betting on me?"

Tiny shrugs. "He's learning."

Capone raps his knuckles on the table, bringing everyone back on track. “New plan. Aerianna comes with us to the casino. Jax and Knight take the girls to the safe house.”

“You got it, Prez.” Dagger pulls out his phone. “I’ll call Torch, Derange, and Jax. Have them get their Ol’ Ladies and kids ready. We roll out as soon as they get here.”

Dagger walks away, and the tension in the room tightens like a noose.

“Why the casino?” I question.

“Because it’s the only place that is populated enough where we can draw Benton out and not put you in danger,” Capone responds.

Trigger tugs my hand, pulling me toward the hallway. “Come on, Kitten.”

“Where are we going?”

He shoots me with a wicked smirk. “You need to get dirty before we get ready.”

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The air in the Royal Casino's back office is thick with tension. My pulse hammers in my ears, drowning out the hum of the overhead lights. Trigger stands beside me, arms crossed, his expression unreadable. He's steady, like always, but I can feel the storm beneath the surface.

Agent Benton has been playing us, all of us, for too long. His manipulations are getting dangerously close to tearing apart everything I've worked for. Everything I still have left to protect. The Black Market Railroad's reach is as deep as it is twisted. Benton has been weaving his lies so seamlessly that even the agency didn't see it. He's betraying not just the badge but me. I didn't see it, but I do now. And now I'm going to end him.

Trigger's hand brushes against mine, and it sends a ripple through me. We're in this together. But my mind can't shake the conflict of it. How did we get here? The lines between duty and desire, between trust and betrayal, are so blurred now that I'm not sure what is real anymore. My body aches with adrenaline pumping through my veins, but my heart aches for a different reason, one I can't easily ignore. I fight the urge to pull away. Not because I don't want it, but because I do. Too much.

"You good?" Trigger's voice breaks through my thoughts, rough and low, like he always sounds when he is trying to sound casual but fails. It's a question, but it doesn't need an answer. He already knows how I'm feeling.

I nod, even though I'm not sure if I am.

"Benton's too dangerous to let slide any longer." I mean it but saying it out loud makes it real. My voice barely registers above a whisper, but I know Trigger can hear

me. He always can.

His gaze lingers, giving me a sharp look that says everything we both know. This is the point of no return. Instead, he shifts gears. "We end this tonight."

"Yeah," I agree, forcing the word out. "No more games."

The plan is set, and nothing will stop us from taking Benton down, no matter what it costs. The truth is, this entire thing is a game, a dangerous one. And the only way to win is to play smarter than Benton.

Bones comes into the room with his ever-present laptop. "I got ahold of Red, and he helped me set up a hack into Benton's phone. We set up a meet as a new buyer, and Benton will be at a warehouse in the business district. He thinks he's finally getting his hands on Aerianna."

"Got it. Thank you, Bones." Trigger is trying to contain his fury, but it's not working too well.

"One other thing." Bones says quietly. He turns the laptop around. "You might want to call Krimson for this one."

On the screen is a picture of Ashley Force, aka Krimson, the leader of the Street Racing Crew in L.A. when she was younger. She is being held at gunpoint by a man I don't recognize, and next to him is Agent Benton.

"What is this?" I ask.

"Is this real?" Trigger asks.

Capone, Blayze, Tiny, and Torch stand behind us. Capone swears, and Blayze, Tiny,

and Torch are clenching their fists.

“As real as you and me. About ten years ago, Krimson was involved with this man.” Bones points to the one holding Ashley at gunpoint. “Shaun Reiser, and after she took her spot as head of the Crew, she kicked him to the curb. He did some time in jail for illegal bootlegging, and when he got out, four years later, he hired these two goons.” Bones points to Benton and another guy. “To try and kill Krimson. Of course, they failed.”

“What does that have to do with us now?” I ask.

“Krimson will want to know that we’re ending one of the men who tried to kill her,” Capone states. He nods to Blayze. “Call her and fill her in on what’s going on.”

Blayze pulls out his phone and walks away.

“Thanks, Bones. Is there anything else?” Capone asks.

“Nope, that’s it.”

“Great job. Stay in the van when we reach the warehouse and watch our six.” Capone turns to the rest of us. “Let’s lock and load. It’s time to play.”

The streets blur as we make our way through the city, the cold night air biting into my skin, but it can’t compare to the icy feeling spreading in my gut. Benton wasn’t just a traitor. He was the embodiment of everything I’ve been fighting against in this world. Men like him don’t deserve to win, and if I have to burn bridges to make sure he didn’t, then that’s what I’ll do.

Trigger’s voice pulls me back to the present. “You’re thinking too much. Just let me handle Benton. I’ve got your back.” He squeezes my thigh for support.

I shoot him a glance, my stomach flipping. "And I've got yours," I shout over the wind. The words feel more natural than I'd like to admit. They are true, but something about saying them out loud makes the weight of our situation feel heavier.

Am I really trusting Trigger? The way my heart thuds harder every time Trigger comes near, the way his presence steadies me despite the chaos, it isn't something I can ignore. This isn't just about the mission anymore. It's about us.

Capone, Blayze, Tiny, Trigger, Torch, Dagger, and Derange park their bikes about a block away from the warehouse. Bones and Seth bring up the rear in the Club van.

We make our way down the street and into the parking lot of the warehouse. We reach the door before anyone stops us. The shadows seem to stretch longer as Benton's smug face appears under a street lamp. He looks like a man who thinks he has the upper hand. That will change quickly.

We're feet away from Benton when Trigger tucks me behind him. The move grates on my nerves, but I know he's doing it to protect me.

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“What the fuck is this?” Benton asks, tossing out a cigarette.

“Where’s the women?” Capone growls.

“Where’s that bitch of a cop?”

I step from behind Trigger with my gun drawn. “I’m right here.”

Benton draws his weapon. When he does, seven other guns are pointed at his head.

The words that come next are calculated, everything I rehearsed in my head playing out in real-time.

“It’s over, Benton. I know you’re my stalker, and I know you are running with the Black Market Railroad. Your terror of innocent women ends tonight.” My voice is unwavering, and my hands are steady as I inch forward. Benton’s smirk falters as I exposed his connections to the Black Market Railroad.

Trigger stays by my side, his presence is an anchor, a reminder that this is the one thing I don’t have to do alone.

"You think I’m stupid?" Benton’s voice is dripping with disdain. "You think you’ve outsmarted me?"

I don’t respond. The only answer I need to give him is the cold, hard truth. "You’ve been playing on both sides for too long. It’s over."

Trigger steps forward, and there is something in his eyes, a deadly calm I've come to recognize. This is his world. And I'm in it now.

"Where are the missing women?" I growl with agitation. I'm done playing these fucking games.

"Like I'd fucking tell you, traitor." Benton spits out.

I approach him before anyone can stop me and clock Benton in the temple with the butt of my gun. He goes down like a sack of potatoes.

"That's one way of doing it." Torch shrugs his shoulders and holsters his gun.

Capone kicks Benton with his boot. "Get this piece of shit to the van. We'll get answers out of him one way or another."

Trigger approaches me and kisses the side of my head. "Proud of you, Kitten." He turns me so I'm facing him, his blue eyes are staring into mine with love and unadulterated passion. He leans in and kisses me. "I love you."

I inhale his scent and bask in the praise. I have never had someone tell me they're proud of me. "I love you, too, Carter. From the bottom of my toes to the top of my head. I love you."

After tonight, I know being Trigger's Ol' Lady is more than wearing his patch or having his ink. It's standing by his side in the fight, supporting him in his darkest moments, battling together, and trusting him completely.

I can't deny the part of me that wants this, wants him, despite all the risks. The kind of love that comes from a life like mine isn't pure, isn't safe, but it's real.

And that's all that matters.

Chapter 24

AERIANNA

A couple of days after the Club took Benton, I find myself outside FBI headquarters, contemplating my next move. I know what I have to do. I know this is the right choice. The weight of the badge in my hand feels heavier than ever. It's not just metal and leather, it's my past, my sacrifices, my identity. Everything I fought for. Everything I bled for.

And now, I'm about to give it all up.

I step into my superior's office, my boots clicking against the linoleum floor. I'm wearing a pair of dark blue jeans, a t-shirt, and my Ol' Lady cut. Special Agent Sharp sits behind his desk, eyes narrowing the moment he sees me. He leans back in his chair, lacing his fingers together, a smug expression plastered on his face.

"You're late, Agent Faber," he drawls.

"Not anymore." I toss my badge onto his desk, and it lands with a hollow thud.

His smirk falters, his eyes darting from the badge to my face. "The hell is this?"

"I'm done." My voice is steady, stronger than I thought it would be. "I'm resigning, effective immediately."

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Sharp scoffs, picking up the badge like it's a foreign object. "You think you can just walk away?" He stands, stepping around his desk, his presence towering, but I don't flinch. He takes in my attire, and something sinister passes across his face as he sneers at me. "You're one of the best undercover agents we have. You really gonna throw it all away for some outlaw dick?"

Rage boils in my blood, but I keep my face blank. "This job was never about justice. Not for me. It was about hunting the bastards who took Allison from me." I lift my chin. "And guess what? Mission accomplished."

Sharp glares at me. "You're making a mistake."

"No," I say, turning for the door. "For the first time, I'm making the right choice."

I don't wait for his response. I don't look back. I step out of that office and leave that life behind. And I've never felt freer.

The cool night air wraps around me as I stand outside the clubhouse, my nerves a tangled mess. Am I making the right decision? What if I made the wrong choice? Are Trigger and I a sure enough thing that I just threw my career away?

My fingers caress the softness of my Ol' Lady cut, and I know I made the right decision. I know deep in my soul, in my heart, that Trigger loves me as much as I love him. A biker doesn't claim you as an Ol' Lady for shits and giggles. They don't take this step lightly. It's an unspoken vow that you're in it together until death do you part.

The heavy rumble of a Harley vibrates through my chest before the bike even pulls into the lot. I know it's Trigger. I'd recognize that sound anywhere.

Trigger swings his leg over the seat, pulling off his helmet. His piercing blue eyes find me instantly, darkening as they take me in.

"You're still here," he mutters, stepping closer.

"I did it," I whisper. "I walked away."

Trigger studies me, his expression is unreadable, but the hunger beneath it is undeniable. "You sure about that, Kitten?" His voice is gruff, but there's something raw in his tone.

"I'm sure." I reach up, gripping the lapels of his cut. "I choose you. I choose this. I don't know where the road leads, but I want it to be with you."

A muscle in his jaw ticks. "You willing to go all in for this life? For me?"

My heart pounds. I know what he's asking.

"Yes," I breathe.

Something shifts in his eyes, something dark, dangerous, and possessive. He doesn't hesitate. His hand snakes around my waist, yanking me against him as his lips crash onto mine. The kiss is deep, claiming a silent vow that I'm his now. And he's mine.

He pulls back slightly to look into my eyes. Trigger reaches up to tuck a stray strand of hair behind my ear. His fingers linger against my skin, sending a shiver down my spine.

“I don’t do forever,” he admits, voice rough.

“I don’t either.” It’s not entirely true, but I need him to believe it right now.

“Then I guess we’re fucked,” he murmurs, just before his lips crash against mine again.

I lose myself in the kiss, in the way his hands grip my waist like he’s afraid to let go. The world fades away, leaving just the two of us.

For now, that’s enough.

The clubhouse is alive with the scent of whiskey and leather, the deep rumble of laughter and conversation filling the air. But the moment we step through the doors, everything quiets down.

When Trigger nods his head, applause and whistles erupt around us, but I don’t hear them. The only thing I feel is Trigger’s grip, the way his hands mold against my body like he’s afraid I’ll disappear.

I spot Tiny sitting at the bar, sadness etched on his face. “What’s wrong with Tiny?”

Trigger’s grip tightens before he relaxes. “When we brought the women and children back from the safehouse, Syvannah was gone, and no one knows where she went.”

My heart drops in my stomach. “You don’t think someone took her, do you?”

Trigger shakes his head. “I don’t know. We can’t find her.” Trigger kisses the side of my head and pulls me against him. “We’re doing everything we can to find her. But tonight is about celebrating you being mine.”

“I’m yours,” I whisper in Trigger’s ear as he picks me up and spins me around, settling my head on his chest.

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His fingers tighten against my skin. “Damn right, you are.”

I close my eyes, listening to the steady rhythm of his heart, knowing that for the first time in my life, I’ve found where I belong.

I’m exactly where I’m supposed to be.

With Trigger.

Epilogue

TRIGGER

I’ve been through hell. I’ve seen men shot in the head, gutted like animals. I’ve buried brothers, fought battles we barely walked away from. I’ve lost count of the bodies, the blood, the shit I’ve done to survive.

None of it prepared me for her.

Aerianna is asleep beside me, her body curled against mine, her breathing soft and even. My arm is slung over her waist, holding her close, like if I let go, she might disappear.

She won’t. Not now.

She walked away from her old life for me. For us. And fuck, if that doesn’t do something to my chest, squeezing it so tight it almost hurts.

I've never had this before. Never wanted it. Never thought I deserved it. But she's here. In my bed. In my life. With my cut, and soon my ink will be on her delicate skin.

I'll burn the whole fucking world to the ground to keep her.

I press a slow kiss to her shoulder, inhaling the lingering scent of sex and whiskey on her skin. My fingers skim down her bare spine, memorizing every dip and curve.

She murmurs something in her sleep, pressing closer, and I swear to God, I don't know how the hell I ever lived without this woman.

I close my eyes, letting the moment settle deep in my bones, when Aerianna's voice cuts through the quiet.

"Do you regret it?" she asks quietly.

I go still.

Does she think I regret this? That I don't want this?

I grip her jaw, forcing her to look at me. "Listen to me and listen good." My voice is raw, stripped down to the bones. "You are the best damn thing to ever happen to me. To this club. You're not just mine, Aerianna. You're ours. You belong here. With me. With us."

A single breath shudders out of her, her eyes shining.

We crash together, tangled in sheets and heat, my mouth claiming every inch of her like a man starving. When I finally slide inside her and feel her grip around my shaft, it's not just fucking. It's more.

She's all in, and so am I.

Hours later, Aerianna is curled into my side, her head resting on my chest, her breathing slow and even. My fingers trace absent patterns along her bare back, my mind nowhere near sleep.

For the first time in years, I feel whole.

The knock on my door shatters the moment. I already know who it is before I answer. My muscles tense instantly.

Aerianna stirs beside me, groggy. "What?"

"Stay here." My voice is low, firm.

I slip out of bed, yanking on my jeans, my body already bracing for whatever bullshit is about to come through that door.

Another knock, harder this time.

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I swing it open to find Tiny standing there, his face grim, his fists clenched so tight his knuckles are white.

I know that look. It's the look a man gets when he's about to burn the whole fucking world down.

"Get dressed," he grits out. "We got a problem."

My gut tightens. "What the fuck happened?"

Tiny exhales sharply, shaking his head. "It's Syvannah."

Aerianna is out of bed in an instant, already pulling on her clothes. "What about her?" she demands.

Tiny hesitates for half a second. Just enough for my stomach to fucking drop. Then he says the one thing that makes my blood turn to ice. "She's back."

Aerianna stills beside me.

I narrow my eyes. "Back from where?"

Tiny's jaw clenches. His voice is rough, edged with fury. "From him."

The entire fucking world shifts beneath my feet. I don't need to ask who. There's only one bastard it could be.

Lattimer.

I grab my cut off the chair and yank it on, my mind already spiraling with a thousand different ways to make that motherfucker pay.

“When?” I demand.

Tiny’s eyes darken. “Twenty minutes ago. She just showed up outside the gates. She looks bad, man.” His throat works like he’s swallowing down rage. “She won’t talk. Won’t tell me what happened. But I know.” He shakes his head, his massive hands flexing. “I know.”

Aerianna steps forward, eyes sharp with something lethal. “Where is she?”

“In the common room. Capone’s with her.” Tiny scrubs a hand down his face. “But it’s bad, brother. Real bad.”

I don’t waste another second. I storm out of my room, Aerianna and Tiny flanking me as we head toward the common room. The moment I step inside, everything stops.

Syvannah is there. Her arms are wrapped around herself, her skin pale, bloody, and bruised. Shadows cling to her like a second skin, darkening the hollows beneath her eyes. Eyes that look empty. Like something vital has been carved out of her and left to rot. The kind of hollow that only comes from monsters.

I clench my fists so tight my nails bite into my palms. She looks up, and the moment her gaze meets Tiny’s, something inside her breaks. A fractured sound slips past her lips, and she stumbles toward him. Tiny catches her before she collapses, his massive arms the only thing keeping her upright.

“Jesus, Vannah,” he rasps, his voice raw. “What the fuck did he do to you?”

She doesn't answer. Doesn't move. She buries her face against his chest, her entire body trembling like a live wire. Tiny holds her tighter, one of his hands cradling the back of her head, but his eyes find mine over her shoulder, burning with barely contained rage.

I know that look. I've seen it in the mirror too many times to count.

Aerianna steps forward, her voice careful, controlled. "Sylvannah." She keeps her distance, like she knows crowding her will make it worse. "You're safe now."

Sylvannah flinches at the word safe. Her breathing stutters, hitching like she can't get enough air.

Tiny shifts his grip, trying to steady her, but the second his fingers brush against her wrist, she jerks back with a strangled noise. A flash of something dark and ugly flickers in her expression before she schools it, forcing it down.

She won't meet our eyes.

My stomach drops.

"Vannah." Tiny's voice is softer now, coaxing. "Talk to me."

She shakes her head once, a sharp, jerky movement. Her lips part like she wants to speak, but nothing comes out.

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Capone moves from where he was leaning against the bar, his expression unreadable. “You don’t have to tell us everything right now,” he says carefully. “Just tell us this. Are we hunting this motherfucker tonight?”

Something flickers in her expression. I see it. Fear. Not for herself, but for us. For what’s coming.

I step forward, my jaw tight. “What did he do?”

Syvannah exhales a shuddering breath. “It’s not what he did.” Her voice is hoarse, raw like she’s been screaming. “It’s what he’s going to do.”

Thick, suffocating silence.

Tiny tenses. “What the hell does that mean?”

Syvannah doesn’t answer right away. She presses a shaking hand to her throat as if she’s trying to keep something inside. Aerianna watches her carefully, then moves closer, her voice low and steady. “Syvannah,” she says gently. “If you don’t tell us, we can’t stop it.”

Syvannah swallows hard. A tremor rolls through her body. Then, barely above a whisper, she speaks the words that shift the entire fucking world beneath our feet. “He’s coming.”

A cold chill wraps around my spine, a slow, creeping dread settling deep in my gut.

Tiny steps forward, his eyes burning with murder. “Then we kill him first.”

Syvannah sways slightly, exhaustion dragging at her, but she shakes her head. “You don’t understand.” Her voice is barely a whisper, but it cuts through the room like a blade.

Tiny’s fists clench. “Then make us understand.”

Syvannah lifts her head, and for the first time since she walked in, I see it, pure, unfiltered terror. She wets her cracked lips, dragging in a breath like it physically hurts. Then, finally, she speaks. “He’s not coming alone.”

Capone straightens, his entire body locking down. “How many?”

Syvannah’s breath shudders out of her, her entire body trembling. “All of them.”

The words are a punch to the ribs. All of them. The entire Black Market Railroad.

Every sick, twisted, psychotic bastard Lattimer could dig up from whatever hole they crawled out of. It’s not just a threat. It’s a goddamn war.

My fingers twitch at my sides, already itching for my gun. I glance at Aerianna, at the fire burning in her stormy gray eyes. At the way her fingers twitch just like mine.

She’s in this. She chose me. Chose us, and now, we fight.

I turn back to Tiny, my lips curling into something sharp. Something deadly. “Then we don’t wait.”

Capone cracks his knuckles, a sinister smile on his face. His eyes are black as coal. “We take the fight to them.”